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BOOK REVIEWS

Suzanne Conklin Akbari. *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450.* Ithaca and London: Cornel University Press, 2009. xii + 323 pages, notes, index, bibliography. Cloth US$49.95. ISBN 978-0-8014-4807-2.

The medieval Christian world was confronted early on with the problem of how to fit Islam into a narrative of Christian supersession. This book describes how Western Christians constructed a metanarrative for Islam as part of a larger categorization of religious and ethnic difference based largely on the features of space and orientation. Readers familiar with the work of Norman Daniel and John Tolan on Western views of Islam, or Dorothee Metlitzki and John Block Friedman on Western notions of the Orient will appreciate Suzanne Conklin Akbari's extension, deepening, and in some cases, critiquing their work.

This book surveys a wide range of texts—literary, historical, scientific, and cartographic—to sketch out the contours of two distinct vectors in premodern Orientalist discourse through which the alterity of medieval Muslims was described: that of religious difference and that of geographical diversity. This construction, incidentally, also served to define the Christian self.

The book comprises six chapters. "The Shape of the World" is the first, and it treats the emergence of a binary opposition of Orient and Occident. Citing maps, images, and literature, Akbari traces the processes through which the West becomes characterized climatically as cold or cool, producing rational people with strong, fair bodies, while the East is categorized as hot which produces irascible people with weak, swarthy bodies. These become paradigms for categorizing and evaluating humanity, but the process takes centuries: "It is…only during the late fourteenth century that something like the modern notion of a European 'West' appears in literature: an Occident characterized by cold, and the external whiteness and internal fortitude born of it" (48).

Chapter Two, "From Jerusalem to India," treats the issue of center, which in the early medieval period is Jerusalem, the *axis mundi*. Ancient

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maps depict three continents, representing the three sons of Shem in Genesis 10, extending from Jerusalem, the center of the world. But the center then shifts eastward toward India. The legends of Prester John begin to emerge in relation to this shift, and both India and Ethiopia become conflated and characterized as marvelous and full of monstrous excess. These are both "orient," representing a region of mystery, danger and multiplicity (109).

This is followed by "The Place of the Jews," which treats the striking overlap in premodern depictions of Muslims and Jews. Akbari shows how the term Saracen functions similarly to the term Jew by simultaneously defining both ethnic and religious difference. However, whereas the Jew is presented as belonging nowhere yet found everywhere, the Muslim is depicted as the product of a particular climate, therefore possessing a range of invariable, immutable bodily and behavioral qualities. Situated outside the borders of the Christian world, the Muslim community is repudiated, as it were, at a distance, while because the Jewish community is located both outside and inside the Christian world, it is rejected from within. This repudiation does not cease even after the Jewish expulsion, notes Akbari, because of Judaism's shadowy presence prior to and even within Christianity.

Chapter four goes into detail treating the literary depictions of the Oriental body defined by the term Saracen. It is fantastic and defies the laws of nature: "men of monstrous stature and beautiful form; women possessing extraordinary powers of aggression overlaid with a veneer of conventionally feminine beauty; half-breed offspring whose misshapen form or variegated color reflects their liminal status, trapped in the gap separating two distinct categories" (16–17). But Saracens are divided "into those who are white, well proportioned, and assimilable, and those who are dark-skinned, deformed or of grotesque stature, and doomed to destruction" (156). The transforming body of the Saracen thus represents the possibility for assimilation and integration of the Islamic world into Christendom. In chapter five, "Empty Idols and a False Prophet," Akbari maintains, contra Norman Daniel, that what he considers the distinction between fanciful and more realistic medieval depictions of Islam actually share a common discourse of falsity and inferiority.

The last chapter surveys Western depictions of the Islamic heaven. It is a place of sensuous pleasures associated with law as opposed to spirit: "The Islamic paradise was [for Western Christians] both enormously attractive and profoundly dangerous, a place of luxury and sensuous stimulation that must be rejected on the basis of its devotion to the body above the spirit, and

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its elevation of the literal world above the meaning embedded within. For European Christians, this false felicity was a microcosm of all that was wrong with Islam, its fetishization of the beautiful surface making it the epitome of what must be rejected." (248). Muslim literalism parallels that of Judaism and misses the truth of the more subtle spiritual essence, but also serves as a foil to critique certain contemporary expressions of Christian heterodoxy.

Akbari notes the correspondences between premodern and contemporary Orientalism on the religious alterity of Islam as a false, deceptive religion of sensuous surfaces lacking substantial truth. She also notes how the "the vector of geographical diversity, in which bodily differences of anatomy, physiology, and behavior were thought to be dictated by variations of climate [has been replaced by] notions of race based on 'blood' (later, genetics)" (282). This is a very important book. It is smart, accessible, and an enjoyable read without losing its scholarly tone. Especially given the recent rise in and greater consciousness of Western Islamophobia, this book shows just how deeply prejudice is imbedded within culture.

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Abdullah Al-Arian. *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xx + 298 pages, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth US$55.00 ISBN 978-0-19-993127-9.

In this intriguing and fact-filled volume, Abdullah Al-Arian not only fills an important gap in the growing literature on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but also provides us with an engaging and culturally-sensitive text. It reads like a story—his-story, since it is about the Brothers (although Al-Arian does give a nod to Zaynab al-Ghazali and her role in the Muslim Brotherhood)—as it rivets our attention with an expressive and comprehensible prose style. Almost every chapter begins with an insightful anecdote that not only epitomizes the complex relationships found therein, but demonstrates the richness and depth of the author's knowledge and data-gathering. He also eschews scoring points in the Western political narrative that verges on Islamophobic, but rather presents an objective, yet respectful, and critical, yet well-reasoned account of the Brotherhood's "triumphant return [in the 1970s] from the dustbin of history to the fore of Egyptian society and politics" (215). He not only tells us *what* the highly