

**Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı: Jorg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2020**

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The Muslim contribution to the debate about life on other planets is the focus of *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* by Jorg Determann. His cultural and intellectual history examines science, society and politics. He investigates modern Muslim scientists, creatives, and governments’ responses to astrobiology (*the study of life in the universe*) and the idea of extraterrestrial life as the ultimate Other (p. x, 38).

About Islam, Determann comments: ‘*I argue that the Islamic tradition has been generally supportive of conceptions of extraterrestrial life. For example, the Qur’an repeatedly refers to God as “lord of the worlds”, and Muslims have combined such notions with*

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*global astrobiological research and science fiction'* (p. x). The Qur'anic verse 55:33 is further evidence. So, from a believer's perspective, all life in the universe is evidence of Allah's omnipresence and omnipotence.

Determann focuses upon the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East, Asia and North Africa and their diasporas in the United States and Europe: the 'Muslim world' (*'the global Islamic community and its lands'*) (p. 34). Despite the authoritarian rule and repression, and religious conservatism within many Muslim-majority countries, Muslim artists and scientists produce imaginative and future-oriented works. The author asks, '*... to what extent did repression encourage writers to discuss sensitive issues by setting their stories on distant planets?'*'; and '*what inspired people from the Muslim world to conceive of space aliens in a particular way'* (p. 35). His findings include utopian and dystopian planets and visions of a united Islamic world in space. At the same time, governments in Muslim-majority countries have funded scientific researches and the arts. However, he reports that secular societies produce more science fiction works globally (p.75).

In the book's compilation, the author uses online interviews and critically reviews many primary and secondary sources translated into English. The broad range of sources includes cinema movies, fiction works, comics, scientific articles, and religious scripture. The book's six chapters chronologically analyse each media. Chapter 1 explores Islam and science fiction, scientific imagination, and Muslim 'world-building'. It includes the Syrian artist, Ayham Jabr's thought-provoking images of Martian spaceships above Damascus (*Damascus under Siege, 2016*) pose the question: will an advanced 'alien' power come in peace? (p. 2, 3). Also outlined are biographies like that of Pakistani scientist Nozair Khawaja and his award from the European Astrobiology Network Association. Chapter 2 discusses scientific journals and popular magazines. The purveyors of nineteenth-century publications on extraterrestrial topics in India and the Ottoman Middle East were the European missionaries and the Muslim institutions; with both Christians and Muslims debating the heliocentric model and life on Mars.

Chapter 3 looks at the '*imagination of extraterrestrial life in the cinemas of Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan'* (p. 36) during the Cold War from 1947 to 1991. During these decades elements of global science fiction,

for instance, *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *E.T.* were appropriated by film industries in Muslim-majority nations. They did this to create low-budget films for mass entertainment. The genres include action, romance, comedy and satire (*Shanee*, 1989, Pakistan; *Planet of Storms*, 1962, Soviet-era Kazakhstan; *Tourist Omer in Star Trek*, 1972; *G.O.R.A*, 2004, Turkey). Likewise, Western filmmakers have borrowed from Middle Eastern culture in costume, set design, and concepts (*Dune*, 1984; *Star Wars*, 1977) (p. 97). Chapter 4 'Islamic UFO Religions' studies ufological texts in Arabic, Turkish, Urdu and other languages and popular literature since the 1960s. The influences on the authors have been movies, Qur'anic exegesis, and paranormal phenomena. In particular, the possible role of *jinn* and Satan behind the sightings and contact experiences with aliens. The UFO's and religious groups' analysis cover the United States, Turkey, and others.

Chapter 5 examines ufological novels and short stories by postcolonial writers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Egypt. Their literature gave the masses something contextualised in the national culture and identity; highlighted are Indonesian female writers Dee Lestari and Eliza Vitri Handayani. The inclusion of Islam into their work was light; nonetheless, their heroes were often 'Muslim' and had Muslim names. Chapter 6 'Modern Futurisms' returns to the Muslim imagination and includes visual arts and computer games. The biographies top Iranian-American scientists employed by NASA are given (Mohammad Mosaddegh, Firouz Naderi and Nader Haghhighipour). Also considered are the future directions that astrobiology might take among Muslim authors and scientists (including in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar). The author stresses that scientific developments, censorship, sanctions, and creationist rhetoric will impact science fiction producers; notwithstanding, science fiction and scientific imagination will continue.

The book's strong points are the breadth of media analysed; the rich and growing history of intercultural communication about astrobiology; the variety of astrobiology interpretations by Muslim creatives; and the Muslim scientists' detailed biographies. Altogether, Determann presents individual Muslims and their governments' contribution to the global study about life in the universe.

I have two observations. The author says the Soviet Union was a secular state '*but accommodating of Islam*, (p. 27) with the '*state ruled by an atheist party*' (p. 63); while true, the Communist Party actively discouraged religion and closed most religious institutions intending to replace them with Soviet culture. Second; the author has focused upon the Muslim Middle East, Asia and North Africa and their diasporas. However, there is an alternative 'Muslim community' born and raised in the West, with a growing number from a mixed ethnic background; they are the descendants of Muslim migrants who arrived since the 1960s. These citizens of liberal secular societies might be tomorrow's astrobiologists too? Notwithstanding, Determann has moved the debate about Muslims beyond the usual and predictable political and historical analysis and gives us a new perspective. This well-researched, clearly-written book is stimulating and topical, and it would suit scholars of cultural studies, the history of science, Middle East studies and all readers interested in extraterrestrials.