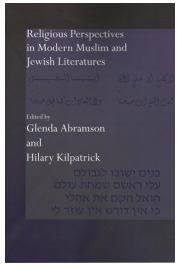
Religious Perspectives in Modern Muslim and Jewish Literatures, edited by Glenda Abramson and Hilary Kilpatrick



Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures 8 | Abingdon: Routledge, 2006 | xi + 325 pages | ISBN: 978-0-415-35021-1 (hardback) $200.00 | ISBN: 978-0-415-59590-2 (softback) $44.95

With this essay collection, republished in softback edition in 2011, Glenda Abramson and Hilary Kilpatrick offer a well-composed book, consisting of eight essays dealing with literature that relates to Jewish belief, culture, and thought, and eight reflections on writings from within the Islamic realm. One must consider the title carefully: the essays are not mere studies of religious beliefs, but more correctly reflections on literature that emerges from within a certain religious realm, or refers to religious themes or conditions within religious societies. This means that the writings analysed in these sixteen essays are not merely to be described as religious; and on the other hand

the analysts themselves are not easily identified as either religious or non-religious or at all belonging to a certain group. The editors in this regard consciously use, for example, the term "Muslim literature" instead of "Islamic literature" (1–2). By "modern literature," the compendium means both the "recent contemporary" as well as the historical period of "modernism." The book's authorship is evenly divided between female and male contributors. This is impressive because it is a rarity in this field. A brief account of the authors' backgrounds and current positions can be found in the beginning of the publication.

In their introduction, Abramson and Kilpatrick remark on various understandings of the expressions "Muslim" and "Jewish" with regard to either the analysed writings or the authors themselves. By raising issues of terminology, used throughout the book and signified in the title of the compilation, the editors and subsequently their co-authors avoid the criticism of including essays that seem to address religious ideas to a lesser degree. Reading the essays by themselves, and reflecting back on the title of the book, such criticism might arise within the reader, particularly considering the categorical term "religious perspectives" as mentioned in the title. Despite the fact that some essays—in a narrow sense—only just match this category, the thoughtful introduction to this collection validates the inclusion of those essays.

The compendium begins with the article "Urdu poetry as a vehicle for Islamic re-expression" by Christopher Shackle. His analysis focuses on poetry expressed in Urdu, a Hindi dialect expressed in Perso-Arabic script. Urdu poetry and rhetoric carries certain forms of expression that are attributed to Shiite poetic literature; it also incorporates Indian styles of poetry. Urdu as language of the Muslim population in the former part of India, now Pakistan, served as a device for promoting independence, not only from India but also from English, the language of the ruling colonizers. Understandably, the literary field to which this poetry belongs steps into the socio-political scene and questions old "hierarchies of authority" (21). It does so, for example, in Hali's Musaddas work, which focuses on social challenges here and now. For Muslim Indians, plentiful questions arose about their religious and national identity. In this context, Muhammad Iqbal's literary efforts attempted to reconnect with the Muslim heartland, through language and the invocation of strong religious images. Particularly intriguing is the tradition of re-invoking idealistic images of Muslim Spain, which is thought of in Urdu poetry as a symbol for the intrinsic dynamic powers of Islam. Thus, past Andalusia emerges as a fairly romantic model for contemporary Pakistan (27).

More "progressive" Urdu poetry fashioned literature with Marxist tendencies, filled with anti-materialist jargon, while anticipating an age of human thought, liberated from religion (28). Shackle gives a well-informed account of the intentions of Urdu poets, and the political and historical setting.

The subsequent contribution engages with the "search for religious faith in the poetry of Itamar Yaoz-Kest." Yaoz-Kest's struggle for a religious identity is instantly winsome. With humour, doubt, and constant self-reflection, the poet shares this exciting but also at times tiresome quest for a religious conscience. David C. Jacobson presents a thoughtful analysis of selected pieces of Yaoz-Kest's work. His poetry is contemporary, dynamic, and immediately appealing. His ("neo-religious") language tries to grasp wider horizons of meaning, not so much of knowledge and assurance, but rather of hope. For Yaoz-Kest, the horizon of faith lies outside the dominion of religious ritual. Jacobson writes: "he was driven to create 'a synthesis between the values of the world of religious faith and the spiritual achievements of the secular world'" (37). Influenced by Spinoza, Feuerbach, and the poet's own life experiences, Itamar Yaoz-Kest acquired a sense of the divine presence (43). But at the same time he expected no more or less than "spiritual enlightenment," which in its peculiarity ought to subdue the idea of God being "interested in granting reward and punishment for the deeds of the individual" (39). Walking the course of life between this sense of the supernatural and the knowledge about one's limited individuality establishes itself for Yaoz-Kest as inevitable modus vivendi. Jacobson's observations, of Yaoz-Kest's internal modification of a wanderer on his way to religiosity, are insightful and reveal facets, which are also common in today's pursuits of spirituality.

Next, B. Babür Turna's "Paths to God within the Poet: Necip Fazil Kisakürek (1904–83) and his mystical poetry" introduces the Turkish writer Kisakürek, who, inspired by *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) expressed his mystical experiences through poetic language. One can hence trace back Kisakürek's personal development in his writings. There, Turna identifies, amongst other elements, the influence of Kisakürek's time in France and the author's occupation with the works of Henri Bergson, with whom other Muslim writers also engaged (e.g., Muhammad Iqbal, 1877–1938; and ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAlāyilī, 1914–1996).[14] In his quest for spirituality, Kisakürek was guided by a Naqsh-

[14] Cf. Manfred Sing, *Progressiver Islam in Theorie und Praxis: die interne Kritik am hegemonialen islamischen Diskurs durch den "roten Scheich" ʿAbdāllah al-ʿAlāyilı (1914–1996).* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007).

bandi sheikh who helped him to see "beyond the material world" (63). Thereafter, Kisakürek lightened up his previously rather dark and heavy poetry; he came to understand poetry as a "mystical experience" itself (65). Turna does well in portraying Kisakürek as a searcher for faith. But at the same time, Turna does not neglect to epitomize the author as a voyager into the depths of human angst and desperation. The essay nicely demonstrates how "the religious" (*das Religiöse*)—in this regard the mystical sphere of Islam—influenced a man to arrive at his own self.

On a similar "religious and spiritual quest" (71), for some sort of spiritual outlook onto the affairs of the world, we find poet Binyamin Shvili, who was inspired by a kabbalistic "religious perspective." Nili Gold in her study "'Merciful Father Abraham': The mystical poetry of Binyamin Shvili" shows how Shvili supposed that a mystical account of religion resonates in the messianic movement that emerged around Shabbetai Zevi (the "false messiah," 80).[15] Shvili apparently has in common with the historical persona Zevi that his family also originated in formerly Greek Smyrna (today Turkish Izmir). From Shvili's poems Nili Gold extracts—as does Turna from Kisakürek's works—a great deal of biographical information. We learn about a childhood trauma and the author's dispatching from the biological father and subsequent turning towards the divine father (78). The reader of Gold's essay might detect the absence of explicit references to particularly Jewish beliefs in Shvili's poetry. Primarily, Nili's essay reads Shvili's as writings the self-search by an author who absorbs some religious figures and narratives into his own reflections about the world and human dismay.

Edwin Wieringa, an expert in Indonesian philology, analyses how writers and performers of Javanese songs aimed at educating children ("Moral Education Through Islamic Songs in Twentieth-Century Java"). Wieringa focuses "on the genre of Javanese Islamic poetry called *singir* … that is mainly sung by girls and women" (90). The reader will discover some parallels to Oesseina Alidou's essay (cf. 209), which also speaks about an oral tradition practiced by females, aiming at young peoples' personal growth. Now, *singirs* are written in Perso-Arabic script (reminding us of the Urdu script Christopher Shackle addressed above, cf. 1). The *singirs* consist of moral lessons and basic religious knowledge that ought to help children, once grown up, to be spared from punishment in the afterlife. This broadcasting of knowledge un-

[15] Cf. Stacy Beckwith's essay on Leopoldo Azancot's *Novia Judia* (305). Zevi propagated "the concept 'redemption through sin.'"

surprisingly contrasts with modern ways of education, in both content and style. Wieringa, however, illustrates that even traditional *singirs* provoke new interpretations in current times (96).

Sigrid Kleinmichel's essay "The Uzbek short story writer Fiṭrat's adaptation of religious traditions" delivers a discussion of how Abdurauf Fiṭrat engages with religious narratives and the modes by which he transforms religious themes into stages for his own reflection and criticism of socio-political affairs from 1910 to the late 1930s in (today Uzbek) Bukhara, until his violent death in 1938. Amongst the themes Fiṭrat tackled with his work (on culture, economy, politics, society), Kleinmichel chooses to concentrate on how particularly religious narratives feature in his writings. Fitrat's view on religion was rather sceptical, sarcastic, satiric, ironic, and comic, but at the same time went far beyond pure ridicule. This means he was indeed concerned to substantially judge various systems of thought, may they be political or religious. From Kleinmichel's article we do not discover much about Fiṭrat's own religiosity, but the reader grasps that Fiṭrat was decidedly critical of religious ideology and principally meant to pan the managers of faith. The fact that he often alluded to commonly known religious narratives or figures seems to indicate his confidence (or rather hope) in addressing a wider audience, outside purely literary circles. The reader senses here parallels to Iqbal's poetry (cf. the first essay): an anti-colonial spirit and ferocity in promoting a genuinely Muslim way of progress.

Next is Dan Urian's "Kulturkampf in the Israeli Theater," which investigates how "the issue of religion" is featured in Israeli theatre (ca. during the 1980–90s). The "theatre stages" are expanded to the realm of other media such as cassette recordings and radio shows. Urian detects that all these arenas transmute into platforms (battlefields) for playing out diverse aspects of a rampant identity crisis within Israeli society. The reader learns about the existence of several conflicting ideological parties: secular Ashkenazy or "Western" Israelis, political Zionists, highly-educated vs. Oriental Jews, religious Zionist / (ultra-)Orthodox Israelis, less-educated classes, etc. These groups and the contrasts between them are not only represented on stage but also reflected in the composition of the audiences. Urian's article is an interesting account of how *Religionskritik* is carried out through theatrical art. In the frame of critique, Israeli theatre, for example, ridicules religious dreams about children becoming fighters for holy places (152); it also strives to "reveal" the hypocrisy of ultra-orthodox men and their suppressed sexuality, and targets certain superstitious beliefs while generally opposing the "religionisation of

politics." Through Urian's selected analysis of theatrical performances, the reader becomes aware of two major struggles of Israeli identity. One comes to ask: Are there two religions, namely the Jewish and the Zionist religion? Furthermore, how does one define "Jewishness" and "Israeliness"? Urian's essay portrays the *Kulturkampf* in Israeli theatre as a constant re-assessment of values. Here, the reader perceives that essays like Urian's, namely relating to "Jewish literature," often debate the authors' efforts for defining Jewishness (rather than what Judaism entails). This impression is fortified by playwright Yehoshua Sobol: "I too am a Jew in essence but not in religion" (153).

The following essay, "Martyrdom and Gender in Jewish-American Holocaust Memory," discusses how today's American memories of the Holocaust are echoed and explored in Jewish literature. The author, Sara Horowitz, explains how, for example, the Rabbis' Talmudian explanation of unjustified suffering resonates with the depiction of martyrdom in Jewish poetry and contemporary liturgy. For example, the theme of *morior invictus* (death before defeat) is woven into the piece "Martyrdom of the Ninety-Three Maidens" (Hillel Bavli), which is part of the liturgy of "American liberal Judaism." Horowitz successfully demonstrates, that although for many American Jews the Holocaust "took place elsewhere" (182), Jewish literature displays a range of unique ways of (somehow) "relating" to the horrors of the Holocaust. When Jewish women are depicted as victims of Nazi atrocities, their alleged, implied, and threatened sexual violation symbolises the murders carried out. In that sense, "sexual violation" (a stage of criminality, as I understand, somewhat lower than actual murder) serves as a "domestication" of the Holocaust horrors (188). For contemporary American readers, it is hence possible to relate to a proportion of the cruelty the Jewish people suffered. Obviously, Horowitz' essay does not primarily tackle "religious perspectives" in literature, but is more interested in the effects Jewish literature can have upon its American readers.

"A 'Cinderella' goes to Hausaland: Islam, gender and Hausa literature" analyses a current version of the Cinderella narrative, as read out by a female radio host in contemporary Nigeria. The author, Alidou Oesseina reflects on the tale's symbolic implications for its audience. Oesseina introduces us to some interesting transformations the Hausa oral tradition of storytelling underwent. Folk tales were memorized and expressed and mostly by females in domestic spaces. This practice served didactic, pedagogical, and socialisation purposes. However, the language of the Muslim Hausa experienced a literarisation through religiously trained males, who transcribed scores of

formerly orally transmitted stories, infused religious jargon and ultimately raided "a female narrative space" (211). Thus, the language of domestic storytelling not only transitioned from orality to writing and from female to male execution, but also absorbed Islamic symbolism. Nevertheless, storytelling today is "re-versioned" by women who utilize traditional material as basis for a re-telling that addresses a contemporary audience. One could argue that this way women gain back their control over this genre. It is before this background of the history of Hausa storytelling and today's incentives for social change that Oesseina analyses the radio-told story of a Hausa "Cinderella." Most significantly, the author identifies in her study elements within the modern Cinderella narration suggesting a possible liberation of women from poverty, illiteracy and oppression.

The collection features a further four essays concerning religious perspectives in Jewish literature, and three more from within the Muslim realm. At this stage of the book review more brief reflections occur. "'Together with the shell, they have thrown away the kernel': Aaron Halle-Wolfssohn's critique of contemporary Judaism" (Jutta Strauss) and "Rahel Morpurgo in the context of Jewish Emancipation in Italy" (Gabriella Steindler Moscati) feature works of two authors writing during the torrent of Jewish enlightenment (*Haskalah*).

Rahel Morpurgo (1790–1871) expressed great piety in her Hebrew poetry. Being female and writing Hebrew poems spawned numerous commentaries on her person and work. Hence we get a glimpse into the reception of a female Hebrew poet. The reader also learns that Rahel's work has to "be read in the light of the Italian Jews' struggle for emancipation" (227). Nevertheless, Steindler Moscati successfully depicts the author's struggle for her own spiritual identity.

Aaron Halle-Wolfssohn (1756–1835), a German Jew, engaged with topics such as human morality along with civil rights for Jews. As a teacher, he promoted secular learning for Jewish children. However, Jutta Strauss' investigation into Halle-Wolfssohn's *Leichtsinn und Frömmelei* shows that he warned Jewish youth not to abandon their Jewish faith by adhering to a misguided understanding of enlightenment.

The last two essays in this line of Jewish thought are "Avrom Goldfaden's theatre of Jewishness: three prooftexts" (Joel Berkowitz) and "Between Eros and Dios: Leopoldo Azancot's *Novia judía*" (Stacy N. Beckwith). Goldfaden (1840–1908) and Azancot (b. 1935) come from distinctly dissimilar backgrounds but nevertheless wrestle with similar themes. Goldfaden does

not principally discuss religious elements but rather a definition of *yudelickeyt* (*Jüdischheit* or *Jüdigkeit*, "Jewishness"). Azancot—likewise on an identity quest—enlivens in his stories the sweet tensions between eroticism and religious law. Beckwith's reader also learns about the history of Sephardic *conversos* and Jewish literary accomplishments in modern-day Spain.

The remaining essays represent studies into literature written within the Islamic realm and composed in three different languages. Isabel Stümpel ("Religion in contemporary Persian prose") inquires into prose fiction in contemporary Iran and admits to difficulties in finding "religion" in Iranian literature (164). While looking at novels from different time periods, she finds connections to Islamic folk-beliefs and superstitions (170) as well as Shia narratives with their main theme: martyrdom. "Religion" might also be found within "descriptions of rituals" (172). Fundamental Islamic theological concepts or references to the Qurʾān are mostly absent. For some novelistic characters, Islam shifts to the background and "religion means nothing more than a childhood memory" (167). Moreover, "religion is closely connected with a sense of guilt and has a paralyzing effect, especially on women" (169). In addition, religion is reflected upon as affecting discrimination against women. Nonetheless, Stümpel rightly points out that religion is a "side-dish" of Iranian novels. What is more, Islam in particular is often (if depicted at all) alluded to alongside other religions (172–174).

From Shawakat M. Toorawa's article "Modern Arabic literature and the Qur'an: inimitability, creativity … incompatibility" we learn that literary creativity, writing in Arabic about religious themes, inspired by the Qurʾān, can be, to say the least, a difficult task. Many literary works inspired by religion and the Qurʾān fall under scrutiny and often condemnation by religious authorities with strong links to the political sphere. Sanctions and censures are invoked, books taken off the market and withdrawn from book fairs. Understandably, then, the study of these works is subjected to related obstacles.

Toorawa explains that the controversy about literary inspiration through the Qurʾān, is rooted in the theological concept *iʿjāz* (the miracle-character) that makes the holy book inimitable. The *iʿjāz* is traced back to the belief in an eternally and uncreated Qurʾān's existence on the preserved tablet (*lawḥ maḥfūẓ*). I remark here that, in addition to the concept of *iʿjāz*, it is also the resentment displayed by managers of faith that makes literary creativity—whether by Qurʾānic content or structure—a difficult task. The managers feel their domain of religious authority threatened by intellectuals, who dare

to step from the literary field onto theirs, the religious field. Hence, the fight against such literature, as discussed by Toorawa, is often also a territorial brawl. Nevertheless, the author here gives an interesting account in how far some Arabic writers in fact utilize their inspirations through religion and the Qurʾān. The works feature a range of religious ideas: fallen angels, Qurʾān-based Islamic legends (243), and sexual escapes inspired by Qurʾānic narratives. Most works try to connect the religious themes with contemporary (sometimes political) situations and personal experiences (248).

"Transcending the boundaries of Islam: written Swahili literature in the twentieth century" (Alamin M. Mazrui) features Swahili, an East African dialect written with a "revised Arabic alphabet" (287), and carrying a discrete Islamic vocabulary. This language of Islamic spirit dominated the written accounts of Swahili, while in its oral form it by all means transmits secular narratives (286). But it was Swahili writing that was later used in public education, Christian sermons, Bible classes (289), Bible translations, and utilized by Western Christian missionaries as "part of the competition for the soul of the East African" (297). Alamin M. Mazrui offers here a fascinating account of the powers of language and the politics of script.

In conclusion, this is a fascinating book, introducing the reader to a vast landscape of languages, customs, beliefs, histories, and cultures. In addition, we learn about a wide spectrum of types of creative writing. Often "the religious" within these artistic productions must be filtered out with a good deal of sensitivity and patience. In this venture, the authors gave their very best. Furthermore, their study of writings in many different languages must be acknowledged. By itself, the selection of these essays reflects an ongoing scholarly "negotiation" about the definitions of terms such as "Muslim," "Jewish," or "religious" as adjective attributes. In this regard, the book is a valuable addition to this ongoing and ultimately essential discourse about what "religious perspectives" might possibly entail.

Katharina Völker
University of Otago