



Review of David Kloos, Mark R. Westmoreland, Leonie Schmidt, & Bart Barendregt (Eds.), *Provocative images in contemporary Islam*

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This edited volume brings together a group of outstanding scholars on contemporary Muslim societies approaching the topic of provocative images from a range of disciplinary angles and different parts of the Islamic world—with special emphasis on regions that are often marginalized in comparable studies, like Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia. As the contributors to this volume show, the interface between provocation and visibility/visuality is a rich canvas for understanding Muslim publics in both their variety and interconnectedness. Although Leonie Schmidt and Mark R. Westmoreland survey definitions of the concept of provocation in previous works, the articles dislodge static understandings of how images provoke. As a result, the volume succeeds in offering “a more inclusive and dynamic approach” that intentionally complicates familiar binaries of pious vs. offensive imagery (p. 11).

The volume begins with an evocative essay by Marwan Kraïdy that discusses media operations of the Islamic State, focusing especially on their production of a video of a captured Jordanian pilot’s gruesome immolation. Such images present dilemmas to researchers, since any attempt to understand them necessarily entails their re-mediation, thus contributing to the viral circulation for which they were produced. Videos like these, he argues, should be understood as “self-conscious martial forms” producing a spectacle that “numbs, frightens, or seduces” and, through its viral circulation, inflicts “death on a wide scale” (p. 35).

Andrea Meuzelaar’s contribution spotlights the remediation of the Rushdie affair on Dutch television over time through footage of Muslim protests in the Netherlands.

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Although the conscious ends of these televised productions may be quite different from those discussed by Kraidy, the effect of producing a frightening spectacle is similar. Through the decontextualization of this footage and its regular repetition, television has constructed and canonized the stereotype of the “angry Muslim mob” (p. 61) as an empty symbol that can then be—and has been—deployed as a heuristic to interpret politicized affairs ranging from Islamic immigration to global events.

Also focusing on Muslims in the Netherlands, Margaretha van Es’s piece combines discourse analysis with auto-ethnography to ask why well-intentioned social media posts by white non-Muslims attempting to express their solidarity in an environment of increased Islamophobia can be perceived as provocative or uncomfortable by Muslims, including the author herself. Provocation, she aptly observes, need not be intentional, but can emerge in cases of “unresolved tensions between different moral sensibilities” (p. 81), which also point to power dynamics in people’s interactions that are not immediately visible, but still operative.

Maryam Kashani is the only contributor to this volume who makes no explicit use of the language of provocation, but her photo essay of Muslim Life in the San Francisco Bay Area, “Medina by the bay,” provokes in its own right by foregrounding what is usually only perceived as background. Through her “Islamiscaping” or “making Muslim spaces and histories visible” (p. 92), she asks the reader to witness where boundaries and infrastructures set up to exclude are navigated and destabilized by Muslims on the move in the context of gentrification, displacement, and surveillance.

If Kashani foregrounds what is often invisible, Pooyan Tamimi Arab returns to Muslims’ hypervisibility in minority contexts by discussing poster campaigns in the Netherlands featuring mixed ethno-religious couples kissing. Explicitly not seeking to provoke but to empower and to promote religious diversity, the campaign became controversial and divisive for its stereotyping religious groups and for its eroticized nationalism. Tamimi Arab’s conceptualization of the kiss as a “frontier zone” (p. 112) is especially useful for provocative images straddling comparable frontiers while evoking “competing politics of disgust” (p. 131).

Such competing politics of disgust—or expectations of disgust and objection—also play a role in Kirsten Scheid’s excellent article on exhibiting Mustafa Farrouk’s portraits of nudes in contemporary Beirut. Such portraits of nudes are folded into global understandings of “good” Muslims as modern, enlightened subjects, whereby those who object to the depictions of nudes in art are framed as “bad,” backward, or even radical Muslims. Anxieties about objection, she shows, arise when Muslim visibility—“dynamic discussions of vision”—is confounded with the visibility of Muslims gazing at and reacting to nude portraits (p. 154).

Carla Jones’s equally excellent piece on images, fashion, and social media in contemporary Indonesia analyzes similar competing anxieties. She focuses on women in the pious fashion industry, seeking—and often failing—to manage their own visibility on social media, a medium where “femininity both demands spectacularity and shuns those who seek it” (p. 167). The more a post achieves the desired visibility through shares and likes, the more vulnerable it becomes to re-contextualization and reinterpretation, such that what was intended to represent a virtuous extension of Allah’s beauty becomes narcissism and religious failure.

Moving from Indonesia to Egypt, Yasmin Moll focuses on mediation, asking “how media content and aesthetic forms are constructed as religious in the first place” (p. 185) through an analysis of “New Preachers” and Salafi disagreements on how religion should be mediatised on television. By showing how their arguments are religiously grounded, Moll makes a crucial intervention into the wider field as she refutes familiar binaries between westernized and halfhearted New Preachers on the one hand, and serious and committed Salafis on the other. Because each side seeks to reflect God’s will through social interaction, their disagreement is fundamentally theological.

James Hoesterey’s final piece takes us back to Indonesia, but continues Moll’s discussion of mediatised critiques launched at the ostensibly most devout, in this case Islamist hardliner figures and moral vigilantes who were caught committing sexual improprieties. In response, Indonesian netizens have deployed memes that are supposed to unmask these figures’ “moral vacuity, insincerity, and duplicity” through “humor, satire, disgust, and outrage” (p. 204). His article’s focus on mediatised constructions and disruptions of pious normative masculinities provides a wonderful complement to Jones’s piece on women, reminding men “who trade on their public piety that they, too, are being surveilled” (p. 206).

It is often the case in edited volumes organized around a theme that the individual contributions approach a topic in different and sometimes incongruous ways, leaving the reader wondering how they can contribute to a more general theorization of a subject area as diverse as the provocative image in Islam. In this volume, however, Karen Strassler’s masterful epilogue does more than justice to this challenge. Looking back at the different articles, she invites us to theorize provocative images as “image-events,” a concept she has developed elsewhere (Strassler, 2020), and which construct publics by provoking agonistic encounters among them. This is especially pertinent in the contemporary context of global Islamophobia and its effects on Muslim views on how to best be a Muslim and perform this Muslim-ness through images.

In addition to the volume’s value for future research, many of its contributions would also be well-suited as assigned readings in both undergraduate and graduate classrooms. I would be particularly looking forward to using the articles by Andrea Meuzelaar, Margaretha van Es and Pooyan Tamimi Arab for facilitating students’ reflections on their positionalities as consumers of media and participants in public discourse, and—in the case of the latter two—how seemingly well-intentioned, and inclusive initiatives are still embedded in the same majoritarian visions they ostensibly seek to dislodge. In addition, the essays by Kirsten Scheid, Carla Jones, and James Hoesterey provide fertile ground for classroom discussions unsettling common stereotypes about Islamic perceptions of nudity, gender, and sexuality.

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