



**Timothy Marr.** *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xii + 309 pp. \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-61807-6; \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85293-7.

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Published on H-Amstdy (September, 2007)

## Recovering Early American Orientalism

Until around a decade ago, the topic of early American orientalism went considerably under-treated in American Studies. Most students of orientalism followed Edward Said's lead in assuming that in the pre-twentieth-century United States—although “there were occasional diplomatic and military encounters with Barbary pirates and the like, the odd naval expedition to the Far Orient, and of course the ubiquitous missionary to the Orient”—there was “no deeply invested tradition of orientalism ... perhaps because the American frontier, the one that counted, was the westward one.”<sup>[1]</sup> Given that the United States had relatively little direct commercial or political interests in the Middle East before the twentieth century, and that its expansionist ambitions lay mostly to the west, the Saidian model of orientalism qua imperialism could not be applied.

Since the 1990s, however, this assumption has been revised in a series of studies, most notably in Fuad Shab'an's *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought* (1991), Lester Vogel's *To See a Promised Land* (1993), Robert Allison's *The Crescent Obscured* (1995), John Davis's *The Landscape of Belief* (1996), Malini Johar Schueller's *U.S. Orientalisms* (1998), Hilton Obenzinger's *American Palestine* (1999), and Burke O. Long's *Imagining the Holy Land* (2002). Collectively, these books not only brought to light the multiple and heavy investments in orientalist tropes and conventions in early U.S. culture, but also developed more nuanced models for understanding the relationship between cultural forms and political power, ones that far exceed the tethering of orientalism to imperialist practices.

These books are now joined by Timothy Marr's fascinating study. In *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* Marr uncovers fresh and surprising archives for exploring American orientalism (military monuments, missionary reports, abolitionist and temperance pamphlets, anti-Mormon literature, women's dress reform, and more), to illustrate how orientalist codes and repre-

sentations of Islam were deployed by Americans in order to shape their national mission, to manage domestic differences, and to claim a position of global importance. The choice of the term “islamicism” instead of “orientalism” is not self-evident; it first strikes one as at once too narrow (the trope of the “oriental despot,” for instance, extended to non-Muslim, say Chinese, rulers as well) and too broad (since American popular imagination did not stretch across the entire Muslim world). But its strength is that it calls attention to the resilient religious component of early American cultural history, to the way the Orient was usefully opposed not only to Enlightenment ideals of liberty and rationality, but also to Protestant narratives of election and redemption.

Indeed, the first two chapters of Marr's book are devoted to a detailed exploration of how islamicism helped define through opposition early national identity. Chapter 1 analyzes the explosion of works in print that surrounded the diplomatic and military crises with the Barbary States. These oriental tales, Muslim spy narratives, Barbary captivity narratives, and dramatic plays used the clichés of oriental despotism, irrationality, and lasciviousness to bolster what Marr calls America's “imperialism of virtue,” the “democratic vigor of American gender performance that celebrated the fortitude of female virtue and the viability of male valor in the face of global challenges” (p. 35). This project worked in tandem with Protestant eschatology, the focus of chapter 2, to weave Islam—as an oppositional but ultimately receding force—into a narrative of American progress and redemption.

The second and most innovative part of the book analyzes the multiple roles played by islamicism in domestic (rather than international) settings. Chapters 3 and 4 show how various social positions and movements—abolitionism, temperance reform, anti-Mormonism—drew parallels between American and Islamic situations as a means of “infidelizing” their opponents. Under the

logic of what Marr terms “domestic Orientalism,” the slave-holding South resembled the Ottoman Empire, consumers of alcohol were possessed by a diabolical Arabian spirit, and the polygamous Mormon household was transformed into a Turkish seraglio.

This rhetorical maneuver was not without complications, however. As more and more Americans traveled to the Ottoman Empire and as knowledge of Muslim cultures expanded, domestic orientalism had to contend with some uneasy challenges, giving rise to a counter-rhetoric of “comparativist orientalism.” Here, islamism was garnered not for the celebration of American virtue, but for a critique of its practices. Thus, for instance, American slavery was unfavorably compared with its eastern counterpart, and the Muslim ban on alcohol was used to malign New England’s global export of rum.

Whereas in the first decades of independence islamism was most useful as a foil for U.S. political and religious aspirations and as a means for infidelizing domestic opposition, from the 1840s “the predominant valences of American islamism were shifting away from an oppositional repulsion and more toward the celebration of a romantic liberty that signified the emergent power of the nation and its citizens as global players” (p. 265). Marr charts this transition to “Romantic islamism” in the last two chapters of the book, through the writing of Herman Melville and the emergence of orientalist consumer trends. The Muslim world, he argues, increasingly sig-

nified for middle-class Americans the lure of the exotic and the liberty of unhampered patriarchy, fantasies that were particularly appealing against the backdrop of stifling bourgeois norms and the Victorian cult of domesticity. From Melville’s Ishmael to Hiram Powers’s *The Greek Slave*, from the Bloomer revolt in women’s dress to the uniform of the Zouave soldiers, Americans projected upon the Orient their dreams of cosmopolitan freedom and revitalized manhood.

Marr glides between these multiple discourses and rhetorical modes with considerable ease, persuasiveness, and elegance, and the result is a book that will appeal not only to those specializing in early American culture or in the history of orientalism, but to any reader who has been wondering about the origins of current American perceptions of the Islamic world. Wisely, Marr never succumbs to the temptation to draw explicit analogies with the present, and indeed more work is required before current U.S. policies can be linked to forgotten episodes such as the naval engagement in Tripoli or James Lyman Merrick’s mission to the Persians. But the book challenges us to think about present-day islamism as a multi-functional phenomenon, far more complex than the Saidian self/other binary.

#### Note

[1]. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 290.

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**Citation:** Milette Shamir. Review of Marr, Timothy, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13559>

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