

Review Essays



New Light on Old Misunderstandings

Recent Research on Islamic History, Thought, and Art

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Chittick, William C. *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*. Edited by Mohammad Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata. Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2012. Pp. xiv + 397. \$95.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Chittick, William C. *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. xxix + 490. \$85.00 cloth.

Elias, Jamal J. *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 404 + 8 illustrations. \$35.00 cloth.

Gharipour, Mohammad, ed. *Sacred Precincts: The Religious Architecture of the Non-Muslim Communities across the Islamic World*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2015. Pp. xxxvii + 542 + 206 illustrations. \$249.00 cloth.

Lassner, Jacob. *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam: Modern Scholarship, Medieval Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Pp. xviii + 312. \$54.00 cloth, \$37.50 paper.

Leoni, Francesca and Mika Natif, eds. *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*. Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. Pp. xix + 244 + 64 illustrations. \$109.95 cloth.

American (and European) misperceptions of Islam and Muslims are rooted in centuries of cultural, religious, and political conflict, and are now sadly enjoying a dramatic resurgence as a result of current events in the Middle East, North and West Africa, and Central and South Asia (Afghanistan and Pakistan). Among the more damaging and deeply entrenched of these attitudes, several stand out, and each demands a more nuanced understanding of the “actual” situation with a critical injection of solid historical perspective.

Perhaps the most widely assumed notion is that Muslim expansion in late antiquity and early medieval times was always and everywhere accompanied by either the wide-scale conversion of the conquered people, wholesale slaughter of those who refused, or exile (either compulsory or self-imposed) of those fortunate enough to escape with life and religious allegiance intact. The natural result, of course, would have been the virtually immediate destruction of all non-Muslim communities—all of which, alas, flies in the face of historical facts. Another common assumption is that Islam is a religious tradition in which “orthopraxy” (correct action) precludes even minimal concern for “orthodoxy” (correct belief). As a result, the story goes, Muslims don’t “do theology.” At best, whatever version of intellectual inquiry they might attempt as a close imitation thereof is destined to hit a dead end in the *cul de sac* of voluntarism in which the deity is unconstrained by any tincture of rationality. Once again, an expansive record of theological literature calls for a reassessment. A third misconception, held equally by Muslims and non-Muslims, is that Muslims “don’t do pictures”—of *any* living beings, let alone of humans, and most definitely not of religious personages. The historical record—countless thousands of exquisite images, for starters—deserves more serious interrogation than the kind of dismissive condemnation that has unfortunately become the default response. Here are half-dozen examples of recent scholarship that offer much-needed correctives to each of these three views.

Two recent works challenge the widespread belief that “Islam has always been spread by the sword.” The eminent historian Jacob Lassner’s *Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam: Modern Scholarship, Medieval Realities* gathers a series of richly reflective essays in two large categories. “Encountering the Other: Western Scholarship and the Foundations of Islamic Civilization” examines various aspects of “orientalism,” especially regarding Islam’s origins, focusing largely on scholarly methodology. “Jews and Christians: the Reality of Being the ‘Other’ in the Medieval Islamic World,” on the other hand, explores several variations on the vast theme of Abrahamic interaction in several medieval contexts. Lassner sums up admirably the complex situation so commonly presumed otherwise about the “meteoric” advent of Islam and its effect on non-Muslims: “Although forced conversion to Islam was rare, the psychic and eco-

conomic advantages of embracing a Muslim faith not so dissimilar from one's own were self-evident. For many Christians, the vast and rapid Muslim conquest was a sign that God had transferred his favor to Muhammad's community. For Jews, the strict monotheism of the Muslims ... might have served as an inducement for the faint hearted or opportunistic to opt in favor of conversion" (ix). Yes, there *were* forced-conversions, but there was never a single cohesive policy enforced globally; such sad events happened in some regions, during some periods, under some rulers of some dynasties—a largely random picture not so different from Christian treatment of minority populations in late ancient and medieval Europe.

This very evocative set of essays offers many correctives to commonly heard views about Muslims in relation to Jews historically. In general, Islamic views and treatment of Jews in newly Islamized lands were significantly less harsh than those of Christians in regard to Jewish presence in medieval Europe. Whereas Muslims "recognized the Jews as having had a long and venerable history in territories that comprised the Abode of Islam" (176), the "Latin West" typically regarded Jews as interlopers. Muslims considered Jews generally as sharing the same "homeland," while medieval Europeans tended to revile Jews for rejecting the true faith. European Christians often rejected Jews as demonic, but Muslims did not accuse Jews of such horrors as killing non-Jewish children to use their blood as an ingredient in unleavened bread, or poisoning wells, or a host of other charges involving Christian deaths. Such accusations were not common among Muslims until they "borrowed" them from Christian sources after 1800, giving rise to much apparent anti-Jewish sentiment currently.

Characterizing the whole text as a series of inter-connected, even overlapping, essays—actually, an "extended essay," Lassner has more than earned the right to reflect on such a broad historical panorama in this somewhat more relaxed genre. And on the whole, it works, is accessibly written and full of arresting insights. Still, the complete absence of annotation is a bit of an oddity, notwithstanding the considerable "select" bibliography sorted out by relevance to chapters.

The skewed perception that advancing Muslim militant forces have *always* historically wiped out any conquered populations that refused to convert to Islam is perhaps the most serious misunderstanding of "westerners." To put it plainly, the news of the Middle East—what now sadly passes for foreign affairs journalism—that bombards so many Americans currently is *not* simply a mirror image of what Muslims "have always done." Solid historical perspective is very hard to come by where Islam is concerned these days, but in this instance a new book based on studies of "material culture" makes an important contribution toward setting this complex record straight. In *Sacred Precincts*:

The Religious Architecture of the Non-Muslim Communities across the Islamic World, edited by Mohammad Gharipour, twenty five specialists offer intriguing “hard evidence” of a very diverse set of portrayals of Abrahamic interplay across a broad spectrum of regions and political histories.

Packed into this hefty tome (550 pages with double-columned text), readers will find studies of built/material culture via a remarkable array of topics, methodologies, geographical regions, and historical periods, all organized in four segments: Identity, Design, Construction, and Re-use. Throughout the book run threads of shared, overlapping, borrowed, and/or contested sacred/symbolic spaces separating and/or uniting the “institutionalized” Abrahamic communities. As the sub-title suggests, the “point of view” is largely that of a dominant Islam toward subordinate “client” communities. But even the widespread and long-established existence of such non-Muslim communities is both the most obvious and most overlooked evidence of the survival of Jews and Christians under Muslim administrative regimes. Yes, they were generally regarded as “second-class citizens,” but that status was not uniquely a function of their subordination to *Islam* as such. For every concrete example of such social stratification in Islamdom one can find at least one not far away in time/space under non-Muslim rule.

In this profusely illustrated volume one finds over two hundred arresting (and almost all color) images of churches, synagogues, tomb-shrines of the eminently holy, and mosques, of every conceivable scale, style and setting. Perhaps most enlightening is the strikingly monumental representation of the reality of co-existence during so many periods in so many places claimed by Christians, Jews, and Muslims of so many denominations and ethnicities. Readers interested in the arts of architecture and the indispensable, irreplaceable reality and function of “sacred space” in the Abrahamic traditions will find this book most engaging and enlightening.

A second misbegotten conviction, though typically less politically fraught than the first and therefore not quite as damaging, is nevertheless divisive enough in that it “others” Muslims starkly and definitively where it hurts the most. It effectively dehumanizes by implying that “they” are incapable of either affective depth or intellectual subtlety. Abundant evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, the well-entrenched bromide “Muslims don’t do theology” persists. Like other too-seldom challenged assumptions about Islam, the assessment implicitly dismisses a major global religious tradition as somehow culturally deficient and clearly unworthy to stand among traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, for example. It hardly takes extensive research into American and “Western” cultures generally to sense a pervasive undercurrent of equal conviction that “Muslims don’t do love, either.” But topics

such as the very nature of the divine, love, happiness, moral uprightness, and dozens of other humane values more or less universally regarded as the bedrock of civilization form the substance of vast treasures of Islamic religious literature in dozens of languages dating back nearly a millennium and a half. Thanks to the committed scholarship of William Chittick, readers now have easy access to essential reading that begins to fill large lacunae in this regard.

In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought, edited by Chittick students Mohammad Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata, gathers some two dozen articles and chapters that elucidate a variety of themes relevant here. With a breadth of erudition and depth of reflection that flow from a life dedicated to appreciating the sources and themes of Islamic spirituality, Chittick treats the reader to welcome insight into a rich heritage too often obscured by the turmoil of historical circumstances. Many Jews and Christians treasure the wisdom enshrined in centuries of literature and tradition while the majority do not have the luxury of familiarity with the more rarified material. Something similar is, not surprisingly, the case among many predominantly Muslim societies, but there is a major difference: in many traditional cultures—across the Middle East, through Iran, and into South Asia—even individuals without high level education learn to revere the great poets and even mystics of long ago, and cab drivers gladly quote medieval masters from memory. To that deep appreciation of Muslim religious classics Chittick invites curious readers. Much of the material in this collection is related to Sufism, with themes and texts developed by great teachers such as Rumi and Ibn Arabi. But there are also samples of traditional Islamic philosophy and psychology, theological themes such as eschatology, and insights into core Islamic teachings on inter-religious relations.

Chittick's recent monograph *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* delves more deeply into explicitly theological questions and themes, especially one that will, alas, come as a shock to many "western" readers: love as a theological and spiritual foundation of all reality. Here Chittick draws on an immense library of traditional Arabic and Persian literature, much of it little-known outside their places of origin and most of it never previously translated, or only piecemeal, into English. A great benefit of this volume is that all of its nine chapters include extensive quotations from rare primary source texts, such as Maybudi's *Unveiling of the Secrets and the Provision of the Pious* and Sam'ani's *The Repose of the Spirits*, complete translations of which Chittick is in process of producing. Readers are also gifted with texts from some of the world's finest mystical poets—Rumi, Attar, Sana'i—and major teachers better known than Maybudi and Sam'ani, such as the Brothers Ghazali. Chittick's superb pedagogical model begins with preparatory "theoretical" reflections on

the origins, theological context, and psychology of love. Phase two, the “life of love,” describes the actual process of spiritual quest and progress along the upward path and details (along the lines of many classical Arabic and Persian compendia of Sufi spirituality) the various subtle and demanding interior “states” through which seekers must pass along the way. Finally, three chapters on the “goal of love” explore various dimensions of the experiential knowledge of authentic love and the suffering that must attend its attainment culminating in full realization of the pure oneness of the divine reality.

Among the gifts Dr. Chittick has shared generously with his Islamic Studies colleagues as well as countless students and readers eager to learn more about Sufism and Islamic spirituality broadly defined, his skill and artistry as a translator stands out. He has an unsurpassed ability to render readable complex topics written in exceedingly difficult Arabic and Persian styles, rich with arcane terminology and elaborate metaphor. Both of these volumes make considerable demands of the reader, but they also reward persistent attention. One of the first and most pleasant surprises that await the reader is that, though the texts at the foundation of both volumes represent genuine theological reflection, the expression of subtle concepts is refreshing, imaginative, and full of surprises.

Finally, the tired bromide that “Muslims don’t do images” hangs on tenaciously not only in the consciousness of non-Muslims generally but remains a common assumption among an astonishing percentage of Muslims as well. Once again, the evidence of the historical record gets the short end of the stick. From the non-Muslim side, the burden and implication of the characterization is in effect an indictment of cultural impoverishment. From the perspective of Muslims who are not familiar with the rich histories of their own multiple material and visual cultures, any favorable reference to producing images of human beings is generally either perceived as an assault from without (if done by non-Muslims, as in the infamous European caricatures of Muhammad) or chalked up to a failure to abide by ancient Prophetic strictures against any such visual imagery. In the latter instance, Muslims often say that those who produce such images while claiming to be Muslim are either defective in faith or (as hardline Sunni Muslims often aver) members of sects not worthy of being considered mainstream (such as Shi`is or Ahmadis).

Aisha’s Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam, by Jamal Elias, tackles head-on the “received wisdom” about this contentious topic. His purpose is to “explore Muslim attitudes toward visual images and suggest strategies of conceptualizing the nature of perception and the ways in which visual objects and images have been and continue to be understood in various Muslim contexts” (3). A tall order, to be sure, but Elias is up to the task. He situates his topic in the broadest possible historical, religious, and cultural con-

texts, focusing on use rather than aesthetic qualities of images. He fesses up to a “methodological promiscuity” that blends “intellectual history and anthropology of visual and material culture, observing the relationship of visual objects to social and individual agency and relations” (18).

Elias constructs his overall argument very carefully and skillfully. His first two main chapters situate the subject in a broadly comparative “history of religions” mode. After briefly addressing the phenomenon of “representation” in Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu contexts, Elias offers a superb overview of “icon and idol” in relation to the “closer” environs of pre-Islamic pagan and Jewish traditions, expanding into a consideration of Christian iconoclasm and iconophilia. Two chapters then focus in on explicitly “Islamic” manifestations of iconoclasm/phobia and historical attitudes to idols, icons, and images as documented in a range of important literary sources. A chapter on general aesthetic theory morphs into somewhat briefer reflections on how conceptions of alchemy, dreams, and Sufi metaphysics further nuance the history of Islamic thought on visual imagery. His final two chapters transition smoothly into the complex meanings behind the imagistic/semiotic functions of calligraphy (smaller scale) and epigraphy (especially architectural). Elias writes very engaging prose and has a gift for concretizing the essential role and tantalizing results of the human imagination.

A book on such a visually-oriented topic begs for extensive visual evidence and would have profited a great deal from further use of illustrations. But its copious annotation, extensive bibliography, and a generous index make *Aisha's Cushion* a very rich, complete volume, and one that will make excellent fare for students and “general” readers alike.

Finally, *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art* presents a very different take on art by Muslims. In this edited collection, Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif and their very able collaborators tackle from multiple perspectives the question of Muslims and “representational”—or at minimum “figural”—imagery. They set out to challenge the long-standing tendency of scholars to limit their characterization of the broad topic of human sexuality as expressed by Muslim writers and artists to “metaphors for mystical/human-divine love.” The broad range of object types analyzed runs from smaller works of ceramic and enamel, to miniature paintings illustrating texts, to architectural scale images in murals. Always taking full account of visual metaphor and symbolism, the essays’ treatment of themes/subjects runs a full gamut from flirtation to frank sexual activity both hetero- and homo-erotic to the bawdy humor of ineptly consummated infidelity.

From a geographical perspective these studies embrace primarily aspects of visual culture in late medieval/early modern Iran, Egypt, Turkey, and Spain.

The seven expertly crafted main essays ask intriguing questions even as they occasionally test the limits of delicacy and polite discourse. Each is densely and meticulously annotated, richly illustrated, and includes its own substantial bibliography. As a group, these essays raise a host of valuable considerations, not only about the study of a controversial theme in the visual arts, but about how one talks about such things in relation to a religious-cultural tradition currently in the news for a host of reasons undeniably unfortunate and, on the whole, unfair to the many hundreds of millions of ordinary folk struggling to survive and overwhelmingly the victims of violent people who claim to be defending “true Islam.”

The editors say in their introduction that the volume “presents seven case studies addressing the topics of eroticism and sexuality in the visual arts of the medieval and early modern Muslim world” (1). The book’s title, however, raises questions worth discussing in this context. Though the book’s cover arguably represents an attempt at a less cumbersome label than the introduction’s characterization, it has the unwanted effect of identifying as “Islamic” an expression of themes that requires more nuance. The book’s title is deeply problematic, for several reasons. Given that the vast majority of “westerners” generally associate the terms Islam and Islamic with a religious tradition that, alas, many perceive as alternately misogynistic, prudish and violent, it is hard to imagine in what way the subject matter can be fairly labelled “Islamic.” The term “Muslim,” on the other hand, taken as referring to people who claim adherence to the Islamic faith tradition, also has a broader semantic range. This more ample resonance also allows for the inclusion of a segment of a given regional population who consider themselves “culturally” Muslim, as, for example, a segment of Americans think of themselves “generically” as Christian.

Consider this: is there the slightest chance that a collection of art historical essays about “eros and sexuality” in the arts of the same historical period but produced in Germany, Italy, France, and Spain would be identified as an exploration of “Christian Art”? In such a case, it would be, at most, irrelevant that the majority of the artists were at least nominally “Christian,” and such a volume would more likely be titled “Eros and Sexuality in Medieval/Early Modern European Art.” My concern is no mere twinge of political correctness. The problem is that the present title tends toward perpetuating stereotypes that feed not always subtle perceptions of things “Islamic” as exotic and mysterious. Finding an alternative—and suitably concise—title is, I confess, not easy. But the matter is important enough to consider, for example, “... in the Arts of Majority Muslim Lands” or “... of Traditionally Muslim Societies.” That said, the volume is very interesting, well done, and provocative in many ways.