Book Reviews

The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism

Timothy Marr
Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 309 pages.

Perceptions of the "other" are a powerful force in day-to-day human interaction, as well as in domestic and international politics. Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* almost three decades ago, many scholars have appropriated and debated his thesis about the reality-changing power of European (and American) discourses on Muslims and Arabs. In the book under review, Timothy Marr, professor of English in the American Studies Curriculum department at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, simultaneously broadens and criticizes Said's ideas.

The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism (a somewhat misleading title for a fascinating book) offers a rich analysis of how Americans appropriated images of Islam, Muslim societies, and the Middle East during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries for various political, social, and cultural – but ultimately American – purposes related to domestic and international issues. The author argues that such perceptions, in light of their complex and multiple uses in American history, are significant because they continue to shape contemporary American approaches to the Muslim world.

Marr advances this thesis by looking at an impressive array of historical sources and documents, as well as secondary literature on various aspects of American history and culture, in which he finds a multitude of references to Islam and Muslims (or Turks, Saracens etc., respectively). His analysis of these references offers a stunning kaleidoscope of American images of the Muslim "other," but reveals far more about the inner dynamics of American nation-building and cultural self-definition than about Islam or Muslims.

In his introduction, "Imagining Ishmael: Introducing American Islamicism," which in terms of theoretical engagement is the book's most powerful part, Marr situates his book in relation to Said by challenging the latter's "contention that nineteenth-century Americans never made an 'imaginative investment' in the orient because they were preoccupied in large part with

the settlement of the West" (p. 17). His analysis focuses on discourses produced by a white Protestant elite concentrated in the northeastern United States and thus intentionally ignores the inner ethnic and cultural diversity of American society.

The first chapter, "Islamicism and Counterdespotism in Early National Cultural Expression," argues that the notion of oriental despotism, as exemplified in the images of the Ottoman Empire and its rulers, provided a powerful negative backdrop for defining early republican ideas of liberalism and democracy. It also demonstrates the multiple levels of American engagement in global politics and the diverse uses of the (mostly negative) Ottoman example to explain American foreign policy successes and failures.

Chapter 2, "Drying Up the Euphrates: Muslims, Millennialism, and Early American Missionary Enterprise," focuses on the Protestant imagination's designation of the Turks as part of the Antichrist and the diverse approaches to Protestant missionary encounters, which invariably resulted in direct encounters with Muslims. Marr shows that such encounters had the potential to dramatically alter simplistic negative perceptions, which sometimes resulted in redirecting missionary activity toward Eastern Christians, leaving infidel Muslims for a later generation to convert.

In chapter 3, "Antebellum Islamicism and the Transnational Crusade of Antislavery and Temperance Reform," Marr takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the uses of Orientalist images of Turks and Muslims as arguments for abolishing slavery and the negative consequences of alcohol abuse. Ironically, abolitionist writers used two diverging propositions: lagging behind "even" the savage Turks, who had abolished slavery in the 1850s, and simultaneously criticizing American slavery as more inhumane than "Muslim slavery." In both discourses, Muslims appear as a backdrop for domestic arguments and politics.

Chapter 4, "Turkey Is in Our Midst: Mormonism as an American 'Islam,'" explores American anti-Mormon polemics in its Orientalist imagery and shows how easily existing stereotypes of Islam and Muslims (especially polygamy) could be reused to demonize a rival Christian community, in part by declaring the American West a domestic Orient. Chapters 5 and 6, "American Ishmael: Herman Melville's Literary Islamicism" and "Turning Turk: The Gendered Pageantry of Mid-Nineteenth-Century Islamicism," explore various aspects of the complex Islamicist ideas in Melville's literary production as well as artistic imagery and the appropriation of romanticized "Oriental" clothing for both men and women in a variety of American cultural contexts.

I would have liked to see a more elaborate conclusion, rather than the short afterword that ends the book. Marr rightfully points to contemporary comparative scholarship's potential awareness of the ideological constraints of intercultural comparison while advancing the understanding of cultures and religions. This book is written in an elegant and sometimes demanding style. The significant number of very interesting illustrations enhances its argument and provides helpful visual support for his ideas and claims.

Marr uses *islamicism* to describe a discourse similar to Said's use of *Orientalism* and sees it as shorthand for *Islamic Orientalism*. For those in the field of Islamic studies who had just gotten used to calling themselves *Islamicists*, Marr's use of this term will prove disconcerting, even though he insists on a lower-case spelling. In addition, and as indicated above, the book's title might not attract enough attention from the right audience.

While this work of American studies significantly enhances our understanding of American discursive formulations about Muslims, it ultimately cannot provide an alternative, more nuanced picture of Muslims or Islam during the centuries in question. This extends to knowledge about the internal politics of Islamic studies, as evident in the lone use of Bernard Lewis' work on race and slavery in Islam as support for the abolitionists' purported romanticizing of Muslim slavery.

This small critique notwithstanding, the book is highly recommended for those interested in advanced discussions of Orientalist ideas and their transformative power. With its impressive wealth of sources and complex and nuanced argument, it advances and complements existing scholarship on the topic, especially in relation to earlier American history. It should, therefore, prove very useful for those interested in the legacies of historical discourses for contemporary politics and society.

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