



## Islamic Thought through Protestant eyes

by Mehmet Karabela, Routledge Research in Early Modern History, New York & London, Routledge, 2021, xvi + 369 pp., £120.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780367549541

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Islamic Thought through Protestant eyes**, by Mehmet Karabela, Routledge

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Mehmet Karabela's translation and analysis of seventeen printed Latin dissertations and disputations defended and presented at German universities through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provides a fascinating window into scholarly Protestant attitudes toward Islam. Reflecting on the changing fortunes of the Ottoman Empire on their eastern borderlands, Lutheran academics engaged in a multi-pronged conflict externally against Catholic and Calvinist opponents and internally between orthodox and Pietist Lutheran factions. Far from the dry and dusty tomes one might expect, these sources are part polemic, part theological and philosophical reflection, and part historical analysis revealing how German and Scandinavian professors were rethinking their place in the wider world. In these, old prejudices interacted with more flexible attitudes toward confessional identity promoted by Pietists and Enlightenment philosophers, and Karabela suggests that most viewed Islam as "a relatively tolerant religion compared to Catholicism". Some writers used Islam to warn against the dangers of theological compromise with either Catholicism or the Reformed. In the process, however, even they treated Islam with greater seriousness, suggesting that it contained "legitimate moral and theological principles of its own" (9). Karabela's major point is that we cannot comprehend the developments within post-Reformation Protestantism without placing it in a global context, showing how interaction with Islam reshaped attitudes and beliefs.

This book is clearly a labour of love, involving a time consuming and complex task of finding, selecting, and translating. Karabela's translations are clear, idiomatic, and easy to follow, not something often said about early-modern scholarly sources. He succinctly introduces each dissertation – all of them surprisingly brief – and their author's career, and all of this is superbly set up by Karabela's thorough general Introduction in which he argues that encounters with Muslims and Jews in part "provided the context for redefining the nature of religion" on the part of Protestant intellectuals (3). And while other Protestants and non-conformists elsewhere were re-evaluating Islam, Karabela argues that Lutheran scholars evinced the greatest interest in Muslim culture thanks to ongoing Turkish incursions to the East, while they also "seized on Islam as a weapon against Catholicism" in the wake of the Thirty Years' War (4).

These learned Latin dissertations were defended or delivered to academic audiences at Germany's major Protestant universities, such as Wittenberg, Leipzig, Helmstedt, and Danzig, and Karabela has selected and organized examples illustrative of Lutheran preoccupations in three major categories: Islamic theology, philosophy, and sects. All writers continued the Christian polemic of describing Muhammad as an impostor and Islam as a patchwork religion woven together from pagan, Hebrew, and Christian traditions, while Islam's rejection of the trinity brought up comparisons with Judaism. What is new is how these scholars portrayed Islam and Catholicism in ways that revealed the Lutheran faith to be the rational one; for example, Johann Michael Lange (d. 1731) argued for the superior rationality of Protestantism by critiquing the illogical Catholic practice of burning the Qur'an, a sign of Catholic insecurity. Similarly, most Lutheran writers portrayed Islam as

antithetical to rational discourse, since they believed that Muhammad had forbidden the study of philosophy. Most also suggested that while Christians had introduced Aristotle to the Arabs, Arabic translations of the Philosopher were too corrupted for Muslims to develop more than a rudimentary understanding of logic. Lutheran writers then compared this portrayal of illogical Islam with the irrational enthusiasm of their Pietist colleagues and, conversely, to use Islam as a foil to defend Lutheran “rational religion” against Enlightenment scepticism. They similarly used the Sunni-Shi’a divide within Islam not only to defend Protestantism against Catholic charges of sectarianism, but also as a weapon in the inter-necine dispute within Lutheranism begun by the “Syncretism” of Georg Calixt (d. 1656) which called for unification between Lutheran and Reformed communes and a peace with Catholics. Calixt’s opponents highlighted how Islam has thrived despite its sectarianism. Lutherans were also intrigued by the role of scripture and mystical experience (Sufism) within Islam, and looked carefully at the Persian Shi’ites who focused on the Qur’an alone, rather than Sunni tradition, as a parallel to their own emphasis on the authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*).

Karabela’s hitherto neglected sources open a new window into how Lutheran scholars were adapting their theological preoccupations in interaction with a foreign faith. Karabela reminds the reader that several of these were composed by associates of famed Enlightenment philosophers, such as Johann Weitenkampf (d. 1758), who as a university student debated with Emmanuel Kant, or Cornelius Dietrich Koch (d. 1724) who discussed metaphysics with Leibniz. They therefore deserve closer attention in the investigations into the broad intellectual shifts of the era. Karabela’s volume is therefore an extremely helpful resource for research and advanced-level classrooms. With an annotated bibliography of selected primary sources, a glossary of terms, and an extensive bibliography and index, *Islamic Thought Through Protestant Eyes* should be in every Reformation and religious studies library.

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