

= Islam : The Untold Story =

Islam : The Untold Story is a documentary film written and presented by the English novelist and popular historian Tom Holland . The documentary explores the origins of Islam , an Abrahamic religion that developed in Arabia in the 7th century ; it criticizes the orthodox Islamic account of this history , claiming that it lacks sufficient supporting evidence . It was commissioned by the British television company Channel 4 and first broadcast in August 2012 . Its release followed the publication of Holland 's *In the Shadow of the Sword : The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* (2012) , which also discussed the rise of the Arab Empire and the origins of Islam .

Adopting the theories of academic historian Patricia Crone as a basis , Holland asserted that there was little hard evidence for the origins of Islam and asked why it took several decades after the death of Muhammad for his name to appear on surviving documents or artifacts . Arguing that there was little evidence for how the faith was born , he suggested that the city of Mecca may not have been the real birthplace of Muhammad and Islam , and ? while not clearly disputing Muhammad 's existence as a real historical figure ? claimed that much of the Islamic origin story was later developed in the early years of the Arab Empire .

The documentary proved controversial . Mainstream media reception was mixed , and it provoked particular criticism from figures within the United Kingdom 's Islamic community , who argued that Holland ignored evidence supporting the orthodox account of early Islamic history . Government @-@ approved regulatory authority Ofcom and the broadcaster Channel 4 received an estimated 1200 complaints regarding the program . Channel 4 eventually cancelled a public screening of the documentary at their London headquarters after numerous threats of violence .

= = Background = =

Possessor of a bachelor 's degree in English and Latin from the University of Cambridge , Holland is an English novelist and popular historian who has published a trio of best @-@ selling histories of the ancient world : *Rubicon : The Last Years of the Roman Republic* (2003) , *Persian Fire : The First World Empire and the Battle for the West* (2005) , and *Millennium : The End of the World and the Forging of Christendom* (2008) . In 2012 , Holland 's fourth work of history , *In the Shadow of the Sword : The Battle for Global Empire and the End of the Ancient World* , was published ; it explored the collapse of the Roman and Persian Empires , as well as the rise of the Arab Empire and the accompanying Arabian religion of Islam .

In an interview with *The Spectator* , he rejected the Islamic belief that the Qur 'an constituted the direct word of God , stating that he believed it to have been " very clearly " written by a human being during Late Antiquity . He highlighted " the lack of sources " that were available with which to analyse the origins of Islam , and that all religious movements come to construct their own back story , in doing so erasing alternative accounts and interpretations of their history .

It was on the basis of *In the Shadow of the Sword* that public service television Channel 4 commissioned Holland to produce a documentary on the subject of Islam 's origins . A spokeswoman for the company publicly announced that the documentary constituted a part of their " remit to support and stimulate well @-@ informed debate on a wide range of issues " through " challenging established views " and providing access to alternative perspectives and information .

The film 's screening came a month after the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) aired the first episode of television sitcom *Citizen Khan* . Revolving around the life of a British Muslim of Pakistani descent , the show had been co @-@ written by its star , Adil Ray , himself a British Muslim of Pakistani descent . The BBC received 200 complaints regarding the content of the episode , including accusations that it perpetuated stereotypes about British Asians , ridiculed Islam and disrespected the Qur 'an ; some of these criticisms would be echoed in the furore regarding Holland 's documentary .

= = Synopsis = =

In Islam : The Untold Story , Holland deals with the origins of the religion Islam . Traveling to Saudi Arabia , he visits Arabian Bedouins to hear their orthodox Islamic accounts of the religion 's origins . Holland then talks to Seyyed Hossein Nasr , a practicing Muslim who teaches Islamic studies at the George Washington University , Washington D.C. , and Patricia Crone , a non @-@ Muslim historian of Islamic history at the Institute for Advanced Study , Princeton . The former defends the orthodox Islamic account of the faith 's history , citing its development within oral history , but Crone challenges the reliability of oral history , and therefore the traditional account .

Holland looks at the earliest evidence for Muhammad , Mecca and Islam in the first century of the Arab Empire , pointing to a lack of evidence in the historical record to support the traditional account . Highlighting that very little Muslim testimony from the 7th century exists , he considers it suspicious that 30 years after Muhammad 's death , Muawiyah I became leader of the Arab Empire in Jerusalem despite showing little sign of being Muslim , and that no mention of Muhammad or Islam can be found in any of Muawiyah 's inscriptions , coins , or documents . Holland proceeds to note that with the exception of a single ambiguous reference in the Qur 'an , there is no mention of Mecca in any datable text for a century after Muhammed 's death . He points out that in the Qur 'an , the Prophet appears to address farmers and agriculturalists while his opponents are described as keeping cattle and growing olives and vines . This appears to describe an environment foreign to Mecca , where there was no agriculture ; thus Holland posits that the location attributed to Mecca in the Qur 'an more closely fits a city in the Negev desert , in what is now southern Israel .

Holland suggests that under the reign of Arab Emperor Abd al @-@ Malik ibn Marwan , even though only a small percentage of the inhabitants of the Empire was Muslim , Mecca was intentionally yet erroneously portrayed as Muhammad 's home and the birthplace of Islam in order to provide the religion with Arabian origins . Holland argues that in doing so , the faith was unassociated from the Jewish or Christian heritage that would have been self evident at a location in the Negev .

= = Reception = =

= = = Mainstream media = = =

Writing in The Daily Telegraph , Christopher Howse , a commentator on religious issues , was critical of the documentary , awarding it two stars out of five and labelling it " disjointed " . He argued that it placed too much emphasis on historiography but that its " crowning annoyance " was Holland 's habit of pausing mid @-@ sentence . In contrast , Ed West , also of The Daily Telegraph , praised the documentary , stating that it was " atmospheric and intelligent " . Noting it would make many viewers uncomfortable , he argued that the Islamic world had to accept " higher criticism " and " embrace the pain of doubt " in order to improve life for themselves and for their non @-@ Muslim neighbours .

In The Independent , television reviewer Tom Sutcliffe discussed the documentary , noting that it was likely to court controversy and cause problems for Holland . Although remarking that he did not know what devout Muslims would think of Holland 's arguments , he asserted that they did not have " a monopoly on literalist affront " . John Crace reviewed the documentary for The Guardian , noting that Holland was no " attention @-@ seeking , neo @-@ Conservative , Niall Ferguson lookalike " but was probably a social liberal . Crace opined that while most Westerners would find Holland 's findings uncontentious , many devout Muslims would consider it blasphemous . Considering Holland excessively cautious , he thought the presenter " was looking over his shoulder , half expecting a fatwa at any minute . "

= = = Islamic community = = =

The UK @-@ based Islamic Education & Research Academy (iERA) proclaimed that the

documentary was " historically inaccurate " and " clearly biased " . In their statement , iERA proclaimed that " in an important 74 minutes [sic] long full of ' complex arguments ' and ' academic scholarship ' documentary , Holland should have spent a little more time with Islamic historians instead of wasting all those precious minutes in learning the way of the Bedouin . " Similarly , the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPACUK) stated that the documentary had a " flagrant bias " against Islam , expressing concern that the majority of viewers would " blindly accept " Holland 's conclusions . To counter what they believed to be an anti @-@ Islamic bias in the mainstream media , they called on Muslims to produce documentaries about Islamic history , praising Faris Kermani 's documentary , The Life of Muhammad , presented by Rageh Omaar , as a good example . Hoping that such documentaries would aid in " familiarising the nation with our ideologies " , they urged British Muslims to encourage their children to enter into professions in history , media and politics .

The Huffington Post published a response from practising Muslim Afroze Zaidi @-@ Jivraj , a graduate in English who had recently began a masters degree student in theology at the University of Birmingham . She remarked that Holland 's methodology was flawed because he had neglected to study the corpus of material on early Islamic history found in libraries across the Islamic world , instead using only sources he had obtained in Western libraries . She argued that he did not consult a single Islamic scholar of Islamic history , instead choosing the more " exotic " option of interviewing a Bedouin , and that although he had consulted Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr ? " a token Muslim voice " ? Nasr was a scholar of Islamic philosophy and not Islamic history . Asserting that Islam : The Untold Story was based on poor scholarship by assuming the superiority of secular Western historical inquiry over Islamic historical traditions , she argued that it would promote negative views of " an already poorly @-@ understood faith and its much @-@ maligned adherents . " This despite Tom Holland explaining within the documentary that " The earliest biographies we have were written nearly 200 years after Mohammed 's lifetime . " These biographies are indeed in libraries across the Islamic world . Copies are available in western libraries .

Another British Muslim to publicly criticise the documentary 's scholarship was Akeel Umar , a spokesman for a protest group assembled outside the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh . Although the demonstration had been assembled to protest against the short film Innocence of Muslims , which asserted that Muhammad was a homosexual and a child @-@ molester , Umar also informed press that he considered Holland 's film to be an academically @-@ flawed work that " wasted everyone 's time and airspace " . He differentiated Islam : The Untold Story ? which he considered to be a poor work of scholarship ? with Innocence of Muslims , which he deemed to be intentionally offensive and inflammatory .

State media in the Islamic Republic of Iran also criticised the documentary , claiming that it constituted an " insult " to Islam . Several critics attacked Holland on the social media site Twitter , some making personal threats against him . One commented that " You might be a target in the streets . You may recruit some bodyguards , for your own safety . " Another exclaimed that he was a " fool " for suggesting Islam was a " made @-@ up religion " .

= = = Other alternate media = = =

The English Defence League (EDL) published an online review of the documentary authored by Pyrus , a member of their LGBT division . Labelling Holland " ludicrously deferential " for praying to Allah alongside the " toothless old bedouins " , they thought that Channel 4 had been far too cautious and should have been more explicit in their denunciation of the Islamic origin story . Believing that such a documentary should have been produced in the 1970s , they argued that the " media , politicians and academics " have spent fifty years hiding the truth about Islam from the British population , and that they doubted whether the documentary would have been made had the EDL not existed to promote anti @-@ Islamic thought .

= = = Holland 's response to critics = = =

Holland initially responded to his critics through the social website of Twitter , where he summed up the public response as " you win some , you lose some . " Then publishing what he described as a " brief response " to his critics on the Channel 4 website , he stressed that the documentary was not created as a critique of Islam but as " a historical endeavour " . Comparing his documentary with others that Channel 4 had produced on religious history , such as The Bible : A History , he noted that Islam : The Untold Story fell within the channel 's remit of sparking " well @-@ informed debate on a wide range of issues " . Admitting that it was impossible to " articulate all the resonances and implications of every argument " in a 74 @-@ minute documentary , he directed those who wanted to learn more to read his recently published book .

Holland 's Twitter critics also came under attack from popular historian Dan Snow , who tweeted " Dear angry mad people on twitter , it is conceivable that you know more than @ holland _ tom & the world 's leading scholars , but very unlikely " .

= = Cancelled public screening = =

After security fears were raised , on 11 September 2012 , Channel 4 cancelled a planned screening of the film for " opinion formers " at its London headquarters . They said they were nevertheless " extremely proud " of the film and would continue to provide access to it on their website , 4oD .

Their decision to cancel was criticised by Jenny Taylor , the founder of Lapid Media , a consultancy specialising in religious literacy in world affairs . Invited to attend the event , Taylor described the documentary as a good historical study and its cancellation as the " appalling " result of protest whipped up by the media . She argued that the right to debate historical events is a core value of the western world , and that Islam should not be exempt from historical inquiry .

The Council of Ex @-@ Muslims of Britain expressed indignation at the cancellation , stating that giving in to the demands of Islamists would have a " catastrophic " effect on " free enquiry and expression where it pertains to Islam " . They urged supporters to write to Channel 4 and Ofcom requesting a repeat screening .