Magic in Islam

Michael Muhammad Knight
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What if someone wrote an introduction to Islam that was "not Sunnī-centered, or male-centered, or law-centered" (p. 4)? What if it did not focus on a theoretical Arab Muslim heartland and "let only the classical male theologians and jurists speak" (p. 4)? And what if "magic became the primary lens that informed the author's priorities" (p. 4)?

Magic in Islam is what would happen. Through "magic," Knight pokes holes in narratives about Islam held by Muslims (such as the notion of a monolithic, static Islamic orthodoxy) and the general populace (such as the "clash of civilizations" narrative). Title aside, *Magic in Islam* is really about American Islam, not magic; that is, it implicitly compares Islam's esoteric heritage with the dry, hyper-logical brand of Islam popular in American MSAs and at ISNA, as well as "Protestant-ish" assumptions about Islam in the broader American discourse. Knight presents himself as neither a specialist in nor a practitioner of the esoteric, and readers expecting a catalogue of Muslim occult practices will be disappointed (and perhaps enraged). Instead, he acts as a wide-eyed observer guiding the reader through the curiosities of Muslim heritage. Knight did not invent this genre, nor is his main contribution in presenting original research. Rather, his main contribution is in making abstruse academic texts meaningful to the non-specialist, and in a way that is engaging and fun.

From this angle, *Magic in Islam* is similar to his other projects, such as *The Taqwacores* (2004) and *Journey to the End of Islam* (2009). However, while his writing here is still playfully irreverent, it is considerably toned down, with only an infrequent swear word or allusion to an indelicate act. Hence, despite its potentially heterodox subject, it is more likely to agree with conservative sensibilities. Ironically, it is also far more grounded in orthodoxy. While Knight proposes to "let the intro come through marginalized voices" (p. 4), particularly loud voices include those of orthodox giants such as al-Bukhari and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, as well as less-orthodox but still mainstream-enough voices such as those of al-Kindi and Ibn al-'Arabi. (This is in contrast to truly marginalized voices, such as those of amulet sellers, jinn exorcists, or women.) Nonetheless, the writing is mature and thoughtful, and I would be comfortable using it as a supplementary textbook in an "Introduction to Islam" class.

What, exactly, is "magic"? Knight begins with an excellent literature review on the dividing line between "science," "magic," and "religion." This question is sensitive on a Muslim front for three reasons. First, early modern anthropology, burgeoned under the aegis of colonialism and buckled under the weight of the white man's burden, led to the sinister view that "a propensity to magic demonstrates an incapacity for responsible self-government; people prone to magic call out for enlightened control" (p. 12). Knight notes the irony that, at the same time, the West itself was seeing a resurgence of the occult. Second, accusations that Muslims are uncivilized – including media sensationalism about witch-hunts – continue to be used as covert justifications for military and economic intervention. And, lastly, there is the niggling concern that the Qur'an does, in fact, prohibit something called *siḥr*, which is usually equated with "magic." Knight concludes that the division between "science," "magic," and "religion" is really a matter of perspective: rival theologies are often discredited as "magic," whereas an atheist would consider both "religion" and "magic" to be "hocus-pocus." Regarding the Qur'an, Knight maintains that "magic" should *not* be used as a synonym for *siḥr*.

While classical Muslims had varying views on what constituted *siḥr*, ranging from employing demons to being a charismatic speaker, "thinkers such as al-Kindī, Suhrawārdī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-'Arabī, and Ibn Khaldūn … were not invited to this [modern] conversation" (pp. 15-16). Hence, anyone who relies on magic as a "meaningful category of analysis" could be "living in a Europe-centered universe" (pp. 19-20). For this reason, Knight excuses the use of the word "magic" in his title – which is fortunate, since much of what he discusses, such as precognition via dreams or reciting the Qur'an for protection – would be considered neither *siḥr* nor magic by most Muslims.

Several themes run throughout the book. First, Islam – like other world religions – did not develop in a box, but rather in communication with other Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths. Muslims did not just inherit ancient Greek, Jewish, Persian, or Indian traditions; rather, they synthesized these earlier ideas into their own tradition *and* contributed back to other faiths and cultures. Particularly illustrative examples here are Knight's chapters on astrology and the identification of the Qurʾanic prophet Idris with Enoch.

Second, scientific or materialist interpretations of Islam, such as those that explain away *shayāṭīn* (demons) as germs, are not true to the Qur'an itself, which admits to the reality of magic and supernatural acts (especially in Q. 2:102 and Q.114-115). Rather than dismissing soothsayers, who were said to receive knowledge from jinn, it describes their spiritual knowledge as unreliable (as Knight puts it, having a "defective *isnād*," p. 36). Additionally, al-

though prohibiting magic, the Qur'an provides the liminal figure of Prophet Sulayman, who spoke with animals and commanded forces of jinn.

The mere presence of the Qur'an itself is believed to bring *barakah*, often translated as "blessings," but which Knight renders as "the Force." (Any book that translates *barakah* as "the Force" scores points with me.) "The Force" can be invoked by reciting, touching, or even ingesting the Qur'an. For these reasons, Knight proposes that rather than being seen in opposition to magic, the Qur'an should be seen as a superior system of magic – a grimoire – due to its ability to bring *barakah* and to repel the *shayāṭīn*. Although this idea sounds heterodox, it could easily reflect how some pre-modern people in the Near East perceived revealed religion. In fact, the concept of the divine power belonging to the Qur'an's letters and words underlies not only Muslim piety but also medieval Muslim magic – which, admittedly, Knight discusses less than one would expect in a book like this.

Knight's third major theme is that contemporary Muslims refashion classical orthodox scholars into their own modern, secular image. Again, one is reminded of the MSA, although Knight points his finger at Zaytuna College and the AlMaghrib Institute. For instance, Bukhari is presented as "an ambitious alpha-nerd who was really, *really* great at school, loved his teachers, memorized mountains of data, aced every exam, and consistently outshone his peers" (p. 142). These portrayals, while not inaccurate, omit the possibility of non-scholarly knowledge or acts, such as Bukhari's advice to eat seven *'ajwah* dates each morning to protect against *siḥr* or his hadith on dreams being one forty-sixth of prophecy. As a result, "if you put an eighth-century Christian, an eighth-century Muslim, and a twenty-first century Christian or Muslim in a room together, the twenty-first century believer is probably going to be the odd one out" (p. 31).

These discussions, which encompass chapters 2 to 5, are grounded in the pre-modern Muslim tradition, with an eye to contemporary concerns. However, chapters 6 and 7 are particularly salient to Islam in America. (Perhaps, not coincidentally, they are both on subjects with which Knight has had personal experience and has written books on, namely, *Tripping with Allah* [2013] and *The Five Percenters* [2008].) The first is his chapter on dreams and visions, which he opens with a poignant account of how he decided to leave Islam and then dreamed of the Prophet, Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husyan, who embraced him. By blessing his attempted apostasy, they enabled him to stay. To Knight, therefore, dreams and visions are not only a means of maintaining a live connection to the Prophet, but also help heal wounds inflicted by the religious community.

Apostasy can be a sensitive and inflammatory subject in a minority community already on the defensive. However, many committed Muslims in America express disillusionment and hurt with the religious community; this is particularly common among racial minorities, converts, women, non-heterosexuals, and the poor. To me, this chapter speaks bravely to an issue that is often suppressed but which calls for more dialogue. My only critique here is that Knight implies that only pre-modern Muslims gave spiritual importance to their dreams, whereas dreams still figure prominently in the Muslim psyche. In fact, dream interpretation books, such as cheap translations of Ibn Sirin's eighth-century manual, remain readily available.

The other chapter is the one on esotericism in African-American Muslim movements, in which Knight challenges dominant narratives about African-American Islam. A typical narrative is that African Muslims were brought to America as slaves, where they were forced to adopt the white man's religion. Today, Muslim (or Muslim-ish) movements such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam serve as a stepping stone to guide them back to their ancestral faith: orthodox Sunnism. However, Knight argues that, first, most captured African Muslims did not actually practice a version of Islam that matched today's dry, literalist "orthodoxy"; rather, their Islam was more likely to have been magical and syncretic. Second, he contends that the trend also goes in the reverse; that is, some Muslims leave orthodox Sunnism for these movements. Lastly, Knight adds up (a) the omission of African-Americans from discussions of American Islam, (b) the omission of Islam from discussions of American religion, and (c) the omission of esotericism and the occult from discussions of American religion. He concludes that this leads to "the intersection of esotericism and Islam in the United States being triply ignored, though this intersection is precisely what gives us American Islam in its recognizable history" (p. 167).

Overall, Knight succeeds in digging "secret tunnels" under the "fences" of orthodoxy (p. 166) through "magic" and gifts the reader with thoughtful reflections on the Muslim heritage as well as Islam and religion in America. However, I have some points of constructive criticism. First, Knight criticizes authors for neglecting Shi'ism, but the hadith and scriptural discussions that he cites are invariably Sunni. This point is not a negligible matter, because Shi'i hadith corpuses contain substantial material on the esoteric arts. (A brief bibliography of Shi'i hadith on topics such as astrology, divination, and speaking with the dead can be found on page 202 of M. A. Amir-Moezzi's *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam [2010]*.) While not all Shi'is embrace such things, due to the common belief that the Imams were able to do things such as teleport

and read minds, there is, in theory, a certain openness to the possibility of supernatural acts. Another fruitful area of consideration would have been Shi'i hadith on Idris, in which the Idris-Enoch connection is rehabilitated into normative Islamic theology.

Second, Knight could have explored the gendered aspect of orthodoxy more – why a man is more likely to be seen as a mystic and a woman as a witch. Throughout the book, he displays sensitivity towards gendered concerns and names female heretics; the only thing remaining is to connect the two.

The most glaring concern is that the book is based almost entirely on secondary sources. Setting aside concerns about facticity, by relying upon academic studies the author retains the perspective of an outsider looking in. While Knight critiques the superimposition of a European mindset onto Islam, virtually all of his sources share a worldview in which Muslims are artifacts to be studied, as opposed to allowing today's Muslims to speak indigenously for ourselves. Al-Kindi, Suhrawardi, and Ibn al-'Arabi are not the only ones who received no invitation to the conversation; neither did we.

Scripturally sanctioned or not, "magical" practices persist, but the only chapter in which we get a sense of these being living traditions is the one on African-American Islam. Knight could, at least, have brought in fatwas of contemporary jurists on questions like "Is it permissible to marry jinn?" to show that, to some, these are still present and real concerns. Additionally, today, thanks to the Internet, there is truly a plethora of bizarrities available, and some Muslims hawk amulets and love-spells online and even purport to auction off jinn on eBay. (Terms of service violation, perhaps?) How do such things fit into paradigms of materialism and modernity? While *Magic in Islam* critiques orthodoxy and the academy, orthodoxy and the academy ultimately find their way to tunnel through.

Amina Inloes
The Islamic College, London, UK