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In the age of highly disparaged political leaders in Muslim-majority nations and Islamic movements such as Hosni Mubarak, Bashar al-Assad, and Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki, many in the West have sought to understand the relationship between Western visions of an abstract “Islam” and of the emergence of these highly undemocratic, even tyrannical and despotic leaders. In this book, Ivan Kalmar lays out an interdisciplinary argument for an imagined, metaphorical relationship between the visions of the divine and practices of Islamic religious life with a proximate, earthly political power; as divine power is, so too is earthly power.

This overarching argument is approached in two ways. The first is that there is an empirical differentiation between “hard” and “soft” orientalism. Hard orientalism conceives of sublime power as a God “whose worship calls forth the masochistic self-effacement typical of the despot’s subjects” (p. 75). This is a power that is exercised “not for benefit of those who obey, but for the selfish enjoyment of that Power itself” (p. 7). For the western Christian imagination, so strong was the fear that this Power could rule at home, that a “soft” orientalism emerged, which sought to overcome the East-West divide by imagining a “unity that comes from the willing subjection of all, without distinction, to the sublime One” (p. 5). It is the “hard” orientalism, Kalmar argues, that distorts and divides. While it is the “soft” orientalism that can best bridge the East-West divide, revealing that, although there is no East-West divide in general, it emerged in western Christian thought in a highly nuanced way (p. 7).

The second approach argues that orientalism has experienced a historical evolution during the course of the last 600 years. From the ancient Greece to the Enlightenment, and from the Ottoman ascendancy in Europe with the conquest of Constantinople in 1452 to twentieth century suicide bombers, Kalmar traces a historical examination of the durability of iterations of orientalism western thought. The evidence for this is wide-ranging, encompassing art and architecture, maps and tech-
nologies of spatial and temporal organization, as well as extensive philosophical, theological, and political thought, which reveals that Judaism and Islam were frequently conceived as sharing much more in common with each other than with Christianity.

This is the most compelling aspect of the book. Kalmar ultimately achieves an engaging and admirable interdisciplinary examination of Christianity in articulation with Islam and Judaism under an umbrella of Orientalist perspectives. As Kalmar articulates, during the last 600 years, Jews and Muslims in the Middle East were often understood as more closely linked theologically and politically than the contemporary context of the Arab-Israeli conflict would allow for today. It is an important analytical frame that is often overlooked in examinations of orientalism and of the Middle East.

However, there are several disappointing elements of this book. The first is that, as an interdisciplinary approach to orientalism, the author makes high-level assumptions made about the reader’s knowledge and access to the persons, writings, theologies, philosophies, ideologies, languages, and art and artifacts presented that may prevent a number of readers from accessing or enjoying the text. As a result, in less than 200 pages, the text often employs a very swift series of data points with limited contextualization and explanation. For example, in the mere 11 pages of Chapter Six we see five different works of art, references to at least eight different artists, an extensive theological discussion of differences between Catholics and Protestants on the topic of the Bible, a treatment of stigmata and stigmatics, and an important engagement with philosophical thought. This pattern is found throughout the book. At many times, the 13 chapters and 600 years of the history of orientalism feel more like a sprint through the argument, rather than a meticulously crafted, singular reading. So much is done so quickly, that it detracts from the reading of the book.

Finally, for those that may be looking for a text that brings pro-orientalist perspectives to a definitive close, this book will disappoint. As Kalmar concludes, “The soft Orientalist pre-romantics, romantics, and post-romantics have certainly believed [in a vision of a benevolent, merciful, sovereign Father that is in Heaven], which is what makes the complexities of an old-fashioned orientalism preferable, in comparison, to the crude Islamophobia of today” (p. 134). According to Kalmar, reaffirming the presence of the East and West and the ability to bridge the two in “soft” orientalism is his prescription for overcoming the “imag-
ined division” between them (p. 129). While Kalmar has contributed much to our understandings of the articulations of orientalism by Christianity of Judaism and Islam, the text does little to convince the reader that reassessing and incorporating orientalism is still a present need and that differences between “soft” and “hard” orientalism are more than a splitting of hairs. Unfortunately, an apologetics for “soft” orientalism is still a kind of orientalism.