
IN THEIR OWN IMAGE: WESTERN CONSTRUCTS OF THE MUSLIM OTHER

reviewed

**Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg: "Islamophobia"
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.; Maryland, 2008**

and

**Frederick Quinn: "The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam in
Western Thought"
Oxford University Press; New York, 2008**

Since the 2001 al-Qaeda attacks in the United States, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the bombings in Madrid and London, the Western world has become increasingly anxious about Islam. The idea that a "clash of civilizations," to use Huntington's term, is taking place has been enthusiastically endorsed by many leading Western politicians. The war on terror, dubbed a "crusade" by U.S. President George W. Bush, suggests a renewal of antiquated language that poses Western policies as God's work in unequivocal terms. Much of this language (though not all of it) has been supplemented with the caveat that such inflammatory gestures are intended for radical Muslims only. However, the lines have been indelibly blurred, and unapologetically so. The fight against "radical" Islam has led not only to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians in war, but also to the penalization of other cultural practices, such as veiling, in Britain, France, and elsewhere. However the fear of "spreading" Islam is articulated, Muslims are the only group categorically associated with hatred, violence, and extremism in the Western collective consciousness. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon has led a number of scholars to investigate the Western construction of Islam as an enemy of "Christian values" and "democratic freedoms."

In the highly readable book *Islamophobia*, authors Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg seek to understand how the "otherness" of Arabs, Persians, Pashtuns and others has been created and sustained in the Western imagination. They do this by focusing primarily on American political cartoons, though often diverging into top-

ics of film, literature, media and political rhetoric. The impetus for such a topic requires little justification, especially considering the violence that ensued after the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005. Political cartoons are easily disseminated and designed specifically to elicit instant emotional reactions. When portraying symbols and caricatures essentializing Muslims and Islam, cartoons represent brief but powerful encounters between non-Muslim Americans and the Muslim “Other,” who is usually assumed to be an Arab Middle Easterner.

The authors begin by providing a background of Western Christian encounters with Muslims, extending all the way back to the founding of Islam. The summary—attempting to synthesize 1400 years of contact and conflict—was perplexing since it distracted from the thesis rooted in a critical analysis of imagery, and was so brief as to be superficial. By providing a specific methodology rooted in the visual, the reader would better understand the historical precedent for today’s political art. That being said, the authors deserve enormous credit for their critical analyses of the cartoons themselves in the chapters to follow, which, when presented side by side in the text, give a profound sense of the collective weight of such images. Frame after frame, Muslim males are drawn as darkened, unkempt, snaggle-toothed, bulgy-eyed, hulking, gun-toting zealots in turbans; while Muslim women are either silent and oppressed or bare-bellied and over-sexed. Islam itself is reinforced as a conservative or radical monolith, pictured as a mosque, for example, in the process of being hijacked by Osama bin Laden. In many recent drawings, armed bearded men are portrayed as the literal hand-puppets of Satan. In addition, even though only about twenty-percent of the world’s Muslims live in the Middle East, camels, sand and oil represent all things related to Islam and Muslims. The perception of the “Middle East” is one that is uniformly backwards, exotic, and dangerous, which is contrasted with the West as modern, progressive and free. The literal drawing of boundaries between East and West in political cartoons does a major injustice to the diversity and the fluidity of such boundaries, and perpetuates a wildly divisive invention of the Orient.

The authors make several other salient critiques worth noting here. First, American cartoons of Muslims over the past sixty years directly parallel anti-Semitic cartoons produced in Europe during the World War II period, both in style and content. It is no coincidence that such degrading imagery is used during wartime to define the enemy. Gottschalk and Greenberg also show how symbols of Islam are appropriated to situations illustrating oppression. For example, in one cartoon from 2001, “Mullah Ashcroft” (U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft) is depicted as reading a decree, sitting cross-legged on a carpet, and wearing a American flag as a turban. While the cartoon is attempting to criticize Ashcroft, it also links him with oppression through the imagined dress of Arab male religious authorities.

Despite their excellent exposure of racism and Orientalism in American political cartoons, the authors take great pains to remind the reader that non-Muslim Americans and political cartoonists do not “consciously cast Muslims as their antagonists in a deliberate effort to construct an adversary” (90). However, to absolve political art of its political motives seems strange in this context. When the artist consciously chooses symbols of Muslims and Islam to convey sentiments of ignorance, danger, and fear, he or she reifies what is perceived as adversarial to Western interests and values. This is a political act, in which negative associations are sustained and replicated by the very manipulation of symbols and the hyper-reproduction of stereotypes. Overall, however, this book asks extremely important questions of its Western audience and recognizes American complicity in degradation and stereotyping. This work would be particularly useful to teachers of undergraduate students in introducing concepts of racial and religious social anxiety.

Another recent work, *The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam in Western Thought* by Frederick Quinn, examines the construction and study of Islam in Western politics, philosophy, religion and art from the founding of Islam until the present. A historian and former diplomat to the Middle East and Africa, Quinn seeks to modify the idea that Western culture has held the same unified and uniformly negative opinion about Islam over time. According to Quinn, the answer lies somewhere in between Huntington’s clash of civilization and Edward Said’s Orientalism. The study of Islam through centuries of limited Western scholarship, he asserts, has produced a paradoxical mix of fascination with and contempt for Islam. Because scholars have incorrectly drawn direct parallels between the Prophets Christ and Muhammad, Muhammad has been the central focus of Islam in the West for centuries, typified primarily as a symbol of moral perversion and political corruption.

Quinn splits his book into four general time periods: early times to 1600, 1600 to 1800, 1800 to 1900, and 1900 to 2000. He finds that four themes dominate the West’s skewed perceptions of Islam: 1) the Prophet as the Antichrist, Satan, or heretic; 2) the Prophet as a fallen or corrupt Christian, 3) the Prophet as a corrupt political figure and sexual deviant, and 4) the Prophet as a “wise Easterner, holy person, and dispenser of wisdom” (24). In each of the cases, Muhammad becomes whatever the West needs him to be. Quinn makes an important distinction between Islam in “early times,” which was regarded as a rogue heretical deviation from Christianity and not a religion in its own right, and after 1600, when Islam was begrudgingly acknowledged as a separate religion with some genuine curiosity, though still condemned. This ideological shift stemmed directly from the Western Europe’s changing relationship with the Ottoman Empire. However, the fear of Turkish (read: Islamic) power remained alive and well in popular culture.

Quinn provides an excellent analysis of the nuanced and often paradoxical manner in which Islam was understood in Europe around the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was not at all the case that Christianity was united against Islam during this period because Christianity itself was engaged in bloody schism. To Luther, the Ottoman Turks and the Catholic hierarchy were all enemies of God. To the Unitarians, Muhammad was a reformer in their own image. Quinn's analysis of plays, public rituals and celebrations is extremely effective because he shows how public performances created stories about the Prophet with the purpose of defining moral and political evils. As Edward Said writes, "culture is a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another" (xiii). In this way, Islam was used as a comparative reference to point out the inadequacies of rival sects and political ideologies, as well as the weak morals of their followers.

In regards to the later chapters, it was disappointing to see that Quinn barely mentioned the colonial period, the World Wars, and the Cold War, for example, which is surprising given the attention afforded to earlier periods. It also seemed that the concluding chapter lacked a clear synthesis of the author's overall purpose and major findings. However, the fact that the West has been as diverse in its invention of Islam as Muslims are in reality is clear. As Ferderick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) is quoted in Quinn, "the grandeur of the Crescent can be understood by the light which falls upon it from the cross" (111). Today, we are still knee-deep in the process of understanding the many forms Islam has taken when cast under this shadow. Overall, Quinn's book succeeds in outlining the ever-evolving way that various Western powers and cultural producers have fashioned Islam in their own image.

Both *Islamophobia* and *The Sum of All Heresies* serve as potent reminders that, as Quinn states, "...the structures, symbols, and images of strangers are seen through a prism of our own invention for our own purposes" (23). This prism of invention is an "ancient political weapon" used to spread fear (22). The irony is, of course, that Muslims—whether they be Pakistani or Persian, American or Arab, English or Ethiopian—are not actually strange at all. The fact that Islam has been and continues to be construed in the Western imagination as everything the West supposedly is not masks this fact. These works are a welcome addition to the growing body of literature deconstructing the myth of Islam and Muslim as the Other and the enemy.

Dana M. Moss¹

¹ Dana M. Moss is a Graduate Student in Liberal Studies at Villanova University, USA.

References

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