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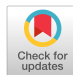

INTRODUCTION

Francis Robinson: personal recollections

Peter Brown

Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, United States of America
Email: peterbetsyb@gmail.com

The three years that I spent at Royal Holloway, University of London between 1975 and 1978, as professor and head of the History Department, were among the happiest and most purposive of my entire academic life. This was due, in no small part, to my instant friendship with Francis Robinson. We soon realised that our interests converged to a remarkable degree, despite the gulf of almost two millennia between my own concern for the world of Late Antiquity and his with religion and politics in contemporary India and Pakistan.

At that time, Francis himself was a new arrival in the Department. He had come to Royal Holloway in 1973. His book *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces Muslims, 1860–1923* appeared the next year.[1] It described how the scattered and somewhat faceless Muslim community of a crucial Indian region emerged, in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as a highly self-conscious and militant political group, in a manner that led, eventually, to the creation of the separate Muslim state of Pakistan. The book was acclaimed as a model study of the relation between political mobilisation and the rise of nationalist feeling in a major Third World country.

But this was not enough for Francis. When I first met him, in 1975, he faced a dilemma for which I had the greatest sympathy. Despite the success of his book, he felt that he had not entered deeply enough into the living texture of the world that he was studying. Somehow, it appeared to him that the book lacked weight—that it had failed to do justice to the momentum of real passions and of muted, long-term certainties. This was a sense of absence calculated to cause disquiet in any young scholar left high and dry by their success.

What made it worse, in many ways, was that *Separatism Among Muslims* had been a highly successful book. It was a star performance within a clear-cut tradition of British scholarship on India. It was a strictly political study of elites and powerbrokers in action. It concentrated on the manner in which the Muslim elites of northern India had mobilised Islamic beliefs in competition with their Hindu rivals for a share in the patronage of the British government, and then in the government of an independent India—a competition that led ultimately (and fatefully for many) to the creation of the independent Muslim state of Pakistan. This was deemed to be proper history—history as it should be done. As Francis pointed out, in a later revision of his views, the manoeuvring of elites was the core of the book. The religious ideas and traditions that gave weight and urgency to those manoeuvres were treated as secondary. As he admitted: 'Ideas were not thought to have a significant power to move men.'[2]

[1] Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces Muslims, 1860–1923* (Cambridge, 1974; reprinted with an Introduction, 1993).

[2] *Ibid*., Introduction to the 1993 reprint, p. xv.

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Within a year of the appearance of his book, Francis realised that he had been wrong. He had underestimated the sheer weight and resilience, across the centuries, of Islam itself—of its traditions and of its distinctive modes of transmitting religious knowledge. Above all, Francis came to think that he had overlooked the Muslims' own view of the place of Islam in the modern world. He turned away from the politics of the Muslim elites in India to the worldwide theme of the Islamic Revival of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To follow such a theme was to do so much more than study the ins and outs of Muslim politics in one region alone. It was to delineate the features of a sleeping giant, and to give due warning of its awakening.

It was my good fortune to come to know Francis at this dangerous moment, when a young man's successful performance in one, well-established genre of history gave way, with a touch of vertigo, to the vision of an entire, much wider world. What I remember of Francis in Royal Holloway was the way in which he set about the conquest of that world.

First and foremost, at this time, I was struck by Francis's energy. This was already legendary. It was shown in Homeric duels in the tennis and squash court at Royal Holloway, and by performances of truly Tudor bounce and ruthlessness on the Royal Tennis Court in Cambridge. This energy flowed naturally into the workings of the History Department. As a result, I immediately found myself engaged with a lively group of scholars, Francis prominent among them, who had already set about creating a course in modern World History that was unique in Britain at the time. It covered, in effect, Asia and Africa since 1900, with special attention to comparisons between the regions—such as comparative studies of the peasantry. It also examined the fate of transnational movements in politics and ideas, as these impinged on differing societies—such as communism, anti-colonialism, secularism, and Islamic revivalism. We had every reason to be proud of this course. It gave a distinctive flavour to the teaching of history at Royal Holloway which it had lacked before.

The efforts of the World History group influenced my own work deeply at this time. So far, my readings in anthropology and in the comparative history of traditional societies—Iran, India, and East Asia—had a bookish quality about them. I was an armchair traveller. But scholars such as my co-professor Neville Sanderson (for Egypt and Sudan), Anthony Stockwell (for Malaysia), along with Francis (for India and Pakistan), studied living societies which they would visit regularly, and whose recent history and present-day dilemmas they could observe at close quarters. I had recently visited Iran (in the spring of 1974); and the memory of this visit—my own first experience of a non-European and deeply Muslim country—made me doubly grateful for their skills and their openness to the world beyond Europe.

This was the academic framework within which Francis taught and constantly experimented with new approaches to the Islamic world. But it was his personal links to a family of Muslim teachers of the Firangi Mahall of Lucknow that, as we now all know, would prove decisive in shaping his profile and his agenda as a scholar. This link was formed in the very first year that I arrived at Royal Holloway. The story of how this happened is quickly told.

In his *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, Francis had touched on the role of a leading member of the Firangi Mahall family, Maulana Abdul Bari (1878–1926). A year later, he received a rather curt letter from the grandson of Abdul Bari, pointing out that he had misrepresented the activities of his grandfather. Far from brushing aside this protest, Francis answered it with care. As a result of this act of courtesy, he was asked by the head of the family, Abdul Bari's son, Jamal Mian, to meet him in London. This happened in June 1976. Jamal Mian was reassured: at a time when so much of the writing of history in India was contaminated by political and ideological agendas, here was a historian who wrote history as he saw it. As a result, Francis was given access to the full range of the

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family papers of the Firangi Mahall—letters, diaries, family biographies, and a slew of documents that reached back to the time of Akbar.

By the end of 1976, Francis was back in Pakistan. His letter to me, written from the Sind Club in Karachi on 22 December, had all the excitement of a birthday boy opening his presents. These were 'the goodies that I have my hands on here'. But, as he pointed out, they were only an inkling of the world that Jamal Mian had stored away in tin trunks ('rescued from the family graveyard in which they were put to hide them from the wicked British') and which he, Jamal, carried in his own memory and exemplified in his own person.

In the first place, access to such an archive validated Francis's new approach to the Islamic world. Here were people for whom ideas really mattered. The history of this one outstanding family offered a way into the rich and diverse life of the learned and pious Muslims, the *ulama*, who had played such an important role in the politics of modern India. On close inspection, these *ulama* proved to be far from being cardboard figures. The richness of the Firangi Mahall material clinched the argument for Francis. As he wrote to me:

> I could go back to 1967 when Jack Gallagher [the doyen of Indian history in Cambridge] pooh-poohed my attempt to impress on him the importance of the ulama, but I think we can forget about that.

But how would he go from there? Characteristically, Francis went first for the networks. The family histories and the collections of *sanads* (effectively, licences to teach granted over the centuries by teachers to their pupils, piled up like so many university degrees) enabled him to trace the relations of the learned men of the Firangi Mahall to the Islamic world at large. They showed an outreach that stretched far beyond the frontiers of modern India and Pakistan. This vast, tenacious net of teachers and their pupils thrown across the globe was the living heart of Islam. Modern boundaries meant little in such a world. As he wrote to me, what the material available to him 'proves, and I hope no one opens this letter, is that Islamic traditions of scholarship are greater than the modern state'.[3]

The glimpse of the sheer extent and interconnectedness of the modern Islamic world, as revealed by the teaching networks of the Firangi Mahall, was a reminder of an altogether wider world than Western scholars had imagined. The sleeping giant was already wide awake; it was we who had failed to understand the rhythms of its breathing. A later letter written from Karachi on the eve of the Iranian Revolution catches a tense moment:

> As I view the world from here, I realise how depressingly narrow the British angle of vision has become. There is little sense of what is blowing up in the area stretching from Karachi to Khartoum to Istanbul and Samarkand.[4]

This in itself was no small discovery. But perhaps the most important change in Francis's viewpoint at this time was more personal. He entered with wholehearted appreciation into the atmosphere that surrounded the relationship between master and disciple in the world of the Firangi Mahall. This relationship between *pir* and *murid*, *alim* and pupil was the crucial, human link on which the fine web of Islamic tradition depended. It was characteristic of Francis that this was not a purely academic discovery for him, traced through the institutional records, the family biographies, and even the diaries of members

[3] Letter to Peter Brown, 22 December 1976.
[4] Letter to Peter Brown, 8 January 1979.

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of the Firangi Mahall. He threw himself into just such a relationship in his dealings with Jamal Mian and his circle. For a time he became part of that circle. He wrote to me that the long hours at the microfilm machine in the family residence were never vacant. Pupils and protégés of Jamal Mian always came and went to greet the great man, to seek his advice, to discuss religious issues.

> Here is a pukka *alim* who values the old ways... but welcomes much of the new. But here is also a special man: highly intelligent, learned, tolerant... and affectionate... he is loved by men simple and learned.

In the group gathered around his person, there was no small talk and no pretentiousness:

> Lovely warm intelligent company in which people were taken for what they were, and nothing else.... [a] society which is not nearly as ashamed of being intellectual as the equivalent groups in our own.[5]
>
> Peter, you will understand how at home I feel among these people who enjoy their knowledge.[6]

Altogether, what Francis brought back to Royal Holloway from Pakistan was a capacity for intellectual friendship far more robust than mere colleagueship. It was a touch of a more ancient and demanding system that still ran in the blood of the learned and pious circles of the Firangi Mahall. Francis had somehow placed himself in the position of a disciple to Jamal Mian, a man 25 years older than himself. He always spoke to me of him as 'my *alim*'. This was no pose. In the coming years, close and respectful observation of that remarkable man, and of his effect on those around him, offered a way into the heart of a living Islam that was as important, for Francis, as were the contents of those many tin chests of documents.

It was here, I think, that we converged. The widening of Francis's vision of the worldwide role of Islam was the stuff of his teaching in World History and of many of his publications at this time. I contributed to this venture by encouraging him to publish his *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500* in a series of historical atlases of which I was an editor at the time.[7] But modern Islamic revival, though an urgent topic—and especially at the time of the onset of the Iranian Revolution—was not my line. Holy men were. I had spent much time studying their rise and function in the world of Late Antiquity. And now, with Francis's recovery of the distinctive balance of holiness and learning among the pious teachers of Firangi Mahall—a balance exemplified in modern times by Jamal Mian himself—I realised that I had to think again. Let me end by explaining why.

Four years before I came to Royal Holloway, I had published an article 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity'.[8] This article explored the social role of holy men in late antique Syria and Egypt and their place in the imaginative world of the late antique Mediterranean and the Middle East. They were a vivid cast of characters. The most notorious of them, Symeon Stylites (396–459), was so-called because he perched on top of a 60-foot pillar; others lived at the bottom of dry cisterns, in tomb-like cells on

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Letter to Peter Brown, 25 January 1979.

[7] Francis Robinson, *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500* (Oxford, 1982).

[8] Peter Brown, 'The rise and function of the holy man in Late Antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp. 80–101, now in *idem, Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 103–152.

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the edge of the desert; or they would emerge from great, fortress-like monasteries to pace the roads of the Middle East to bring healing and the resolution of conflict to cities and villages alike.

In trying to understand this phenomenon, I had drawn on a specifically British tradition of social anthropology, associated with the work of Edward Evans-Pritchard and Mary Douglas. I did this in order to make the actions of these spectacular figures intelligible in terms of the need for patronage, healing, and spiritual guidance in a conflict-ridden society, characterised by heightened social fluidity at the top and by unprecedented rural growth at the bottom.

The article was deemed a success, and has been discussed ever since.[9] But, four years later, when I came to Royal Holloway, I had begun to have second thoughts. In this, I was not unlike Francis after the publication of his book *Separatism Among Indian Muslims.* I had used a vigorous English tradition of social anthropology to make sense of a flamboyant, even rebarbative, feature of late antique society. But there was a lot that still remained to be explained. Something had been lost in translation. Like Francis, I felt that I had somehow failed to do justice to the *weight* of the phenomenon that I had attempted to explain. I had shown how holy men had functioned successfully as outsiders in their society, but I had not seen how their strange figures might also be seen, by believers, as bearing in themselves the distilled essence of the religious values of that society. I had shown how holy men might be useful, but I did not catch the extent to which they might be loved.

And this is what Francis gave me through his work on the Firangi Mahall. His presentation of an entire gallery of learned and holy persons nourished and challenged my own work on the Late Antique holy man. I realised that Islam was a religious system that had many features in common with Late Antiquity, but where the balance between the elements were markedly different. In Late Antiquity, Christian holy men had tended to stand alone (or to be presented as standing alone) as embattled, charismatic figures, straight from the desert. By contrast, Francis opened up a world filled with less dramatic but more gentle persons—with learned, this-worldly saints who maintained, with rare grace, a balance between Sufi mysticism and active involvement in the affairs of this world, as husbands, merchants, teachers, and politicians. His own, warm portrait of Jamal Mian and his circle showed that this notion of sanctity had endured into modern times. There was nothing archaic about it.

As Francis described them to me, the modern saints of learning reminded me of the Greek philosophers and their pupils in the time of Plotinus and the last days of the Platonic Academy of Athens. These philosophers were mystics, but they were also men of vast learning and often pillars of their community. They radiated a more gentle charisma than did the wild holy men of Syria. They would have fitted well in the ranks of the learned and pious *ulama* of the Firangi Mahall. I realised that, in my study of Late Antiquity, I would have to pay more attention than hitherto to other figures—to philosophers, bishops, and rabbis—and not only to 'my' rugged holy men. It was a major change of course for me.

By the time that I left Royal Holloway, in 1978, I was already on that course. At Berkeley, I settled down, in my first year, to a comparison between Christian and Islamic notions of sanctity that attempted to redress the balance of my earlier work. By a peculiarly happy turn of fortune, Francis and I were able to come together, in

[9] For my own re-thinking of many of the issues raised in this article, see Peter Brown, 'The rise and function of the holy man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pp. 353–376; and, most recently (on Syrian asceticism), Peter Brown, *Treasure in Heaven. The Holy Poor in Early Christianity* (Charlottesville, VA, 2016), pp. 53–70.

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July 1979, at a conference organised by Barbara Metcalf on the theme of 'Moral Conduct and Authority. The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam'. (*Adab* referred to the stringent codes of deportment adopted by members of the Muslim elites of India and elsewhere.) I contributed a paper entitled 'Late Antiquity and Islam: Parallels and Contrasts',[10] and Francis spoke on the Firangi Mahall.[11] It was a memorable conference and a delightful moment of reunion at the far end of the earth from Royal Holloway. But already Francis had opened up a world for me. In the album of good wishes presented to me by the History Department in 1978, he wrote beneath his photo: 'Ibn Abbas reported that the Messenger of Allah said: "To the Devil, one scholar is stronger than one thousand holy men".'

The challenge of such scholars, admired by Francis with such infectious warmth, has remained with me ever since.

[10] Peter Brown, 'Late Antiquity and Islam: parallels and contrasts', in *Moral Conduct and Authority. The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, (ed.) Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 23–37.

[11] F. Robinson, 'The ʿ*ulamâ* of Farangî Mahall and their *adab*', in *ibid*., pp. 152–183.

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