

Book Review

Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, HB, ISBN 978-0-226-00130-2 (cloth); 978-0-226-00144-9 (e-book)

Reviewed by Yashab Tur, Center for Islamic Sciences, AB, Canada, Email: jis@cis-ca.org

The title is indeed tantalizing, the time span transforming, and the opening view panoramic: Imagine a world still living with centuries-old routines and patterns of individual and communal life, submerged in the slow rhythm of a pre-modern era, about to encounter modernity! This is the world that Elshakry describes in her groundbreaking work, a world which encounters cylinder-powered platen printing machines, the telegraph, the steam ships and railways—all coming from countries dimly perceived and barely understood. These fruits of modern science are accompanied by a host of ideas about the emergence and propagation of life on earth which, to the lay believer, seemed outright un-Godly. Marwa Elshakry, now an Associate Professor of History at Columbia University, explores the encounter of the Arab world with these and many other Western technologies and ideas in her wide-ranging *Reading Darwin in Arabic* through a panoramic lens, which then zooms in to focus on specific individuals. Thus we meet Free Masons, missionaries, colonial agents, officials of the fledgling Ottoman Empire, Arab propagators of a new science, and religious scholars (‘Ulama) who are not ready to deal with a science that attempts to extract God from the explanatory hypothesis.

The arrival and reception of Darwin in the Arab world is initially depicted with bold strokes, then becomes a thorough and detailed scrutiny as the book moves beyond its introductory chapter. The remaining seven chapters focus on individuals and institutions responsible for the spread of Darwin’s views in the Arab world via translations, discussions, and interactions, which subsequently also shaped and formed contours of the broader discourse on science and religion in the Arab world.

“The Gospel of Science”, the first chapter of the book, recounts the story of spread of science journalism in the Arab world, especially through the influential journal, *Al-Muqtataf* and the missionary zeal of its founders, Ya‘qub Sarruf and Faris Nimr, both “enterprising young Syrian Protestant College instructors who dedicated themselves to campaigning for scientific advancement” (p. 27). The chapter presents a synthetic and layered account of the internal politics of the Syrian Protestant College as well as informative episodes from the public life of the small elite which had started to mold science and religion discourse on the pattern of what was happening in Europe and America at that time.

Elshakry is at home with her sources, she writes with confidence and presents historical evidence for the fast-flowing narrative, which takes *al-Muqtataf* and its founders, Sarruf and Nimr, to Cairo. The second chapter, insightfully entitled “Evolution and the Eastern Question” brings into sharp relief the dynamics of the intellectual and political “Sick man of Europe” (the Ottoman Empire) in Egypt, which was formally taken over by the British through a “veiled protectorate” that was to simultaneously re-energize the efforts of Sarruf and Nimr to spread the gospel of new science. They also started a daily, *Al-Muqattam*, and thus entered “a political minefield—one that ultimately tarnished their reputation and altered the reception of their ideas” (p. 79).

“Materialism and Its Critics”, the third chapter, considerably widens the scope of the book’s narrative. It brings in other actors and links this scene in the Arab world with other parts of the Muslim world, although

this attempt remains limited to a few individuals such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who exerted considerable influence on Muhammad ‘Abduh and, through him, impacted other Egyptian thinkers of the time. One fascinating aspect of Elshakry’s work is its frequent perusal into issues of linguistic, as well as social and political aspects of reading Darwin in Arabic. She notes, for instance, how new Arabic terms were invented and how this process was influenced by both the classical Arabic sources and modern Western. For instance, she notes that Materialism was called *al-maddiya*, “an abstract noun derived from *al-madda* (matter or material). But Shumayyil’s particular brand of materialism had very little to say about matters of central concern to most European materialists of the time—such as the relation of mind to matter or the nature of emotion, reason, or consciousness.” (p. 109).

The fourth chapter, “Theologies of Nature”, is the only chapter of the book which does not present what one would expect from the title; it, rather, focuses on another protagonist of the wider discourse, Husayn al-Jisr. It is through al-Jisr that Elshakry brings in a truncated reference to Islamic theology. This is not a problem in itself, as it serves well the aim of the book. Elshakry’s ability to synthesize a coherent narrative out of a large number of historical accounts and textual sources is best exhibited in the fifth chapter, “Darwin and the Mufti”, which encapsulates the life, works, and ideas of Muhammad ‘Abduh, the architect of Arab modernism. She recounts the story of the life and career of ‘Abduh with remarkable insights and the chapter has several memorable quotes:

Yet “religious modernism” is perhaps not the best way to describe what ‘Abduh saw himself engaging in. In the first place, his vision of science was (as for so many thinkers treated in this book) rather eclectic. Like others of his generation, he drew on the emerging consensus that science as merely the uncovering of the “true principles,” or laws, of nature, which he allied to final causes (and divine laws), an approach drawn as much from past Arabic philosophical and exegetical works as it was from contemporary views.

Second, ‘Abduh was primarily concerned with the fate of the Muslim *umma*, not with modernism, and his ideas on civilization and even the “West” cannot be separated this, particularly as his project of reform was critically couched in an older language of *islah* and *tajdid* (Muslim communal reform and renewal). (p. 165)

Such insights into the complex, diverse, and overlapping intellectual currents which were transforming the Muslim world are clearly a result of deep reading of sources and clear thinking. Elshakry’s treatment of ‘Abduh remains detached throughout the chapter and although the undercurrent of her narrative indicates her own perspective on the life and ideas of her protagonists, she consciously remains objective and non-judgmental. One, however, feels less than satisfied with the section on “Adam and Evolution”, where her treatment is rather cursory. Likewise, the list of Muslim thinkers on page 192 is either due to the lack of familiarity with pre-modern Islamic sources or simply poor proofing; one hopes it is the latter: the names listed here are random, there is no chronological order, and Abu Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī is called Abu Bakr al-Baklani! The text could have used proper transliteration, at least for names and major technical terms.

“Evolutionary Socialism”, the sixth chapter of the book focuses on broader social, intellectual, and political currents which informed the reading of Darwin in Egypt through a number of thinkers, such as Farah Antun, Mustafa al-Mansuri, and Salama Musa who were less influential than other protagonists in the book, but who, nevertheless had a place in the making of the intellectual discourse. The general sweep of this chapter is, once again, panoramic, and the summary presented in the last two pages is a highlight of this chapter.

“Darwin in Translation,” the last chapter of the book, is, once again, a skillful treatment of both the story of Arabic translation of the *Origin of Species* and Isma‘il Mazhar, the person who undertook this task. Elshakry shows deep insights into the process and difficulties of translation as well as cross-cultural and historical currents which informed the choice of Mazhar’s use of technical terms and syllogism. In her own words, this final chapter of the book “explores this process of translation as a complex project of intercalating linguistic, conceptual, and historical references and metatexts by focusing on the figure of the translator himself. Viewing Darwin through Mazhar’s eyes, we can capture the local referents through which Darwin was read. The focus on Mazhar, meanwhile, takes us into the nexus of ideas, places, and people that helped to construct this particular reading of Darwin in translation.” (p. 264).