
This collection of essays offers a very important contribution to Islamic and Middle Eastern studies as well as the study of intercultural and interfaith interactions, especially those between Muslims and Christians throughout the past few centuries. Its 11 chapters, written by academics from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, cover the fields of media, culture, history, religion, and politics. Most of the evidence presented in the book was drawn from historical documents, travellers’ accounts, manuscripts, and media studies. Many chapters attempt to expand on editors Karim and Eid’s hypothesis on the “clash of ignorance” (2012), which critiques Samuel Huntington’s theory on the “clash of civilizations.”

In their introduction to this collection, Karim and Eid make a solid and balanced argument on the roots of several conflicts in the Middle East that can be attributed to ignorance from both sides. They claim that the cultural and sometimes scientific “contributions of each to the other have generally been written out of Western and Muslim societies’ respective historical memories. This has promoted a cultural ignorance that has had the consequence of seeing each other as profoundly alien” (p. 2). Ignorance is defined not only as the lack of knowledge or understanding but also as an intentionally and previously shaped state of mind that would only serve the interests of those in power or others seeking power. Karim and Eid rightly suggest that most of what is highlighted in “educational curricula, popular history, and the media” is related to the conflicts rather than the longer periods of mutual understanding, engagement, and learning between Islam and the West. Yet what could further enrich the book would be providing more evidence and examples for such claims, which would further strengthen the general arguments.

In terms of coherence, most of the book’s chapters share a common theme and generally agree on a few issues, especially in stressing that people living in predominantly Muslim societies have never discontinued their contact with the West, even during the age of knowledge stagnation. However, I felt that the chapter on translation somehow did not fit so well within the book, as it was only broadly connected to the central theme in terms of examining how translations can strengthen the link between the East and West and enhance understanding. According to its author, Salah Basalamah, translation does offer a platform for dialogue that makes it “possible to bridge the widening gap of representations in the imaginations of peoples swayed by polarizing and sensationalizing media coverage” (p. 195).

One interesting chapter is written by Nabil Matar, who traces the roots and origins of the Arab awakening after Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century. Matar offers important observations on some of the reasons behind the Muslims’ backward technological state during Ottoman rule. He mentions, for example, the lack
of interest in Western sciences and philosophy on the part of Arab Christian travellers who visited Europe and North America before the Arab awakening movement. In another chapter, Jack Goody adds another shortcoming by stressing that Muslim rulers are to blame for not introducing the printing press into the Middle East due to their belief that it might be against Sunni Islamic teaching. All of this created an obvious knowledge gap between the East and the West. Matar mentions in his discussion that “the only Arabic-speaking population that remained culturally and linguistically unaffected by Turkish-Ottoman power was the Moroccan” (p. 39) and later emphasizes that “[t]he world was Ottoman, with the exception Morocco and India” (p. 50). What Matar overlooks is that Oman was for most of its history independent from outside powers except for the Portuguese invasion in the early sixteenth century, which was followed by the creation of an Omani empire in the nineteenth century. The Omani empire, which expanded to Pakistan and Zanzibar, was famous for its strong sea fleet and trade. The Oman movement itself is not mentioned in the book, though the Ibadhism doctrine in Islam regarded it as democratic in comparison to other doctrines and progressive even by today’s standards (Ghubash, 2014).

In relation to media studies, Eid’s chapter titled “Perceptions about Muslims in Western Societies” basically agrees with Edward Said’s Orientalism theory in the sense that Muslims are mostly regarded as the Other. Though the chapter does not provide new empirical evidence, it offers an important assessment of the way Muslims are negatively portrayed in the media, with emphasis on Canada.

As for Karim’s chapter titled “Islamic, Islamist, Moderates, Extremist: Imagining the Muslim Self and the Muslim Other,” the author emphasizes the binary distinction made in the media between the Self (the West) and the Other (Muslims) as well as between the good and bad Muslims based on George Bush’s post-9/11 classification. Karim stresses that “naming is crucial to developing such identifications” (p. 153), as this is regarded as one of the framing techniques followed by journalists and policymakers. Though they discussed media coverage of medical cases, Brown (1995) and Vigsø (2010) stress a similar issue by stating that naming is the same as framing. This is done when labels, whether they be pejorative or not, are given to certain groups, religions, and peoples. In this regard, Karim criticizes the way some Western media channels depict the criminal acts of some Muslims living in the West and concludes that “[t]hrough emphasis on the Muslim rather than the Western identity of the ‘homegrown’ criminals, it becomes possible to avoid consideration of even the remotest likelihood that some of the causes of deviance may find their sources in the Self” (p. 168). Here, the attribution of responsibility is another media framing technique (Entman, 1993), in which blaming other sides rather than one’s own group or party is routinely practised by the media in order to avoid any kind of responsibility or self-examination.

Finally, Eid and Karim offer in their concluding chapter some recommendations revolving around the need for the Other to be “re-imagined in the broader contexts of the mutually beneficial intersections” (p. 217), due to the current tensions between the West and Islam. In other words, the Self and the Other must be continually evaluated and examined outside of previous notions such as Huntington’s controversial hy-
thesis that would only bias perceptions of reality and hinder any kind of mutual understanding between Islam and the West.

References

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