

The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam (Review)

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The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam, by Ziad Elmarsafy. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009. Pp. 288. \$29.95. ISBN: 9781851686520.

In *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam*, Ziad Elmarsafy argues that the Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, was a key influence on some of the most ground-breaking intellectual work in the European Enlightenment because “the engagement with Islam enable[d] a radical break with past traditions and the conception of something new” (x). Such “shifts in perspectives,” according to Elmarsafy, were possible only because of “new translations of the Qur'an that were being produced in Europe after the mid-seventeenth century,” translations that moved away from the “outright hostility” found in Ludovico Marraci’s version to the “genuine understanding” of George Sale’s version (xi).

As such, the book can be broadly divided into two parts. Elmarsafy dedicates the first half of *The Enlightenment Qur'an* to charting the history of translating the Qur'an into Western languages from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. In the second half of the book he is concerned with the way in which such translations were used by some of the most iconic figures of the European Enlightenment.

The book’s first half opens with a chapter that traces the different translations across the centuries and notes how they are marked by the political upheavals of their time. These translations, Elmarsafy writes, “bear witness to a history of conflict—not only with Islam but within Christendom—as well as a secret attraction across the boundary between cultures and religions” (1). Throughout the chapter, Elmarsafy provides examples of landmark translations that appear at specific points in history, along with copious descriptions of the climate of ideas that produced each unique version. He notes that the earliest translations, such as the Toledan Collection commissioned by Peter the Venerable in 1142, were borne out of a desire to “convert Muslims” and thus became a “standard part of Christian anti-Muslim polemical and apologetical literature” (1). Later translations were still marked by anti-Muslim sentiment despite taking a “dramatic turn for the better,” as translators had to include such anti-Muslim propaganda in order to “foil any censors” (8–9). One example is Marraci’s remarkable 1698 translation, which is ruined by the “frequent recourse to military language and the ‘refutations’ that he adds to display his ‘open hostility’ toward Islam (13). It is not until George Sale, whose “youth coincided with key advances in European studies about Islam” and the “growing Cartesianism of early eighteenth-century Utrecht,” that translations of the Qur'an began to improve (14).

Sale’s translation of the Qur'an is of special interest to Elmarsafy, and the reason for this becomes abundantly clear as the book transitions into the second half of the argument. In chapter 2, Elmarsafy expounds on the key differences between Sale’s and Marraci’s translations. Marraci, he writes, saw his “task as verbal warfare” (38) and had put great emphasis on characterizing Muhammad, a key figure in the Qur'an, as violent and forceful by describing him as a fraud who appropriated Judeo-Christian truths to “hoodwink and bully

his helpless victims” (44). Sale however, bearing no anti-Islamic agenda, characterized Muhammad as “the legislator of the Arabs, rather than a warrior king,” and thus creates a more respectable version of Muhammad in his translations (41). The way that their different perspectives produced wildly different conclusions from the same text is explored further in the following chapter, in which Elmarsafy outlines how the two translators negotiated the similarities and differences between the Qur’an and Christian scriptures.

However, it is chapter 2’s findings that have the most bearing on the second half of this book. The revamping of the figure of Muhammad in Sale’s (and later in Claude Savary’s) translation underpins chapters 4, 5, and 6, which explore how this new conceptualization of Muhammad influenced the ideas of Voltaire, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, and Napoleon Bonaparte. In chapter 4, Elmarsafy shows how Voltaire’s “reading of Sale’s translation of the Qur’an” (83) allowed him to “rehabilitate” the figure of Muhammad and “recognise his ability as a statesman and ‘grand homme’ whose existence changes history” (81). This view of Muhammad was also taken by Jean-Jacque Rousseau. Elmarsafy posits in chapter 5 that the Frenchman would very likely have come across Sale’s *Preliminary Discourse* and would have used Sale’s Muhammad as “an important case study” upon which to theorize his ideal legislator (127). What follows is a fascinating chapter on Napoleon Bonaparte and the influence that Savary’s translation of the Qur’an had on him. Like Sale, Savary painted Muhammad as a “legislator and a demagogue” (147), and Napoleon, Elmarsafy observes, “displays more than a few parallels with Savary’s portrait of Muhammad” and “thought he himself could have been Muhammad” (148–49).

Elmarsafy rounds off this illustrious list with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, linked to the chapters before him through “a mechanism similar to the one operative in the cases of Voltaire and Napoleon: an identification with a great man” (160). However, unlike Napoleon, Goethe has a gentler conceptualization of Muhammad. This milder impression arises from Goethe’s ideas on world literature and his own role as a translator. For him, the “operation of literature is bound intimately with its role as an earthly gospel”; he saw the work of a translator as akin to that of a prophet “who transmits God’s message in a language that the people ... can understand” (174). Thus, Goethe saw “in Muhammad and the Qur’an a brilliant example of what words can do” (177). Elmarsafy suggests that the influence of Goethe’s views on world literature can be seen on Thomas Carlyle, who wrote an “account of Muhammad that overturns the routine accusations of imposture and ambition in favor of a man seeking, finding, and proclaiming answers regarding his place in the universe” (177–78).

Elmarsafy’s book is thus a persuasive and insightful challenge to two of the most enduring assumptions of the European Enlightenment: the notion that religion had little impact on this fiercely rationalistic era and the widely held belief that the “rapport” between the Islamic and the European world was “defined by conflict alone” (x).