

# H-Net Reviews

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**Jonathan Lyons.** *Islam through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. x + 260 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15894-7; ISBN 978-0-231-52814-6.

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There is a growing body of literature on the history and politics of what many people now call Islamophobia or anti-Muslim discourses in America and Europe.[1] This topic should be of great interest to diplomatic historians and scholars of international history, as Western images of Muslims and Islam do shape the foreign policy of various countries and international affairs on multiple levels. From the influence of Orientalist and racial ideologies on imperial politics during the long nineteenth century, to the role of culture, identity, and prejudices in U.S.-Japanese relations leading up to Pearl Harbor or in U.S.-Vietnamese relations influencing Cold War-era decisions, many recent studies have tackled the question of perceptions in international history.[2] Some recent works have focused on the question of Islam and the West as an intellectual and ideological construction shaping foreign policy decisions, justifying them, or mobilizing public opinion as well as social movements on a world scale. Matthew Connelly's *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (2003) offers one of the best analyses of the importance of the French discourses and propaganda about the pan-Islamic enemy of the West during the process of Algerian independence. Two of Edward Said's best-known books, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997), actually examine the powerful role of partly racialized misperceptions about Muslims in American foreign policy.

Since the publication of *Orientalism*, a significant number of scholars and academic experts on Muslim societies and the Middle East have become highly conscious

of the dehumanization and othering of Muslims created by their predecessors and have tried to overcome their complicity, albeit with partial success, in the reproduction of the Islam-West dichotomy in world politics. Yet, anti-Muslim rhetoric and discourses have persisted and have even become stronger for certain segments of the American population during the last three decades. How could a kind of racist language about one and a half billion Muslims still be tolerated and perpetuated in a post-colonial world that shuns and condemns skin color-based racism? Why do policymakers, politicians, and public opinion leaders remain loyal to a highly irrational set of associations about an imagined unity of almost one-fourth of humanity, the so-called Muslim world? How can we explain the constant references to Muslims's fanaticism, sexual perverseness, backwardness, violence, and exoticness, despite the meaninglessness of such associations for more than a billion people with amazing diversity? Any college student visiting Istanbul, Beirut, or Kuala Lumpur, or any educated person watching the news about the Arab Spring, should not be able to sustain this concept of a medieval or alien religion and civilization. Jonathan Lyons's book, *Islam through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism*, tackles the puzzle about the appeal of anti-Islamic discourses in America despite the constant empirical falsification of these stereotypes in real life. Lyons proposes a long-term historical explanation to understand the formation, longevity, and power of anti-Islam discourses in Euro-American societies.

Lyons argues that anti-Islam discourses, which operate silently in the background as they shape our state-

ments about Islam and the Muslims and define the disciplines that organize and classify such knowledge (p. 4), were originally formed during the twelfth-century campaign of the Crusades. Though this anti-Islam language of Europe passed through various mutations and transformations, its core remained stable and even thrived during the last one thousand years. Lyons's most brilliant chapter in the book is the one devoted to the origins of the anti-Islam language in Europe during the first Crusade, following five centuries of undifferentiated and mixed texts about Muslims by various Christian writers. For about half a millennium since the birth of Islam as a faith tradition, there was no visible pattern, theme, or argument about Muslims in the minds of Christian Europeans. There were polemics, yet general perceptions varied according to local experience, and it seems this is more empirical and common-sense. Yet, a new paradigm of hateful narratives emerged around the twelfth century, partly due to the exaggerated and systematic propaganda to justify the Crusades by the Catholic Church and its defenders.

By studying the images of pre-Crusader period, when Islam was not seen as a threat to the Catholic Church, Lyons avoids a clash-of-civilizations argument. Anti-Muslim discourses were not necessarily a result of Christian theology, as there was and still could be a different construction of an image of Muslims. Muslims had an uneventful and undifferentiated place in European Christian consciousness before the Crusades. Even after the "zero point" of the Crusades, there were minority opinions about Muslims. Lyons cites from the accounts of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, before the twelfth century, and no single negative grand narrative of Muslims as a threat or as enemies emerges from these accounts. Even the Muslim presence and expansion in Spain in the eighth century failed to promote a unified Christian view of the Muslim enemy, and was noted by many chronicles without alarm. When some chronicles wrote about the now well-known victory of the Franks over the Arabs in Poitiers, the defeated Arabs are neither ridiculed nor vilified (p. 54).

New long-lasting discursive formation of Muslims began to take place around Pope Urban II's public call to crusade, delivered in 1095. Instead of the idea of fellow worshippers of the same God in a different way, Crusade propagandists produced the image of the "godless defiler of Christian sacred precincts, tormentor and torturer of true believers, idol worshipper, and usurper of lands rightfully belonging to Latin Christendom" (p. 61). In his Council of Clermont speech, the pope identified

the enemy rather simply as "the Turks, a Persian people," a focus that replaced the earlier focus on correcting the violent behavior of Christians toward each other, moral degeneration in daily life, and problems of clergy upbringing (p. 62). In the twelfth century, "the othering of the Muslims" became more pronounced when they were categorized "irretrievably outside the bounds of civilized society, reduced in status to little more than animals," a process of dehumanization that could also explain the senseless cruelty of Crusaders towards unarmed Muslim civilians (p. 72).

The most striking argument of this book is the insistence that this anti-Islam paradigm has "remain[ed] perfectly viable" for about a thousand years (p. 26). Thus, thinkers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and area specialists in American Ivy League universities during the Cold War reformulated this set of self-referential arguments about Muslims. Lyons notes that this somehow violates the "laws of intellectual physics." But, the basic outline of the Islamophobic paradigm is triumphant today, as "a western conversation about Islam remains very much rooted in its medieval beginnings" (p. 26). This line of continuity from Crusader ideologies to the language of President George W. Bush and Pope Benedict XVI does seem exaggerated, but Lyons provides a shockingly rich spectrum of examples from contemporary times that even overshadows the Crusader propaganda of a millennium earlier in terms of its level of bigotry, ignorance, and sheer stupidity. How else, Lyons asks, can we explain the comfortable attribution of violence to the essence of Muslim theology by Pope Benedict, who holds the very office that initiated one of the most violent pogroms against Muslims (and Jews) centuries earlier? Should not Pope Benedict be offering self-reflection and self-critique about the church's violence against Muslims rather than blaming Islam for being a theologically violent religion? Utilizing Michel Foucault's methodology of intellectual archeology, Lyons argues that "there was nothing else the pope could say," as "he was quite literally overwhelmed by a thousand-year-old discourse" (p. 32). For Lyons, the scandalous statements of Pope Benedict (or George Bush, Jerry Falwell, or Bernard Lewis) about Islam "was misled" not by a few errant facts or mistaken interpretations by his experts, but by the existence of an anti-Islam discourse that allows for no conclusions or statements about Muslims other than that Muslims are prone to violence by their faith (p. 32). Agreeing with the methodology of Foucault, Lyons sees anti-Islam discourse reproduction as occurring "outside the consciousness of the speakers

themselves and ... recognizable only to the archeologistâ (p. 32).

After the initial historical construction of the origins of anti-Islam narratives, Lyons devotes three separate chapters to âIslam and Science,â âIslam and Violence,â and âIslam and Womenâ to illustrate the three key themes of anti-Islam discourse. In each case, Lyons argues that anti-Muslim discourse created an image that is at odds with the actual historical realities and contradicts the situation in the Western societies as well.

Similar to the conclusions of Saidâs *Orientalism*, or Foucaultâs various books on the archeology of knowledge, the reader may get a very pessimistic conclusion out of this book. If a bigoted negative discourse about more than a billion Muslim human beings has a thousand-year-long history, one cannot expect this to change very soon. In a concluding chapter titled âWhatâs Wrong With Us,â Lyons tries to suggest a way out of this mental prison for Westerners, asking them to adopt âa new and more useful way of looking at Islam and the Muslims that recognizes the distortions inherent in past effortsâ (p. 192). Lyons proposes a complete shattering of the inherited epistemological foundations by doing the necessary self-reflection, as he believes that otherwise, any new information about Muslims, even if it should challenge the established anti-Islam narratives, would not produce the necessary epistemological shock therapy that Western writings on Muslims need.

Scholars of international history will benefit from the well-written and well-argued analysis, which will help them to better historicize the ideologies of the clash of civilizations that characterize various social movements in America and Europe, as well as the origins of the âMuslim problemâ in European and American intellectual life. They may, however, disagree with the âthousand-year-long continuityâ argument of the book, as this reviewer does. Medieval fears of Muslims may seem similar to contemporary hatred of Muslims, but there are significant differences among particular anti-Muslim discourses by particular groups of actors in particular locations, and historians may not want to give up attention to context and change over time. Further attention to the diversity, evolution, and mixed motives of essentialism and Islamophobia over the centuries may not challenge the main argument of Lyonâs book. After all, there is a set of sad similarities between contemporary anti-Muslim ideologies and movements, and the twelfth-century Crusaders. However, there are three areas where further historicization will be necessary.

First, a history of contending minority European and American opinions on Muslims could be a great complement to this study, perhaps helping us better understand the persistence of anti-Islam discourse despite strong objections or changes over time. A good example might be the pro-Ottoman French discourses during the Ottoman-French alliance in the sixteenth century. France needed to justify this alliance with a Muslim dynasty-ruled empire against the powerful Habsburg propaganda that France was allying with the infidel and thus betraying Christendom. In 1543, the Ottoman fleet wintered in Toulon as guests of their French allies in order to prepare for a battle against their joint Habsburg enemy. Eventually, the Habsburg view of Islam and its version of the clash of civilizations history seemed to have won this intellectual battle within Europe, but this victory of anti-Muslim emotions, ideas, and theories was not necessarily predetermined. Even at the level of Catholic Churchâs relationship with different Muslim dynasties, there had been important differences of emphasis on peace and war in different contexts and at different times.[3] Contending opinions of Muslims have always existed in Europe and they mattered in the history of international affairs. Similarly, today, the majority of academics and scholars in universities have been countering Islamophobic arguments with their writing and teaching, and they present a strong, educated counter opinion on issues related to Muslims. Perhaps these scholarly perspectives have been overwhelmed by the concerted effort of new Islamophobic groups, who have spent at least fifty million dollars on various projects promoting hatred of Muslims in the United States in the last five years, with political agendas ranging from advocacy of Israel and Zionism to the defeat of Barack Obama in the presidential election.[4] There is, thus, a very intentional re-appropriation, recycling and reinvention of old anti-Muslim themes for contemporary political aims rather than natural, organic or spontaneous continuity over many centuries. Despite the incredible amount of financial backing the new Islamophobic groups were utilizing in their campaigns, and their achievements in trapping a certain segments of public opinion into Islam versus the West narrative, however, their scholarly credibility is at an all-time low against the academics and the public intellectuals like Lyons himself.

Second is the question of rupture in the anti-Muslim images in Europe through the nineteenth century, when Europeâs confidence in its civilization and way of life increased, with new levels of social science arrogance that medieval anti-Muslim polemics could not exhibit. Islam went from being the theologically âwrongâ religion of in-

fidels to being the unscientific, unmodern, and unsecular religion when European secularism transformed Christianity in the nineteenth century. Perhaps a comparison with the history of anti-Semitism could illustrate this point. When Anders Breivik committed an unimaginable massacre in Norway in July 2011, with a comprehensive anti-Muslim manifesto justifying his acts, many commentators noted the similarities between the anti-Semitism of the 1930s and the anti-Muslim discourses of Breivik and his intellectual sources. Even though modern anti-Semitism carried elements from medieval Christian rhetoric and hatred, it was thoroughly modern in terms of its connection to nationalism, eugenics, and Social Darwinism. It is clear that a similar story of continuity and modern transformation happened in the case of anti-Muslim discourse. Modern anti-Muslim groups may be recycling themes and ideas from medieval Christian writings on Islam, but there are also new elements and new motivations that were added in the nineteenth century. For example, medieval Christian discourses on Muslims reflected an awareness of the military weakness of Europe in relation to the Ottoman Empire, as well as fear, while the twentieth-century discourses assumed an aura of superiority over colonized Muslim societies and anger at their resistance to colonialism. Nineteenth-century imperial-era writings that portrayed Muslims as inferior and in need of civilizing as well as military punishment, also coincided with the formation of the modern social sciences and humanities in the late nineteenth century. The construction of a new racialized geopolitical Muslim identity, tied to Social Darwinism and orientalism, spawned modern anti-Islamic discourses, whose discontinuity with medieval Christian discourses is critically important. Moreover, it was these nineteenth-century assumptions of European supremacy and Muslim inferiority that went into the textbooks that twentieth-century generations are still reading in different forms. Thus, it may be the anti-Muslim discourses of Ernest Renan and William Gladstone, which are radically different from medieval Catholic or Habsburg anti-Muslim fears, to which we should be paying more attention.

Third, the importance of the nineteenth-century transformation in Western discourses on Muslims relates to another area of historical inquiry: during the globalized Muslim modernist movement of the late nineteenth century, for various reasons, Muslim intellectuals partook in the process of essentializing their history, tradition, and geopolitical identity.[5] As part of their anticolonial, nationalist, or pro-Ottoman imperial projects,

Muslim reformists helped perpetuate a vision of a "Muslim world" that shared common cultural characteristics. This self-Orientalization, of course, tells only a portion of the rich history of modern Muslim intellectuals, and there is a dynamic hermeneutic engagement with both religious texts and secular values. Yet, this globalization of nineteenth-century European discourses on Islam, partly through Muslim agency, contributed to the longevity and persistence of the essentialized discourses that Lyons analyzes. Islamophobia attributes a set of negative characteristics to Islam, while Muslim reformists attributed a set of positive traits, but both agreed on the civilizational, historical, and metageographical unity of an immensely diverse Muslim population, and contributed to the persistence of the "clash of civilizations" thesis.

These disagreements by a historian about the longevity argument of the book under review should in no way detract us from its scholarly contributions. Jonathan Lyons offers a very readable and thought-provoking account of the roots and characteristics of Islamophobia. This book should be added to the reading lists of undergraduate and graduate courses on contemporary world affairs and American foreign policy.

#### Notes

[1]. See Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells, eds., *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Salman Sayyid and Abduoolkarim Vakil, *Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press/Hurst, 2001); and Andrew Shryock, ed., *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[2]. Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1992).

[3]. For an example of correspondence, with a peace emphasis, between the Catholic Church and a specific Muslim rulers, see Brett Whalen, "Corresponding with Infidels: Rome, the Almohads, and the Christians of Thirteenth-Century Morocco," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 41 (2011): 487-513.

[4]. For a comprehensive analysis of funding of anti-Muslim organizations and groups, see Wajahat Ali et al., *Fear, Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress Re-

port, 2011).

[5]. For a very good recent book on this topic, see Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Jakarta: Equinox Publishing, 2011).

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