

**Fred Donner, *Muhammed and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*.
Harvard University Press, London, 2010. Hardback; 280 pages; 20
illustrations, 6 maps; RRP A\$30 ISBN 978-0-674-05097-6**

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Donner's book takes a refreshing and compelling look at the process of the 'parting of the ways' between Islam and Christianity. His thesis that early Islam was a broader monotheistic endeavour than the later Muslim religion is well supported. In the present climate of growing media-driven concern about Islamic violence, a book that presents the evidence for an Islam that is less alien than many think, is very welcome. Just as the evidence is increasingly pointing to a gradual process of disengagement between Christianity and Judaism, so also Donner shows that the relationship between Islam and the church was seen as complex from both sides. He argues that early Islam saw itself as a community of believers in the One God, a community including Jews and Christians as well. According to Donner, Islam developed a separate identity only after several decades, specifically during the rule of Abd al-Malik. His analysis of the actual evidence stands in stark contrast to many other books that seek to impose a 'clash of religions' motif on the realities of early positive interaction.

Donner skillfully refutes several current views like those of Ye'or and Luxenberg, showing that the spread of Islam was often not violent at all, and explaining the rise of the status of Mohammed within the Muslim community. The key role of Abd al-Malik is well explained, and a wide range of evidence is presented showing the transition of Islam from being a broad 'ecumenical' movement with some friendly relations to the Church, into a separate conflicting religion.

The sections on the pre-Islamic Middle-East and the social and religious context for the growth of Islam are well-written and provide a good launching point for Donner's main thesis. His definition of early Islam as a 'monotheistic reform movement' (p. 87.)

is apt given the evidence he presents. His challenge to the prevailing notion that Islam is some form of Arab nationalist movement is insightful and productive.

The book is well-designed for the average reader or undergraduate and includes a good glossary of Muslim terms, and an excellent section of suggestions for further reading. Early researchers will miss footnotes, but experienced scholars will know most of Donner's references anyway. The illustrations do just that and add very visual weight to Donner's case.

Where the book slightly falls down is in failing to make use of sufficient pre-Islamic Syriac church evidence. Such material would have clarified some of Donner's arguments and added weight to his more speculative points. For example, he fails to note that the first part of the *shahada*, the Muslim confession of faith, already existed in cognate Syriac Christian usage, a reality that surely fortifies his conclusions. He also omits mention of the similarities in language between the Arabic and Syriac-speaking Christians and Muslims which would indicate significant relationships, for example the Arabic *zuhd*, *shahada*, *jihad* have close Syriac cognates in *zuhd*, *sahda* and *agona* etc. Another addition that would have been good is the evidence from early Sufis like Rabi'a whose use of only the first part of the *shahada* is significant. Donner also somewhat overstates the unity between Islam and Christianity given that his evidence indicates that the two faiths were more like close sisters rather than either united in one movement – as he implies – or in conflict – as has, to date, been the widely accepted view.

However, despite these quite minor gaps, the book is a very solid corrective to the many polemically-oriented texts on early Islam that are currently available. It is essential reading for all scholars of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations, and will provoke much debate and further research. Donner is an expert on early Islam and this book adds to his already successful collection of works. Such an accessible and easily read book is a welcome addition to this key area of research into early Islam.