

People of the book - The Forgotten History of Islam and the West
by Zachary Karabell.
John Murray 2007.

Amid all the turbulence that informs the modern relationship between Islam and the Western, democratic, Judaeo-Christian world, People of the book tells a slightly different story about historical relationships between the two blocs, a story that if taken seriously by all the protagonists could change the nature of the conflict that threatens, at worst, to engulf us all.

Zachary Karabell, in People of the book, tells the story of Islam and the Islamic nations, and also of their engagement with the other Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and Christianity.

There is much bloodshed in the story, but there is a great deal more besides: constructive engagement between the faiths, lengthy periods of peaceful co-habitation, Islamic efflorescence in terms of both religious and secular scholarship, and the summit of Islamic culture in al Andalus. Karabell hints at the roots of many modern problems in earlier events, not least in the story of the Ottoman Empire, which he tells in detail, but also gives suggestions of ways in which the past might be constructively used to build a better present.

He concludes by looking at the Gulf State of Dubai, which he holds up as a model for other Arab states who wish to engage with the modern, non-Islamic world while still retaining their religious integrity.

People of the book is an excellent and highly readable work of history, but it is also an eloquent riposte to all those, Muslims and non-Muslims, who seek to misrepresent the past as a means of justifying the hatreds of the present.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh