Review Essays

New Light on Old Misunderstandings
Recent Research on Islamic History, Thought, and Art

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American (and European) misperceptions of Islam and Muslims are rooted in centuries of cultural, religious, and political conflict, and are now sadly enjoying a dramatic resurgence as a result of current events in the Middle East, North and West Africa, and Central and South Asia (Afghanistan and Pakistan). Among the more damaging and deeply entrenched of these attitudes, several stand out, and each demands a more nuanced understanding of the “actual” situation with a critical injection of solid historical perspective.

Perhaps the most widely assumed notion is that Muslim expansion in late antiquity and early medieval times was always and everywhere accompanied by either the wide-scale conversion of the conquered people, wholesale slaughter of those who refused, or exile (either compulsory or self-imposed) of those fortunate enough to escape with life and religious allegiance intact. The natural result, of course, would have been the virtually immediate destruction of all non-Muslim communities—all of which, alas, flies in the face of historical facts. Another common assumption is that Islam is a religious tradition in which “orthopraxy” (correct action) precludes even minimal concern for “orthodoxy” (correct belief). As a result, the story goes, Muslims don’t “do theology.” At best, whatever version of intellectual inquiry they might attempt as a close imitation thereof is destined to hit a dead end in the cul de sac of voluntarism in which the deity is unconstrained by any tincture of rationality. Once again, an expansive record of theological literature calls for a reassessment. A third misconception, held equally by Muslims and non-Muslims, is that Muslims “don’t do pictures”—of any living beings, let alone of humans, and most definitely not of religious personages. The historical record—countless thousands of exquisite images, for starters—deserves more serious interrogation than the kind of dismissive condemnation that has unfortunately become the default response. Here are half-dozen examples of recent scholarship that offer much-needed correctives to each of these three views.

Two recent works challenge the widespread belief that “Islam has always been spread by the sword.” The eminent historian Jacob Lassner’s Jews, Christians, and the Abode of Islam: Modern Scholarship, Medieval Realities gathers a series of richly reflective essays in two large categories. “Encountering the Other: Western Scholarship and the Foundations of Islamic Civilization” examines various aspects of “orientalism,” especially regarding Islam’s origins, focusing largely on scholarly methodology. “Jews and Christians: the Reality of Being the ‘Other’ in the Medieval Islamic World,” on the other hand, explores several variations on the vast theme of Abrahamic interaction in several medieval contexts. Lassner sums up admirably the complex situation so commonly presumed otherwise about the “meteoric” advent of Islam and its effect on non-Muslims: “Although forced conversion to Islam was rare, the psychic and eco-