Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace

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In this topically and theoretically eclectic project, Sophia Rose Arjana analyzes the way that religious consumption perpetuates Orientalism. Arjana focuses on the consumption habits of Nones and New Agers, two amorphous groups linked by their avowed disregard for the strictures of religious traditions. She contends that their clothing, travel, and self-care practices commodify "the Orient" for Western consumers. Arjana terms this field of consumption the "mystical marketplace," a network of symbols, figures, and objects that circulate non-Christian religious traditions to those desperate for enchantment. Within the mystical marketplace, tourism to Bali or Rumi translations stripped of their Islamic content (220-21) are not, as they might appear, means for learning from other religious traditions. Rather, the mystical marketplace in *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi* dislocates religious symbols and entrenches Orientalism. Arjana's postscript explicates her intention to expose the hegemonies—of whiteness, of coloniality, of Protestant normativity—which structure these forms of consumption. Her engaging concepts and case studies do just that, all in a broadly accessible register.

Arjana substantiates the mystical marketplace through virtual ethnography, site visits, and archival research. Ethnographic data collection

provides contemporary examples of "muddled Orientalism," or the "mixing of images, terms, and tropes from the imagined Orient" (3). Archival work fills in the gaps by linking the mystical marketplace to Orientalist knowledge production from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Arjana generally employs discursive analysis to interpret these sources, alongside a visual analysis of the symbolic meaning of images. Conceptually, Arjana brings critical approaches to religious consumption (Jain 2014; Shirazi 2016; Lofton 2017) into conversation with Edward Said and Michel Foucault. Said elucidates how the imagination of "the Orient" is made real through knowledge production; Arjana shows how contemporary consumption perpetuates this process. Foucault's notion of heterotopia illustrates how festivals and mystical tourism leverage the enchantment of an imagined Orient to draw in consumers (13; 44-45). Throughout, Arjana engages theories like these to tease out the racial, socio-economic, and gendered implications of the mystical marketplace.

Arjana opts for breadth rather than depth when engaging her case studies. Given the sprawling nature of muddled Orientalism and commercial markets, this decision arises as much from necessity as it does choice. Arjana finds a seemingly limitless number of case studies from social media, online retail, and international tourism. Her analysis sutures them together by their repetition of terms like "mystical" and symbols like the lotus flower. The advantages and disadvantages of this mode of analysis are evident. For example, on page 142, Arjana links a treatise from 1869 that frames Sufism as Aryan, neo-Sufi thinkers in the mid-twentieth century, and contemporary proponents of Sufi psychology on the basis of their shared distinction between Sufism and Islamic tradition. This line of thinking clearly suggests the relationship between Orientalist knowledge production and Sufi-influenced wellness programs. However, without direct historical connections, the reader is left to wonder whether the resemblance between these examples is the result of causation or coincidence. In cases with such temporal and spatial distance, additional evidence would have strengthened Arjana's case for the colonial roots of the mystical marketplace.

The early chapters contain Arjana's overarching arguments about Orientalism, consumption, and modernity. The Introduction outlines the

main arguments of the book: a search for enlightenment drives mystical consumption; the mystical marketplace perpetuates colonialism and capitalism; and "muddled Orientalism" erases religious traditions. Chapter 1 argues that concepts like "mysticism" took form through colonial knowledge production and identifies Orientalist tropes that are widespread in the mystical marketplace. In this line of thinking, Arjana extends Richard King's genealogy of "mysticism" (1999) and J. Z. Smith's claim that scholars produced the category of "religion" (1998). Chapter 2 examines cultural colonialism—according to Arjana, the extraction of symbols and practices from a tradition (72)—and shows how this process effaces the religious traditions that it ostensibly engages. Arjana identifies several consequences of cultural colonialism, such as the conflation of non-Christian traditions and the valorized poverty of mystical tourism workers (108-12). The following chapter argues that the excess of choices provided by secular modernity disenchant consumers, which increases the appeal of products that promise enchantment. A survey of the branding of tourism, fashion, exercise, and beauty products evidences the prevalence of this marketing strategy.

The final three chapters describe more specific instances of muddled Orientalism. All three chapters contextualize their main subject—religious traditions in Chapters 4 and 5, and popular English-language entertainment in Chapter 6—before detailing the Orientalist dynamics found in relevant products, marketing strategies, and narratives. The fourth chapter surveys the muddled Orientalism of Hinduism and Buddhism in, for example, wellness resorts that blend yoga and Ayurvedic medicine or the separation of Zen practice from Buddhism. Chapter 5 paints the Orientalist disassociation of Sufism from Islam in broad strokes before transitioning to more specific examples of misattributed Sufi couplets and the industries which profit from them. The final chapter ties the mystical marketplace to the diffuse Orientalist tropes in popular media like the *Star Wars* films and the television show *Lost*. While these chapters offer value to a wide range of scholars, the entirety of Chapter 5 and Chapter 6's examination of landscapes and costuming in *Star Wars* will be the most relevant to specialists of Islam.

As with any monograph that is so ambitious in its scope and varied in its theoretical engagements, there are several aspects of the book

which would have benefitted from further attention. Most centrally, Arjana's analysis generally represents religion and commerce as mutually exclusive. Take, for example, Arjana's statement that, "the question arises whether Shambhala is more of a religion or business model" (185). This question forecloses the possibility that "Shambhala" (presumably Shambhala International) is *both* business model and religion. According to a recent assessment of scholarship on religious consumption, Arjana's bifurcation of commerce and religion may inadvertently adopt a Protestant framework of religion (McLaughlin et al., 2020). Beyond imposing Protestant norms onto her case studies—a significant concern given Arjana's critique of "mysticism" on similar grounds (24-32)—the delineation of religion and business undercuts Arjana's analysis of the hegemonies that fuel consumption in the mystical marketplace. Asking whether Shambhala is a business or a religion prevents more incisive questions, like how the religious ethics of Shambhala International facilitate extractive institutional practices. Arjana unpacks how profit motive affects religious traditions. But this misses a similarly important force in the mystical marketplace: the potential of religious formations to structure economic exploitation.

Additionally, Arjana's approach to religion and mysticism as primarily categories of knowledge occludes their embodied dimensions. This framework of religion perpetuates what Donovan Schaefer has called the "linguistic fallacy" (2015), or the problematic assumption that religion is essentially cognitive and rational. Practically speaking, the linguistic fallacy misapprehends the material aspects of religion as discursive (Schaefer 2015: 4-10). For instance, Arjana mentions David Morgan's illuminating notion of visual piety (1997) on page 160, but her analysis only focuses on the meaning of symbols. *Star Wars* and *Lost* become "visual texts" (232) and lotus images turn into signs of "the East" (11). One wonders what insights Arjana might have drawn had she also attended to the ritual practices, embodied relationships, and social structures which images mediate, as Morgan suggests in his work. Nonetheless, its engaging subject matter and plethora of case studies make *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi* a useful teaching resource, especially for undergraduates in courses that touch on Orientalism, consumption, or pop

culture. Given the vitality of these topics, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi* is a welcome entry in a growing stream of scholarship on the forces that motivate religious consumption.

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