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**Robinson, Chase F. *Islamic Civilization in Thirty Lives*.  
University of California Press, 2016**

Reviewed by Norman C. Rothman

In this work the noted Islamic scholar, Chase F. Robinson, traces the development of Islamic Civilization through the biography of notable figures — some known such as the Prophet Muhammad, and the fearsome world conqueror, Timur, who ruled over a large chunk of western Eurasia, and some less known, such as the poet Rumi, the traveler Ibn Fadlan, and the cartographer al-Idris.

The book has four major sections based on chronology and themes. It covers the first millennium (actually from the seventh century to the sixteenth century CE).

The first section — entitled “Empire” — traces the foundation and spread of Islam from 600 to 850 CE from the Arabian Peninsula to North Africa — and by extension, the Iberian Peninsula, the Middle East, much of central Asia and parts of the Indian sub-continent. In this period, there was a fairly unified administration or empire ruled first from Damascus, under the Umayyad dynasty, and then from Baghdad, under the Abbasid dynasty. The individuals covered are the Prophet; his cousin Ali, who was the fourth caliph and whose descendants began the Shia movement; Abd-al-Malik, whose reign as caliph gave the Umayyads a new lease on power; Ibn al-Muqaffa, a scholar of Persian extraction who translated Persian learning into Arabic; Rabi’a, a woman whose teachings became a foundation of the Sufi tradition; and al-Ma’mun, who was the last consequential member of the Abbasid dynasty.

Part II deals with the period of 850 to 1050 CE. This period witnessed the loss of political unity. At the same time, however, the disparate peoples under Islamic rule — Persians, Egyptians, Berbers, Turks — gradually adopted Islam even to the point of schism. A number of them became Arabized, as Egyptians and Berbers especially subsumed previous identities since the Qur’an was written in Arabic. This section is called the “Islamic commonwealth,” as various people forged a new identity based on missionary work often carried out by Sufis and extended commerce both land and sea to Sub-Saharan Africa and East and Southeast Asia. Islam arrived in these last two areas due to missionary work and trade. The figures covered in this part include a courtesan, a martyr, a rationalist philosopher, a physician, a world traveler, a scribe and a calligrapher; a man who conquered what is now Afghanistan, Pakistan, and north India; and a man who was both a high-ranking government official and a noted writer on applied mathematics and astronomy.

Part III, “Provisional Synthesis,” covers 1050 to 1250 CE, often termed the “Golden Age of Islam.” The classical heritage of the Greeks was combined with ancient learning from India and neighboring regions to produce advanced works in mathematics, science, philosophy, and applied subjects, such as medicine. Indian numerals became the Arabic numbers which replaced the cumbersome Roman numerals previously used in the Middle East and Europe. Decimals and the concept of zero inherited from the Mesopotamians were introduced and this concept of zero, borrowed from India, spread globally.

The individuals covered in this section are the writer of 400 works on many subjects; a female scholar of the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet); a writer who systematized Sunni thought; a merchant millionaire; and the famous Muslim opponent of the Crusaders, Saladin. Most significantly, Ibn Rushd, known as Averroes in Europe, was considered the foremost philosopher of his age. He was a judge as well as a physician, and through his work he became the foremost interpreter of Aristotelean thought and rationalism. His work was translated and read by scholars in Europe as late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Part IV, “Disruption and Integration,” deals with the end of the Golden Age, as the Islamic world gradually succumbed to external attacks by Timur, a Turkified Mongol who conquered much of Central Asia, Iraq, Iran, northern India, the upper Middle East and neighboring areas; Mehmed II, who converted the Greek Byzantine Empire into the Turkish Ottoman Empire; and Shah Ismail, who established Shia rule in Persia. However, this period, which dates from 1250 to 1525 CE, saw the writings of the Sufi poet Rumi, Rashid al-din (a global historian), Ibn Taymiyya who wrote copiously on law and philosophy, and Ibn Khaldun, a famous historian and social theorist whose works were widely read in Europe.

Professor Robinson has written a work that is both scholarly and entertaining. It is readily accessible to both layman and scholar. He trends to a middle ground in his biographical sections. These are neither hagiography nor critical assessments. He gives both positive and negative coverage. His sources are both timely and copious. His ancillary material is outstanding; he gives a complete index, impressive illustrations, a large bibliography as well as detailed notes, and a glossary. The only deficiency is that the book stops at the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Let us hope that a future volume will complete the picture!