REVIEW

Jörg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2021.

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This book is a complicated way of saying the Muslims are like everyone else. Like others, Muslims have looked to the stars to envision new futures, speculate about extraterrestrial life, and comment on the human condition. Science fiction and the UFO phenomenon do not belong to the West; rather, 'If the plurality of inhabitants [of the universe] has been the "myth of the modern age", Muslims fully participated in its creation' (38). While some propound the stereotype that, among Muslims, '[r]eligion, repression, and rote learning have often been blamed for a perceived lack of creativity, imagination, and future-oriented thought' (x), creativity and imagination were not limited to the Islamic 'Golden Age', but, rather, thrive among Muslims today. Man is indeed an 'imagining being' – and not just the European man.

Determann opens the book with his own 'cosmic journey', launching from his native Germany and Austria to a career in Saudia Arabia and Qatar, the capital of which struck him as a 'city of future' with its own 'Borg cube' (x). His childhood interest in science fiction and fantasy led him to explore the science fiction of the Arab world, resulting in this book, as well as *Space Science and the Arab World* (2018) and *Islamic Theology and Extraterrestrial Life* (ed. Jörg Matthias Determann and Shoaib Ahmed Malik, 2020).

Rather than limiting itself to the Arab world, this book covers virtually all Muslim-majority regions, from Africa, to the former

Soviet republics, to Southeast Asia, providing space for often underrepresented voices in the global Muslim culture.[1] In doing so, it showcases both the commonalities of the Muslim experience – such as the desire to harmonize the Qur'an with science – and the diversity among Muslims Some of this diversity is geographic – for instance, desert aliens versus water aliens. Some of this diversity is also religious: for instance, a Salafi shaykh offers views on science fiction that strangely resemble those of Christian fundamentalists, while the Naqshbandi Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani speaks about jinn and UFOs. Women – who are still underacknowledged in science fiction – are also included. Thus, we hear about Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hossain, who, in 1905, speculated about a world where women are in charge, as well as Turkey's self-described 'first female UFO researcher', Farah Yurdözü, who asserts that her great-grandfather was visited by reptilians (134).

Most people do not expect to read about Amazon women and reptilians in a book about Muslims. However, their presence here suggests that Muslims, in general, share more or less the same imaginary about the future and outer space as others around the globe. (Apart from, of course, *A Mosque Among the Stars* (2007).) That said, engagement with science fiction and UFOs in the Muslim world has not been identical to that in the West.[2] First, this is due to colonialism. While, in the West, modern science brought its own debates – for instance, on whether or not evolution should be taught in schools – in colonized regions, Christian missionaries and officials used European science to angle for the civilizational or religious superiority of Europeans. Many Muslims resisted that, even going so far – as a 19th-century author says – to have the 'conceit' that they already possessed learning and civilisation (45). Rather, many Muslims tried to harmonize modern science with Islam.[3] For instance, in the 19th century, the Qur'anic expression *rabb al-ʿālamīn* ('Lord of the Worlds') was understood to support the existence of a plurality of planets, thereby sidestepping the

theological angst about other planets or extraterrestrials that has tailed post-Copernican Christianity. Therefore, while the Muslim experience of European science – which led to the modern genre of science fiction – differed from the European experience, it nonetheless occurred within a global dialogue. In the film era, this dialogue has continued; for instance, in the integration of Eastern religious themes into *Star Wars* and the filming of science fiction movies in the Muslim world.

Politics is a theme that runs throughout the book, not only regarding colonialism but also its legacy of war, dictatorship, and censorship (the latter of which 'probably helped [science fiction] more than it hurt it', x). The first image in the book is a 2016 graphic called 'Damascus Under Siege', depicting a spherical craft hovering over an intersection. 'They say they came for peace,' the artist says. 'But who is really coming for peace? [...] The terror the West is sending us is worse than hell itself' (1). Even Hafez al-Assad is quoted, ironically, as saying that he wished an unbiased alien interlocutor would negotiate peace with Israel. 'It should offer advice to both sides, not deal with guns, planes or billions of dollars [...] even-handedly.' (13). On the other side of the Atlantic, Determann describes how the Nation of Islam's UFO mythos grew out of the institutionalized racism and government repression of the black community, the American legacy of the transatlantic slave trade.

Of course, these trends should not make the reader think that Muslim speculative writing is concerned solely with colonialism or the ills of the modern world; Muslim speculative writings also explore futurisms of a better world. To that end, Determann also discusses Muslims who have translated that imagination into space research or exploration, such as the Syrian cosmonaut Muhammed Faris and the first female Muslim astronaut, Anousheh Ansari.

Not only do Muslims go to space, but UFOs also hover about Muslim airspace, as a particularly interesting chapter on Muslim UFO sightings details. Often, UFO sightings are treated as an

American phenomenon, grounded in scientism, expansionism, and the fear of a nuclear apocalypse. Here, Determann fills that lacuna by reviewing UFO sightings from Morocco to Indonesia, crediting an uptake in sightings to 'broader public consciousness of the phenomenon and denser normal air and space traffic' (including the use of radar) (107). King Hassan II of Morocco, the Iranian government, the CIA, and virtually every other government exchanged memoranda about unidentified flying objects, especially given concerns about out-of-place military aircraft and espionage.

UFO sightings often segue to UFO religions. While many countries have UFO religions – and Determann observes that in some post-Soviet republics, they were encouraged as an alternative to traditional religion – a uniquely Muslim response to UFOs has been to identify UFOs with jinn. (Jinn are described in the Qur'an as sentient beings made from smokeless fire, which today's enthusiasts liken to plasma or other forms of energy.) The main argument for this is that stories about jinn (in the Qur'an, hadith, and cultural lore) resemble stories about UFOs. For instance, both jinn and UFOs shapeshift, teleport, and mate with humans. Identifying UFOs with jinn offers an avenue for traditionally-minded Muslims to embrace UFO culture through a nativist lens, rather than as an import; and to valorize Islam by arguing that the Qur'an predicts the findings of modern science (including ETs). On the other hand, other Muslims have looked to UFOs to revive ancient beliefs; as the History Channel would say, ancient aliens. Here, there is also a vital difference from Western takes: while, in the early 20th century, pyramids and ziggurats held a particular mystique for Europeans – not only because of their ancientness, but because of their foreignness – in the Muslim world, these are heritage sites in the here and now.

All in all, this is an enormously comprehensive book on Muslim science fiction, UFO literature, and the space imagination. It is safe to say that this is likely the most detailed book of its

type in any language. It succeeds not only in presenting a broad survey of Muslim science fiction and speculative writing, but also in challenging outdated stereotypes about Islam and the Muslim world – a step towards the utopia of a united, equitable world that many science fiction enthusiasts idealize: one nation under the stars.

NOTES

1. For this, he credits a number of research assistants who offered their linguistic expertise.
2. While Determann acknowledges that the phrase 'Muslim world' is itself an imaginary, he notes that imaginaries have a special place in a book on imagination.
3. Determann notes that some Hindus did as well.