

Review:

Jörg Matthias Determann. *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World*. I. B. Tauris, London, 2021.

Jörg Matthias Determann. *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East*. I. B. Tauris, London, 2018.

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Abstract

This review discusses two books by Jörg Mathias Determann. The books explore space science in the Arab world and Islam, science fiction and extraterrestrial life in the Muslim world. Both are detailed accounts, and they place their respective subjects in a historical context. The books also present and analyse topics such as science, science fiction, and astrobiology, which are rarely the focus of scholars of the so-called Arab and Muslim worlds. Hence, the books are important. They contribute to a broadening of the fields studying Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East by highlighting themes that require scholarly analysis.

Keywords

Islam, Muslim, Arab, science, science fiction, astrobiology, interpretations of Islam, extraterrestrial life, nationalism, history and modernity.

These two volumes, written by historian Jörg Matthias Determann, *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East* (I. B. Tauris 2018) and *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (I. B. Tauris 2021), are welcome contributions to the study of Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East. Primarily, they are texts that engage with the phenomena of science fiction and space science in Muslim and Arab societies by situating them at the level of society and social enquiry. Fundamentally, the books intend to stimulate broader discussions about interpretations of Islam, creativity, futurism, pluralism and other worlds, knowledge and transnational flows of ideas in milieus usually represented as repressive, overtly religious, and not particularly imaginative and innovative. In my subsequent response, I will approach the books from a theoretical perspective rooted in the study of contemporary Islam.

In the preface to his last book, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life*, the author makes several important statements. He begins the book by stating his intention, namely that the reader will explore little known and obscure facets of Muslim cultures and religion and learn about the work of scientists in Muslim majority countries performing research on extraterrestrial life. However, in the process, the reader also enters a world diffused with imaginative insight crafted in several languages, including Arabic, Malay, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu (p. xi). These statements are both factually true and exciting in equal measure. The book's true strength lies in its faithful gift to the reader of a key, one that unlocks a vivid, ethereal imagined world. Throughout the text, the reader's intellectual curiosity is wilfully excited through linking ideas about science fiction, astrobiology, and extraterrestrial life to everyday conditions in Muslim societies and to a variety of interpretations of Islam.

The aspirations behind Determann's more recent publication on Islam, science fiction, and extraterrestrial life closely mirrors his earlier book on space science and the Arab states. In the latter, the author

investigates the development of space science in Arab countries and roots the theoretical discussion in contemporary political phenomena, contextualising the nationalism(s) and histories of Arab science from the middle of the 19th century and onwards. In a sense, you could say the two books are built on empirical studies of materials that rarely form the focal topic of scholarly discussions on Islam, Muslim societies, and the so-called Arab world, and to a large extent in academia more generally. The premise of this book is truly unfamiliar territory to scholars and students of Islamic or Middle Eastern Studies. At the same time, the books contain an analysis of the modern history of science, science fiction, astrobiology, and understandings of extraterrestrial life that are contextualised with real insight and linked to further discussions among Muslims and non-Muslims about modernity, interpretations of Islam, and the role of Islam in a contemporary and transnational world. Both books explore themes surrounding science fiction, astrobiology, and space science, and discusses them within their broader social milieu of modernity and societal change. a conclusion drawn from both books is the need to understand the emergence of modern science from the 19th century onwards as a very different form of science from the knowledge production that took place in Muslim contexts during the so-called “Golden Age of Islam.” Even as modern science draws authority from the rationality of great thinkers and a certain objective logic, scientists and others continue to cite interpretations of Islam or tenuous connections to a historic past to justify the implementation of modern methods. This imposition of religious links onto scientific method ultimately protects modern science and its dissemination from religiously founded criticisms.

Determann’s two books are also structured in similar ways. The chapters discuss distinct themes. In a few cases, the two books overlap, especially in their examination of the history of observatories and their wider development in Middle Eastern societies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Most chapters usually start with a brief story, a personal presentation or an episodic narrative that relates to the chapter’s themes. Thereafter, the author develops the key theme in detail. For

example, in *Space Science and the Arab World*, the second chapter starts with the story of Taleb Omran, a Syrian scientist and science fiction writer, and his fictional book that imagines a world where Arab scientists come together to form an Arab Science City. Omran's description of the joint efforts of Arab scientists to create a science city is actually the allegorical preamble for a critique of space science in the Arab countries and a discussion on how these developments can be understood as expressions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Through institutions like the *Qatar Foundation*, Arab space science becomes part of the politics legitimizing the modern state. Through transnational cooperation, it becomes, at least in ideological terms, a project for the service of humanity at large. As mentioned above, perceptions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism are served by a certain amount of nostalgic fondness, connecting today's efforts in space science to historical remnants of an earlier age of Islamic or Arab science.

An example of a similar structure in *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* is the chapter entitled "Islamic UFO religions." The chapter begins by recounting some well-known sightings of unidentified flying objects over Kuwait in 1978. Following on from the opening passage, Determann describes earlier sightings of UFOs in various Muslim majority countries, deftly pointing out how Islamic UFO religions and Muslim ufology tended to emerge in minority contexts, especially in the U. S. The connection between the Nation of Islam and the Nuwaubian Nation, and the "Nations" belief in UFOs are presented as examples of Islamic UFO religions. This section of the book also describes how leaders within the Black movement in the United States, such as Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, rationalised their understanding of cosmologies and mythologies in terminology inspired by science fiction and technology, a UFO jargon, of sorts. The chapter also demonstrates the links between UFO writing and flying saucers by popular writers like Erich von Däniken and science fiction films, and the formation of various Muslim movements, some of them Sufi, drawing richly from a transnational UFO literature in the formation of their own theology. The chapter ends with a discussion on flying

saucers as *jinn*s and provides several examples of how flying saucers or UFOs came to represent the evils embodied by a variety of conspiracy theories, ones in which alien interventions have fundamentally altered the history of Islam, or even where AIDS is envisioned as a virus genetically engineered by advanced extraterrestrial species. Throughout, the chapter alludes to an intimacy between global adherents with a belief in flying saucers and UFOs themselves. They draw from the same literature, recounted sightings of objects and a common supply of classic science fiction literature, sometimes translated to local languages. This demonstrates science fiction's inherent transnational tendency and how the flow of ideas within radically different contexts poses a direct challenge to the abstract borders that exist between "the West" and the "Muslim world." By detailing the exchange of ideas between these two worlds, imagined as overwhelmingly different from one another, the author's strength lies in an ability to elucidate cracks in the surface of strictly defined social constructions, citing the complex social interactions that have shaped Islamic Ufology and made its existence possible.

In comparison with much of the existing scholarly literature on a field broadly defined as concerned with Islam and modern science, these two well-researched books by Determann operate closer to the level of politics and everyday existence. It brings fresh life to tired understandings of science and Islam in Muslim contexts through the affectionate portraits of enthusiasts writing and translating science fiction, professionals in the field of astrobiology, and through discussions on various "Muslim futurisms." The books retain a solid rendering of the historical development of contemporary imaginations of life on other planets or contemporary space science, and in this sense fill a gap in research about these relatively unknown parts of Muslim and Arab cultures. Whilst these books are important scholarly contributions, they remain characterised by a descriptive portrayal of these developments via careful, historical analysis. In this sense, they have opened the door for further fruitful research ventures.

In sum, Jörg Matthias Determann's *Space Science and the Arab World* and *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* are essential contributions to the study of Islam, Muslims, and the contemporary world. They examine understudied facets of Muslim and Arab societies and culture. These books open doors for further investigation into the complex relationships between transnational flows of ideas and practices and contribute to broader discussions on Islamic and Arab modernity. Almost every chapter in both books has sufficient depth and academic rigour to inspire new research projects. Fundamentally, they are exciting additions to studies on creativity and contemporary Islam, and to developments in cultural production and modern science in Muslim and Arab contexts.