

## **God's Rule: Government and Islam**

*Patricia Crone*

*New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 462 pages.*

Originally intended as a short textbook codifying the existing knowledge of Islamic political thought, Patricia Crone's *God's Rule* developed into a fuller and more comprehensive examination of the first six centuries of government and Islam. Crone, perhaps better known for her more controversial works, such as *Hagarism* (Cambridge: 1977), *God's Caliph* (Cambridge: 1986), and *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford: 1987), is no stranger to Islamic political theory, having written *Slaves on Horses: The*

*Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: 1980). In her present book, the reader will find an accessible, readable, and scholarly contribution that is largely devoid of controversy while retaining a healthy skepticism of the sources, as one would expect from an historian.

Primarily written for the non-specialist, the intention is to render the contextual theory, practice, and development of political thought during the early centuries of Islam (c. 622-1258) intelligible to the general reader. Divided into four sections, Crone seeks to cover the broader trends and themes in the transition from the Prophet's polity to that of the Buyids and the Seljuqs. Along the way, she guides the reader through the complex web of Islamic history, starting, in part 1, with the basic Muslim conceptual understanding of government and state up to the first civil war, sect formation, and the Umayyad period. Here, the central importance was the leader, as successor to the Prophet, who weds truth and power and thereby rightly guides the Muslim community by providing legal legitimacy and a moral example. The question of legitimacy came to the fore during the first civil war, which resulted in the formation of various sects and the rise of the Umayyad dynasty.

In part 2, the author explores the decline of tribal tradition (c. 700-900) due to the gradual shift from tribal allegiances and dynastic rule to the position that communal unity is more important than a right and just government. In seven relatively short chapters, she examines the Kharijites, the Mu'tazilites, the Shi'ites of the Umayyad period, and the Abbasids, finishing with the Zaydis, the Imamis, and the "hadith party" (the Sunnis). In these first two centuries, the key issue was tyranny and how to avoid it.

Part 3 details the results of expanding Muslim rule and the subsequent effects of non-Arab Muslims and their cultures upon government. Ranging from Persian tradition and advice literature to Greek political ideas and the influence of the Ismaili Fatimids in Egypt, along with various Sunni responses, the reader is introduced to the complex issues that Muslims faced in a fragmented world. From the ninth century onward, military personnel were largely drawn from tribal populations outside the Muslim world, a practice that led, by the tenth century, to a fragmented political order with power residing not with the caliph and religious leaders, but with men who saw themselves as kings, emirs, and sultans. Political debates moved from the ummah's unity and just government to how the law and the sociopolitical order, which was legitimized by that law, were related.

The book's final section, part 4, moves the reader away from political theory to the practical issues surrounding government and society. In

five chapters followed by a short epilogue, the author discusses the nature and function of government, including various attempts to address the need to live under the revealed law along with the wider issues of social order and the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. At first glance, this final part appears to be a potentially tedious extension of previously presented material. However, it ends up being a valuable contribution to understanding the process of intellectual thought regarding political issues and questions, all within the context of the applications of government.

Crone proposes and answers a series of questions faced by philosophers, Shi'ite thinkers, and Sunni theologians (*mutakallimun*) on the nature of government. And yet it is difficult to know whether intellectuals were utilitarian in finding answers to support such current realities as the need for government to be absolutist. The issues involved in social order show how Muslim society became more universal and theoretically egalitarian while simultaneously defending socioeconomic inequality, all within the diverse topics of Sufism, private property, women, slaves, and animals. The final chapter before the epilogue deals with the place of non-Muslims within and outside Muslim societies, and largely focuses on questions of legal relationships and jihad.

In her epilogue, Crone concludes that religion, state, and society were united during the time of the Prophet. By the end of six centuries of Islamic history, however, the overlap between government and religion was minimal, while religion and society maintained a close relationship.

Despite the annoyance of some editorial errors (an extra word not deleted on p. 248, an incoherent sentence on p. 348, and a misordered sentence in the bibliography on p. 427), the quality of the work is not hindered. With charts, an index/glossary, and a detailed bibliography, the book is written in an engaging style suitable for undergraduate as well as graduate students and scholars. Crone does a good job of navigating through the sources, making potentially complicated histories and ideas manageable. This is arguably the book's greatest strength and contribution. There is nothing really new by way of historical discovery, as these topics were largely addressed in such earlier books as W. M. Watt's *Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: 1968) and, more recently, Anthony Black's *History of Islamic Political Thought from the Prophet to Present* (New York: 2001). However, Crone's strength is in her style of presentation, her organization of the material, and her skill of simplification without compromising detail

or accuracy. This is a text that professors and educators alike will find suitable for their students.

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