


BOOK REVIEW

## Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World

Jörg Matthias Determann (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2021). Pp. 269. \$25.16 paper. ISBN: 9780755650361

Reviewed by Merve Tabur , Department of Culture, Religion, Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oslo, Norway; Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication, Utrecht University, The Netherlands ([m.tabur@uu.nl](mailto:m.tabur@uu.nl))

In the past two decades science fiction and futuristic imaginaries have become increasingly more visible in the works of creators with roots in South and Southwest Asia and North Africa. Such imaginaries have materialized not only in literature, film, video games, and the visual arts more broadly, but also in architecture, urban design, and major infrastructure projects. Anglophone academic scholarship on this phenomenon has so far focused predominantly on Arabic science fiction and dystopian literature (particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring), Indian science fiction, and the visual aesthetics of Arab and Gulf futurisms. *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* contributes to this growing body of scholarship by providing a comprehensive and interdisciplinary history of scientific imagination concerning extraterrestrial life in “the Muslim world.”

Determann argues that the culture of astrobiology—“the study of life in the universe” (p. x)—in the Muslim world has actively conversed not only with Islamic cosmology and beliefs but also with global cultural and scientific discourses on extraterrestrial life. Authors, artists, and scientists, among other actors in the cultural field, often have employed local elements (geographies, names, beliefs, and genres) to adapt and affirm or to challenge and critique globally circulating discourses on astrobiology. Contributors to this scientific imagination have had a diverse range of personal and social motives, shaped by individual, national, and regional circumstances. Determann succeeds in examining the motives, inspirations, and accomplishments of these contributors in their complexity, without reducing them to representatives of a homogenous Islamic perspective on extraterrestrial life or to mere adapters of global discourses on astrobiology.

The book consists of six chapters, arranged broadly in a chronological order and extending roughly from the 19th century to contemporary times. The first chapter, “Lord of the Worlds,” serves as an introduction to the topic and provides a general overview of the diverse contexts, languages, and media covered in the book. Determann’s primary sources encompass materials in Arabic, Bengali, Malay, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu, with each of the next five chapters focusing on a different medium—that is, periodicals, films, ufological texts, literature, and video games, respectively. The first chapter also offers definitions of key concepts such as the Islamic notion of the “plurality of worlds,” “scientific imagination,” and “the Muslim world.” The idea of the “plurality of worlds” stems from the Quranic verse referring to God as the “lord of the worlds” (1:2), which has allowed for an imagination of extraterrestrial life among Muslims (p. 10). This belief in the plurality of worlds, Determann argues, goes hand in hand with a “scientific imagination,” which finds expression not only in

scientific research but also in a wide range of cultural expressions “as different as science fiction films, journal articles in astrobiology and books about [UFOs]” (p. 29). The term also is a literal translation of the Arabic word for science fiction (*khayāl ‘ilmi*). Determann prefers to employ the term “scientific imagination” because it allows for a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis. Lastly, Determann states that he uses “the Muslim world” as an “umbrella term and a convenient shorthand for the global Islamic community and its lands” (p. 34). Acknowledging the linguistic, cultural, and sociopolitical diversity of the geographies implied by the term, Determann is careful not to depict Muslim communities around the world as a monolith. Despite the problematic history of the term, he finds it important to work with it to study the many examples of scientific imagination from Muslim-majority countries, which have produced visions of a united Islamic world themselves.

The book’s biggest strength lies in its interdisciplinary methodology. Determann, who is a professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, skillfully puts history of science in conversation with discussions on science fiction in the above-mentioned languages. In Chapter 2, “Missions and Mars,” the history of science approach comes to the fore as Determann traces the development of astrobiological debates in a geography extending from India to the Ottoman Empire and Kazakhstan. He demonstrates how interactions between Christian missionaries and Muslim communities led to the dissemination of vibrant discussions on astrobiology, particularly through the activities of the Syrian Protestant College and the Cairo- and Lebanon-based Arabic journals published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This chapter situates the history of astrobiology in the Muslim world within the broader histories of colonialism, missionary activity, and technology (i.e., the printing press).

*Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* succeeds in offering sufficient political context to frame its discussions without overwhelming the reader. Indeed, politics play an important role in understanding the scientific imagination related to extraterrestrial life, and Determann is careful to distinguish the beliefs and inspirations of creators from religious politics. Chapter 3, “Trips to the Moon,” which focuses on science fiction film production in the post-1940s Indian, Egyptian, and Turkish contexts, showcases secular states that have more readily adopted astroculture and supported science fiction cinema through subsidies and liberal laws. Many of these early productions were influenced by European and North American films and did not engage closely with religion, although they incorporated local elements. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, Turkish science fiction cinema, in particular, produced many exploitation films—films produced quickly for profit, often with a low budget, following popular trends or engaging with sensational topics. These films were often “light in content” (p. 103) and had a comical bent; yet at times they also offered political critique and satirized famous franchises such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

Determann’s attention to delivering a more balanced view of cross-cultural influence and appropriation also becomes evident in Chapter 3, in which he touches upon how canonical works of North American science fiction, such as Frank Herbert’s *Dune* series, heavily drew from Southwest Asian and North African cultures and mobilized Orientalist imagery. In Chapter 4, “Islamic UFO Religions,” focusing on UFO religions, testimonies of sightings, and discourses on ancient astronauts, Determann once more demonstrates that Muslims from around the world actively contributed to global discussions on astrobiology and were not passive receivers of ideas. This chapter further expands the scope of analysis by pivoting from Muslim-majority countries to the United States to examine the activities of Muslim African American spiritual communities (i.e., the formation of the Nation of Islam and the Nuwaubians) within the context of the civil rights movement. Underlining mutual influence, Determann ends the chapter with a discussion of Muslim conceptions of extraterrestrials that have influenced American ufologists.

One aspect of methodology that stands out is the ample incorporation of secondary sources, such as published interviews, biographies, and essays written by creators. This approach allows the creators to speak for themselves and underscores their experiences and agency, particularly in the face of structural constraints. Chapter 5, “Building Nations and Worlds,” tackles the question of agency through a study of science fiction literature in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Indonesia, and examines how the scientific imagination of extraterrestrial life has contributed to new modes of self-representation in postcolonial contexts. With the exception of the works of major figures such as the Egyptian author Nihad Sharif, many of these science fiction texts were not well received by critics. Nevertheless, they put forward diverse visions of postindependence national futures while simultaneously imagining the future of humanity (and extraterrestrials) in outer space. The final chapter, “Muslim Futurisms,” continues this discussion on imagining the future as an act of self-representation, focusing on the Iranian video game industry and other expressions of futuristic imagination (such as the +100 series published by Comma Press and Sophia al-Maria’s work with Gulf futurism). The book ends with Determann’s hopeful visions for the future achievements of the scientific imagination in the Muslim world, such as the establishment of “concrete space programs” (p. 210).

As Determann points out at certain points in the book, not all expressions of the scientific and futuristic imagination in the Muslim world refer to Islamic imagery or beliefs. Although Islamic culture is deeply engrained in the contexts that produce these expressions, the question of whether the works are best categorized as “Muslim” imaginaries, even when they do not explicitly engage with Islam, remains open. Here, readers are free to come to their own conclusions.

In a work that is so rich and unprecedented in its scope, it may be unfair to suggest further inclusions. However, a pertinent addition to the discussion on early astrobiological debates would be the work of Turkish microbiologist and veterinarian Osman Nuri Eralp (1876–1940), who published a science fictional text, titled *Başka Dünyalarda Canlı Mahlukat Var Mıdır?* (Are There Living Creatures in Other Worlds?), in 1918. Additionally, a more explicit articulation of John Rieder’s theoretical conception of “mass cultural genre” in the first chapter, where it is briefly mentioned, would be helpful in framing the concrete examples provided in the subsequent chapters. As a text that offers South–South comparisons by putting into dialogue texts that have never been studied together before, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* is commendable in its scope, goals, and methodological choices. The book’s accessible language and interdisciplinary approach make it a compelling read not only for scholars and students of history, literature, and cultural and religious studies but also for general readers curious about ufological imaginations.

doi:10.1017/S0020743825000029