



Islamic Thought Through Protestant Eyes

by Mehmet Karabela, New York, Routledge, 2021, xvi + 370 pp., \$160.00 (Hardback), ISBN: 9780367549541

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BOOK REVIEW

Islamic Thought Through Protestant Eyes, by Mehmet Karabela, New York, Routledge, 2021, xvi + 370 pp., \$160.00 (Hardback), ISBN: 9780367549541

In this fascinating book, Mehmet Karabela reveals the many roles assigned to Islam, Islamic history, the Ottoman Empire, ‘Turks’, and ‘Arabs’ by northern European Protestant intellectuals, mostly German Lutherans, from 1650 to 1800. He does so by translating and analyzing university dissertations and disputations that are largely unknown to English-speaking scholars of the period. This rich collection of source material needs to reach as many interested readers as possible, so it is excellent news that Routledge, the publisher, has recently made it available as a more affordable paperback. It should become an indispensable resource for anyone interested in early modern intellectual history, the history of Islamic Studies and Orientalism, and Christian attitudes toward the non-Christian world.

Seventeen Latin sources appear here in a lively and readable modern English, which will make them accessible to interested scholars and readers from many backgrounds. The authors were intellectuals affiliated with Lutheran universities between the early seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, with the exception of a nineteenth-century Köthen schoolmaster who belonged to the Reformed Church. While trained primarily in theology, philosophy, or both, many held additional specializations in ‘Oriental’ languages like Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, or Persian. In some places, Karabela’s translation is attentive to the loaded meanings that specific words could carry in the Lutheran intellectual environment of the period, notably when discussing August Pfeiffer’s 1687 denunciation of Islam as ‘Syncretic’ (p. 156). It might have been useful for the volume to have included even more linguistic analysis of this sort. One example would have been to probe the significance, in a Christian theological context, of one author’s negative description of Islam’s supposed moral ‘laxity’ (*laxitas*) and ‘populist’ (*popularem*) character.

The texts cover many topics that famously captivated European thinkers during a period which Karabela elects to call ‘post-Reformation’ rather than ‘Enlightenment’. There are comparative studies of religion, philosophy, and literature. There are theories of historical change and the movement from ‘barbarism’ to civilization; these range from cyclical and contingent to progressive and stadial. There are theories of racial and cultural difference which emphasize, to varying degrees, the effects of environment, politics, and national ‘genius’. There is a principled argument against censoring books. There are calls to reform educational institutions steeped in empty and narrow-minded conservatism. There are self-congratulatory declarations that Lutheran Christianity is the only rational faith and attacks on other Christian groups who apparently fall short of this lofty goal. There are sober reflections on fanaticism, sectarianism, and the degeneration of monarchy into tyranny. Of course, not every topic has the whiff of potential ‘Enlightenment’ about it. Seventeenth-century specialists will not be surprised to find the earlier writers, notably Wendeler (1655), Kromayer (1668), and Calixt (1687), indulging in characteristic bouts of apocalyptic speculation: the identity of the ‘Little Horn’ in Daniel 7, the whereabouts of Gog and Magog, and so forth.

With each text, the reader is provided with an intriguing snapshot of how these preoccupations influenced, and were in turn influenced by, views on Islam and the steady development of Oriental scholarship in Protestant Europe. When read together, the texts interact with one another in many ways, leaving the reader free to draw conclusions about continuity

and change over time, as Reformation-era attitudes and concerns gave way to more modern, 'Enlightened' ones. On the one hand, one finds the persistent reiteration of typical Christian polemics against Muhammad as an impostor who concocted a 'patchwork' religion out of Judaism, paganism, and Christian heresies, and then spread it through conquest and by appealing to the basest of human sensual desires. On the other hand, as Karabela points out, an increasing familiarity with the Qur'ān and other Islamic sources did produce an observable trend toward greater depth, detail, and at least the pretense of neutrality in Protestant analyses of Islam's history, its philosophical schools, and the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.

Karabela's introduction provides a robust review of the historiography and offers context for patterns that emerge from the texts. For readers unfamiliar with the religious landscape of the period, he sketches out the differences between Pietists, 'Syncretists', and Orthodox thinkers, and shows how each of these tended to be associated with universities like Halle, Helmstedt, and Wittenberg, respectively. He ably guides the reader through prominent themes that coloured early modern Lutheran views of Islam and its history. With regard to theology and religious practice, these include rational faith, *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, saints and miracles, sexual morality, and the errors of Calvinists and Roman Catholics. In the history of philosophy, a narrative begins to emerge. Muslims are depicted as sensual thinkers who are incapable of abstraction, on the one hand, and as dogmatic enthusiasts whose corruption of Aristotle gave rise to Scholasticism, on the other. Yet Karabela shows how the harshness of these assessments varied considerably, and that even the most hostile authors did maintain that genuine philosophical study was nurtured among Muslims (and might be again) by the patronage of enlightened *caliphs* and the benevolent influence of learned Christians.

Karabela also has several larger interventions to make. First, he takes issue with existing studies of early modern Europe's confessional and sectarian divisions, arguing that a chronic insularity among Christian scholars has obscured the importance of Protestant engagement with Islam during this factious period. Beyond the obvious anti-Catholicism that pervades all these texts, Karabela's sensitivity to Lutheranism's internal divisions allows him to argue convincingly that 'Lutherans studied Islam partially to understand their own intra-denominational and shifting beliefs' (6). Second, he hopes his translations and commentary will provide 'resources' for future historians of Islamic Studies. Here, too, he has succeeded admirably. He is also clear about how he thinks these resources ought to be used: 'to challenge the subsequent evaluation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers as the seeds of a later Orientalism' (8). Karabela thus joins the growing number of early modern scholars, most recently Noel Malcolm, who insist that Edward Said's celebrated thesis cannot be applied to any historical period before the high age of European imperialism in the nineteenth century.

Finally, and most ambitiously, Karabela hopes to spark a multidisciplinary conversation 'about the interconnected nature of post-Reformation Protestantism and Islamic thought as part of global intellectual history' (10). This journal's readers will be sympathetic to this idea, and certainly there is much here to begin a conversation. But a global intellectual historical approach must reckon with the process of intercultural mediation and the academic construction of authority and expertise. So it is unfortunate that this book's only major shortcoming is the paucity of annotation on the texts themselves. It is unclear whether this was the author's choice or an editorial decision to present a more streamlined volume. Nonetheless, there is a missed opportunity to pursue these pressing questions of mediation and authority, or perhaps authoritativeness, with regard to European scholarship on Islam and Muslims in the early modern period. Two examples, one general and one specific, will suffice to illustrate this point.

First, the authors' citations suggest that a shift took place in the later decades of the seventeenth century, and not only because of Ludovico Marracci's landmark 1698 publication of the Qur'ān in both Arabic and Latin translation. As late as 1687, the account of Islamic history provided by one author, Friedrich Ulrich Calixt, continued to rely on a longstanding medieval textual tradition that can be traced back to Vincent de Beauvais, the thirteenth-century French Dominican, although Calixt refrained from identifying Vincent by name. By contrast, many of the later writers supplanted Vincent with Edward Pococke's 1663 edition of a decidedly more 'Eastern' thirteenth-century writer, the Syrian Christian Abū al-Faraj (Bar Hebraeus). Like Marracci's Qur'ān, Pococke's work featured parallel Arabic and Latin texts, making it a crucial resource for developing the language skills that early modern university scholars were so eager to show off to their colleagues across Europe. How much did this growing reliance on Abū al-Faraj in northern Europe affect early eighteenth-century depictions of the Islamic Golden Age? How much did it contribute to the tendency, noted by Karabela, for Lutheran scholars at the turn of the eighteenth century to depict early Muslims as 'intellectual captives of their faith, dependent on [Eastern Orthodox] Christians to deliver them to a place of reason' (18)? The answer is not clear, since neither Vincent, nor Marracci, nor Abū al-Faraj, nor Pococke are discussed in the introduction or notes, although the last three are listed in the index.

A more idiosyncratic second example comes from Christian Benedikt Michaelis (1708), who cited a fictional book of 'Turkish Letters' as proof of what remains an enduring Islamophobic canard: that Islam encourages dissimulation (*taqiyya*) as a religious duty to spy on infidels. These 'Turkish Letters', in fact, make up a pseudonymous epistolary novel that first appeared in the mid-1680s and is usually attributed to the Genoese writer Giovanni Paolo Marana. Yet Michaelis seems to have regarded the letters as a genuine 'confession', accepting the book's claim to have been written by 'a certain Muhammad, an Arab, who pretended to be Moldavian, and acted as a spy of the Turkish Sultan for forty-five years in Paris disguised as a monk' (66). Quoting extensively from this fanciful source, Michaelis granted it as much authority for understanding Islam as Marracci's Qur'ān or Pococke's edition of Abū al-Faraj. Since there is no discussion of Michaelis's sources, a non-specialist reader could be forgiven for taking this attribution at face value. This is a pity, because the use of such a source raises questions about the relationship between literary genres and 'serious' Orientalist scholarship – particularly in a period of European history that has long been associated with the birth of the novel, on the one hand, and the proliferation of anonymous and pseudonymous books, on the other. Such works aimed to provoke and entertain readers with controversial discussions of politics, religion, sexuality, and other topics.

In short, Karabela has produced an outstanding volume that has much to offer historical specialists as well as a wider audience. He has brought rare source material to light by providing accessible translations and perceptive insights. But readers of all backgrounds should know that there is not much handholding after the introduction. While the extensive review of the secondary literature does provide valuable resources, the task of critical engagement with these texts – and digging deeper when necessary – must rest with each reader.

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