Joseph Massad's *Islam in Liberalism* makes a forceful argument: liberalism relies on Islam in order to arrive at its self-understanding. In this process, liberalism attributes to Islam several negative qualities, such as despotism, misogyny, sexual intolerance, and psychological disintegration. Liberalism posits itself as Islam's “other,” appearing as the embodiment of democracy, gender equality, sexual liberation, and psychological integrity, or so goes the story. In four chapters following the introduction, Massad elaborates this argument at length (for example, the first two chapters extend from page 14 to page 212!). Massad’s analyses unveil the specific discursive strategies through which liberalism externalizes Islam and Muslims. The book’s last chapter adds to this account an interesting analysis of the politics of Semitism by looking at the category of “Abrahamic religions.” In so doing, this chapter levels a severe critique of Jacques Derrida’s political positions with reference to the Jewish Question and the Palestinian Question. I mention this chapter separately because certain thematic emphases and stylistic features make chapter five a stand-alone piece of writing instead of a direct extension of the book’s argument.

In his introduction, Massad does not say much to define “liberalism” and “Islam.” We learn that by liberalism he implies the dominant political ideology and political regime of modern Western Europe and North America. This vague semi-delimitation of liberalism authorizes several slippages between liberalism and a host of other terms, including: Europe, the West, democracy, the Enlightenment, Protestant Christianity, secularism and secularity, rationality, colonialism, imperialism, neo-imperialism, capitalism, and Zionism. Massad assumes these terms to be extensions of liberalism. Here, Massad does not consider certain historiographical questions, such as: Does liberalism, as ideology and/or as regime, constitute the historical conditions of possibility for the conceptualization and materialization of these terms? What gives liberalism precedence over capitalism, for example, in constituting the dominant political order of the modern West?

There is an unfortunate tendency in Massad’s book to sharpen the tense historical differences of perspective and practice between “Islam” and “liberalism.” While Massad states that Islam was “one of the conditions” of the emergence of Europe and liberalism (1), his argument is only tenable when readers assume that Islam was the primary, even the privileged, ideological construct in opposition to which liberalism derived its identity. Massad is not concerned with identifying Islam as a faith tradition, a ritual system, a civilization, a
demographic unit, a political ideology, or a political regime. Rather, he is concerned exclusively with the political and rhetorical construction of “Islam” in liberalism. To put it otherwise, the book tracks the polyvalent instrumentalization of “Islam” within the liberal imaginary. *Islam in Liberalism* therefore does not interrogate whether or not negative ideas and practices such as despotism and homophobia appear in the discursive and non-discursive practices of Muslims. The book's analytical aims are rather of a different order: it gazes at liberalism as a collective self, a reified and sometimes idealized group psyche, the traces of whose interiority are disparately available in discourses and practices originating in Euro-America over the last two centuries. As a diagnosis of a Euro-American ideological malaise, the book is insightful.

Chapter 1 examines how the attribution of democracy to the liberal West happens through the attribution of despotism to the Muslim East. Massad argues, “the assumption of democratic identity by the ‘West’ and of despotic identity as the West’s other, represented by the figure of ‘Islam,’ is both an act of self-constitution and projection as well as an imperial strategy that uses cultural assimilation and othering as tactics of economic and political domination” (19). This chapter also argues: “the discourse on democracy...is also largely a Christian religious discourse, which posits democracy as the highest stage of (Protestant) Christianity” (19). Massad discusses several concrete scenarios in which liberal politicians and diplomats depict “Islam” as ripe ground for planting democratic values that intrinsically belong to Euro-America. Working like a forensic detective, Massad amasses evidence to unpack the myriad connections between Euro-American imperialism and liberal discourses and actors.

Chapter 2 diagnoses the universalizing aspirations of Euro-American liberal feminism, especially “the discourse and policies of emancipating Muslim women from gender-based discrimination” (111). Massad exposes the complicity between liberal feminism’s globalizing deployments of “women’s rights as human rights” and Western colonialism and neo-imperialism (111). Massad’s analyses in this chapter overlap with those of several scholars of feminism, such as Ratna Kapur and Inderpal Grewal, and political theorists, such as Anne Norton. He shows how liberal feminist discourses paint “Europe and its American extension as spaces of women’s equality, of (Protestant) Christianity as a religion that accords women respect, and of liberalism as the secular variant of Protestantism that ensures these allegedly prevailing conditions in the form of ‘rights’, which American and European feminists, in an act of Christian generosity to their kin, want to extend to their ‘Muslim sisters’ through proselytization and conversion” (212). Note the slippage between “liberal feminism” and “American and European feminists.” While Massad certainly has a point (which several feminist scholars themselves have made), such generalizations mar an