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### Review of Geaves' Islam in Victorian Britain

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Ron Geaves, *Islam in Victorian Britain: the life and times of Abdullah Quilliam*, Markfield: Kube, 2010, viii + 344 pp., ISBN 978-1-84774-010-6, \$25.95

This first biography of an important figure in the history of Islam in Britain tells a story which deserves to be far more widely-known, particularly in the light of the role currently being played in Britain by a Foundation which bears his name (cf. p. 306), and does so very effectively. (It is very important to distinguish between the London-based *Quilliam Foundation*, which with its motto 'Challenging Extremism, Promoting Pluralism, Inspiring Change', is primarily concerned with different aspects of counter-terrorism, and the Liverpool-based *Quilliam Society*, which is seeking to restore the property set up by Quilliam as the first mosque in Liverpool, at 8 Brougham Terrace in the West Derby area of the city.)

William Quilliam, born in Liverpool in 1856 to a Wesleyan Methodist family with strong connections to the Isle of Man, trained as a solicitor, qualifying in 1878. In 1888, however, he formally converted to Islam, following a visit to Morocco in the previous year, and changed his name to Abdullah (Servant of God). The author outlines very effectively the various factors which contributed to this decision, including the theological (unease with

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the Christian doctrine of the atonement, the difficulties which the Christian churches seemed to be encountering with the discoveries of science, the problems of biblical criticism, and, in particular, issues with Trinitarianism, which led to a flirtation with Unitarianism (through the influence of Pastor Charles Beard) before converting to Islam); the political (Quilliam's work as a liberal politician campaigning against capital punishment, and slavery in the USA, and his later work campaigning on issues relating to British colonialism, especially in the Islamic world, on which his views were often close to a figure such as Wilfred Scawen Blunt); the legal (as seen in Quilliam's role as the defender, in 1895, of Burton and Cunningham, two supporters of the Irish cause who were tried for setting off bombs in England and Scotland, indicating his work as a kind of campaigning lawyer); the social (especially his concern about the lack of Christian unity in his city, which would today be called sectarianism, and for the high rate of violent crime); the moral (evidenced by his involvement in the Temperance Movement as a young man – 'Nonconformist crusading zeal against alcohol' (p. 27) – and campaigns against prostitution); and the personal (where the author chronicles sensitively but probingly Quilliam's own sexual and family life, with his first child born 3 months after his first wedding (1879), his apparently running a second household with a former chorus girl, Mary Lyons, to whom he was married by Islamic

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Law, with whom he had five children, and whom he married according to English law after the death of his first wife in 1909, and then his also at a later stage living with and possibly marrying Edith Miriam Spray, the widow of his close friend and fellow convert to Islam Henri de Leon. Geaves makes it quite clear that Quilliam broke no British law by these arrangements, and that his first wife must surely have agreed to the arrangement with Mary Lyons, but he also includes a telling comment from his grandson, who described Quilliam's views of women as 'a mixture of Muhammedanism and Victorianism' (p. 52)). Quilliam clearly 'pushed the limits of both the moral codes of Victorian society and the licence of Islam to permit more than one wife' (p. 57).

As the story unfolds after Quilliam's conversion to Islam it is a very Liverpool story, well illustrated by some of the cartoons of Quilliam in 'The Porcupine', a Liverpool satirical magazine (pp. 137 and 233). Liverpool was at that time the second city of the British Empire, with strong links with America, Ireland and North Wales, and these links had a considerable impact on the city in terms of both its intra-Christian diversity and the arrival of Muslims from different parts of the empire. Quilliam's role in the life of the city is compared by the author to that of Charles Dickens in London, combining the roles of public speaker and philanthropist (p. 36).

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One significant difference between the two, however, is that Quilliam was responsible for the conversion of possibly as many as 500 British men and women to Islam (p. 6).

Things all seem to have gone wrong for Quilliam around 1908, however, with a slightly mysterious summons coming to him and his son to head to Istanbul being followed by his being struck off the Rolls (i.e. disqualified from practising as a lawyer) in 1909, and being badly let down by his son Billal with reference to the sale of the property which had been used as a mosque in Liverpool. His last years are therefore rather opaque, to say the least.

The story of his life is well told by the author, though more might have been made of the wisdom or otherwise of Quilliam's close association with the Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II, whose overthrow by the Young Turks in 1908 must surely have been a major factor in Quilliam's uncertain position in the last years of his life. Too close an association by British Muslims with any foreign government has its hazards. And not all readers will be persuaded by the author's suggestion that Quilliam can be seen as 'the first multiculturalist', as argued in Chapter 5. His 'Hymns Suitable for English-speaking Muslim congregations' (p. 84), and his establishment of the Osmanli Regiment, a kind of Muslim equivalent of the Boys' Brigade (p. 89), perhaps suggest that Quilliam was

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rather too tied to some of the norms of British culture for that description to be fully valid, but it is of course easy to be wise with hindsight.

The revived interest in Quilliam, however, in both Liverpool and the wider UK, is both timely and deserved, and this biography is a valuable resource which will do much to make the enigmatic figure of William/Abdullah Quilliam both better-known and better-understood.

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11 illustrations (listed pp v – vi)

*Intro* (p.1)

13-18 Outline of contents

15 – one of first 'multi-faith migrant centres in Britain'

18 methodology – rg not historian or biographer by training –  
interest = lived religion.

MA theses and other publications

20 Burial in Woking cemetery 1932

20-22 Main source = over 800 editions of the crescent

+ newspaper articles – neither all angel or all devil – neither  
apologist nor antagonist – space left open for further investigation

*Chap 2-* context of conversion (p. 23)

58 'displayed a loyalty to the religion and a passionate conviction  
that its revelation was final to his dying day'

*Chaps 3 + 4* – history of Liverpool Muslim Institute (p. 59 + p. 96)

Liv Mus institute 1887-1908 (when left city)

63 Elizabeth Murray nee Cates – mother wished to burn Qur'an

Links with Ottoman Empire and amir of Afghanistan

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64 early converts included Primitive Methodist Minister + Anglican clergyman (72)

66 attack on lecture by evangelical Christians (1895) – theological antipathy or attitude towards the Ottomans?

69 protest against play 'Mohamed' by Hall Caine – protests in India!

73 Donations from Rangoon and Sierra Leone + India

75 Represented Sultan at opening of Lagos mosque

76 malaria

83 3 attractive features of Islam

84 Hymns suitable for English-speaking Muslim converts

89 1897 Osmanli (cf Boys') Brigade

91 Plans for cathedral mosque

94 Nov 1899 – attended synagogue with Lord Mayor + invited to speak at Hebrew Philanthropy Fund 139 pro early Zionism

*Chap 4 (p. 96) – Liverpool Muslim Institute 1900-1908*

103 Concern at Christian missionary activities

111 problems in family/ies

119 some early converts

124 helped by intra-Christian rivalries

129 1908 – condemned by Lord's Day Observance Society

130 1908 departure



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*Chap 5* (p. 131) – Quilliam 'the first multiculturalist'?

137 Porcupine cartoon cf 233

*Chap 6* (p. 166) – Q and British colonial foreign policy

p. 15 international dimension = 70% of articles in 'the crescent' –  
psychological shock of colonialism (cf w s blunt hpg)

191 Shi'i Iran

196 hypocrisy of British foreign policy

*Chap 7* (p. 204) – Q as Ottomanist/pan-Islamist

16 'traditionalist of the hanafi school with influence of abduh and  
khan

250 twilight post 1908

*Chap 8* (p. 251) – twilight years (1908-1932)

departure for C'ople with eldest son in 1908 – most difficult years of  
life – some time in IofMan + in London – active in woking mosque –  
lived under pseudonym of henri/haroun de leon

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251 3 women in life

254 struck off Rolls 1909

257 let down by son Billal viz corruption

259 1913-1914 in Nottingham

263 Woking/Leitner

272 photo of Onchan House

276 mystery woman in Q's life – or deluded woman? - never solved

282 1997 plaque

*Chap 9* (p. 284) Quilliam's children/legacy

pride at reconstruction of Liverpool centre – 1<sup>st</sup> formal prayers at his  
mosque 9/6/09

306 Quilliam Foundation

Mw and west 307 westophobia ? 311

Q oriental lifestyle 312

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