

***Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, by John V. Tolan. 372 pages. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-231-12333-7**

Reviewed by : Abdullah Al-Dabbagh  
*United Arab Emirates University*

John V. Tolan's *Saracens* is a welcome contribution to the familiar world of literary and intellectual orientalism, and an appropriate entry into what currently is the undisputed topic of the day - East/West cultural relations, or the so-called clash of civilizations.

Choosing, as its main subject, the "anti-Muslim attitudes of the Christian authors from the eleventh to the thirteenth century", the writer seeks to fill a void left by the first scholarly work in this field, Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image* (1960). That book, although a detailed and comprehensive landmark, still failed, Tolan contends, to address the question why Christian writers portrayed Islam in such a hostile, distorting fashion, or what ideological interests these portrayals may have served.

Furthermore, Tolan wants his work also to complement Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which he finds very much indebted to Daniel's book in those short passages that deal with the Middle Ages. While Said may have been correct and convincing about the ideology that lay behind the representation of the Orient in British and French writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Tolan argues that such a schema could not be "unproblematically transferred back six or ten centuries". For one thing, while the Europeans of the Age of Colonialism and Imperialism may have had the "grounds" of military power, economic domination, and intellectual advance to make them feel superior to the East, the Europeans of the Middle Ages were in a position of inferiority to the Muslim world on those very grounds.

Tolan's first ambition, then, is to provide a historical context for the better understanding of the hostile European images of an Islamic world that was seen as a largely superior rival and threat in the Middle Ages. His second aim is to arrive at a more complex analysis of how cultures interact and "define" themselves against others that they regard as "enemies". Yet, for all his necessarily commendable ambition to go

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beyond Norma Daniel's limited, descriptive account, and to correct Edward Said's long-recognized ahistoricism, Tolan, unfortunately, remains bound to the general parameters of those two writers and cannot genuinely free himself from their basic approach to the field.

Only in the last two paragraphs of the book, when the author speaks about "the two visions - universalist and exclusivist - that coexisted in European culture throughout the Middle Ages", do we get a glimpse of what may be the proper entry into the complexities of this field. The space, however, is too short, and the book ends before it really begins to tackle the key issue. For, surely, the European West in the Middle Ages was paying, even as it so grotesquely and laughably distorted and caricatured the Muslim world, the greatest compliment to Islamic civilization as it steadily moved to build its own Renaissance upon the intellectual (as well as technological) foundations of that civilization. The process, in other words, inevitably entailed universalism, in addition, to the obviously cherished exclusivism. While the Christian West of the Medieval period sought to separate itself sharply from "the infidel Saracens", it had to adopt a universalist standpoint in embracing the cultural and scientific contributions - the highest, or one of the highest, Mankind had reached at that particular historical point - of Islamic civilization. And, indeed, there can be no doubt, as the recent work of Nabil Matar, particularly his *Islam in Britain 1558-1685* (1998), and other scholars working in this field has re-affirmed, that the intellectual and religious impact of the direct encounter with Islam was essential in the formation of medieval and early modern European culture, to the extent that the Renaissance could only be accurately understood when regarded as not only a European phenomenon, but an essentially "inter-Mediterranean and inter-religious one too". In other words, East and West, in their own Medieval way, were one, just as they are so, in different and reversed ways, in the contemporary world. Indeed, East and West could well be regarded as aspects of a united, interpenetrating, world civilization, which provided as much justification to speak of a medieval globalism as there is nowadays of a modern globalism.

Efforts, like those of Norman Daniel and Edward Said, that one-sidedly emphasize only the break, the hostility, and the Difference, inevitably fail to tell the complete story. Tolan, in a generally highly commendable work, may well have fallen into the same trap. It seems to me to be crucial that this obverse side of the distortion and the hostility is put fully into the picture, and that, indeed, the hostility and hatred form quite often

a mask that accompanies admiration and, that most powerful of compliments, emulation. The case of Dante's Islamic sources and his closeness to Muslim Sufism is a major case in point, but by no means the only one. It may be appropriate to remember that Toynbee, at the end of the most comprehensive civilization-based study in modern times, expressed his strong reservations about "civilization" as an adequate term - particularly for the study of religions. As John Obert Voll summed it up so eloquently, in that 1993 Middle East Studies Association Presidential Address, "Those who attempt to see civilizations in conflict where civilizations do not exist may be assisting in the process of creating hyper-nationalist attitudes and perceptions . . . There are many conflicts in the contemporary world. There are many tensions and dangers. However, in the modern world with its high levels of interaction and dissolution of old boundaries, such conflicts are not between "civilizations". The civilizational narrative, in this contest, increases tensions rather than explaining them".