

Islam through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism

Jonathan Lyons

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Jonathan Lyons' *Islam through Western Eyes* takes a critical and historical approach to understanding the anti-Islam discourses that continue to emerge across North America and Europe. His main argument is that their origins can be traced back to the Crusades and that the current Islamophobic climate has been in the production since then. Thus an inherent anti-Islam discourse has been ingrained into the western imagination, and its effects are still being seen today.

In the introduction, the author notes that the answer to understanding much of this western Islamophobic movement has been in the making since the fifteenth century anti-Islam discourse as it relates to the Crusades. Lyons notes that we need to develop a deeper understanding of the history of this discourse in order to fight its modern version and to understand the causes of the current Islamophobic climate. This certainly sheds a more complex light on many of the issues facing Muslims in Europe and North America, and gives readers a new angle from which they should understand and interpret this growing sentiment.

The book is divided into five main chapters following the introduction. The first is essentially a chapter on methodology, which delves deeper into Foucault's critical theories on discourse and power. Lyons particularly focuses on Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*, in which he argues that certain forms of knowledge are privileged over others in order to create a larger narrative about a particular topic or group of people. The author clearly takes a post-

structuralist historical approach to understanding the issue at hand, one that takes a critical perspective on socially constructed knowledge that is highly motivated by the special interests of those establishing such knowledge. This discussion leads us to pose an important question: “Just what do we mean by ‘Islam’? And why do we mean this instead of something else?” (p. 42). And, more importantly, who benefits from spreading certain types of knowledge?

This final question really sets the framework for the book, as it seeks to question how knowledge of Islam in Europe was established as well as the interests involved when a greater understanding and knowledge of Islam and Muslims was being spread. As such, the book’s second part delves into the western image of Islam. This chapter is mostly focused on addressing the shifting perspective of Muslims in Europe. Lyons highlights how there was a constructive effort to otherize Muslims in the eleventh century – a prerequisite for the Crusades and the ability to garner support for these military invasions. This set the framework for demonizing and othering Muslims across Europe.

The next three chapters address the western perception of Islam and Muslims, particularly as it relates to science, violence, and women. These chapters focus on understanding the causes and misrepresentation of Muslims as anti-scientific, violent, and oppressors of women – the predominant narratives that have formed the foundation of the anti-Islam discourse ever since the Crusades and which are all familiar to those living in North America. In particular, the version of Islam as a violent and female-oppressing religion has formed some of the foundations for the ongoing “war on terror” and the othering of Muslims. The author argues that the Muslim contributions to science, mathematics, and technology were erased and covered with a “pre-modern” and backward interpretation of Islamic civilizations. Furthermore, Muslims were represented as violent and suicidal. All of this has been coupled with an interpretation of Muslim civilizations that oppress women in various forms.

While the book certainly does a good job of allowing the reader to place much of the anti-Islam discourse within a historical interpretation of how European relations with Islam have shifted, it misses some key related issues. For one, it is quite surprising to find little mention of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Having really developed the foundational understanding of how the anti-Islam discourse evolved through European explorers and interpretations of Islam, Lyons’ book seems to make *Orientalism* more relevant for understanding today’s Islamophobia. Although Said’s analysis was focused less on the Crusades, it certainly gave a more holistic understanding of how different

factions of European society created the Orientalist discourse of Islam (ranging from the military to academic and European explorers). Not only does the book fail to really include any discussion of Orientalism's role in creating the anti-Islam discourse, but Said also heavily used Foucault's poststructural approach to understanding the construction of knowledge and how interests were involved in creating the false image of the "East" and of Muslims.

While Said focused predominantly on the "East" as a whole, Lyons is more interested in understanding the West's interpretation of Islam and Muslims. This leaves one wondering what the role of non-Muslim Arabs is within this context. Unfortunately, modern Islamophobia has also spread to Arabs and Asians of various faith backgrounds. This leads one to conclude that there is something far more at play here than anti-Islam, more of a profound issue relating to the interpretation of the East, and of racial prejudice.

Furthermore, the author seems to equate much of the "West" with Christianity. In the third chapter, where he elaborates upon the western idea of Islam, he discusses the Church's role in changing the perspective of who and what Islam represents. This essentially otherized Muslims and fed much of the foundational anti-Muslim sentiments that drove the Crusades. While much of fifteenth-century Europe was certainly influenced by Christianity, this is no longer the case. And to presume that both Christianity and the West have created anti-Islam sentiments only misrepresents the current problem. In fact, the Catholic Church has been far more respectful of Muslims and their faith. That being said, since the author focuses so heavily on the historical discourse, he fails to really acknowledge some of the issues that have created the anti-Islam discourse currently of concern to many Muslims living in the "West."

This book gives the reader a strong foundation for understanding European interpretations of Muslims during the Crusades; however, it cannot holistically account for understanding Islamophobia as it exists today. Numerous other factors have contributed to this climate, among them racial prejudice and anti-immigrant sentiments, the events of 9-11, and western military interests in various Middle Eastern and Asian regions. In *Islam through Western Eyes*, Lyons certainly does not give a universal understanding for the current anti-Islam discourse; however, he does provide a small piece of the puzzle for understanding the climate – and perhaps that is all he intended to do.

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