
Reviewed by Silvia Naef, University of Geneva, Silvia.Naef@unige.ch

Keywords
Islam, art, human image, idolatry, iconoclasm

Starting with the well-known hadith in which the Prophet’s wife Aisha is reported to have fashioned a curtain or a cushion with human representations Jamal J. Elias, Religious and South Asia Studies professor at the University of Pennsylvania, takes the reader through a cultural history of religious images in Islam, and relates this history to that of other religious traditions with which Islam has interacted. His purpose is to go beyond the commonly used texts and objects, to relocate figural representations in their broader cultural contexts, and to give space to popular practices of representation. Furthermore, his book aims at putting the contemporary phenomenon of “Islamic iconoclasm” which has found large media resonance after the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the Muhammad cartoon crisis, within its Islamic historical filiation.

To do so, Elias divides the book in 10 chapters, completed by a prologue and an epilogue. Chapter 1, “Representation, Resemblance, and Religion” (27–42) defines the basic notions involved in the discussion—“image,” “aniconism” or “iconophobia”—as well as the mimetic tradition that plays a prominent role within Western tradition. However, Elias also explores Hinduism and Buddhism, with which Islam had strong contacts, but which are mostly left out from the discussion on images and representations in Islam. Chapter 2, “The Icon and the Idol” (43–83), starts from pagan times and Judaism, and enters subsequently into the Christian realm, stressing the two main iconoclast crises, in Byzantium in the 8th–9th century and during the Protestant reform in the 16th century. It also relates Christian-Muslim interactions in the times of Byzantine iconoclasm (67–72). The author concludes that “the history of Christianity is exceptional for having had two episodes in which major sections of society were forced to think about the nature of religious images” (77). Ch. 3, “Iconoclasm, Iconophobia, and Islam” (84–99), discusses the relation of Islamic aniconism and Byzantine/Christian iconophobia, noting that “there is no sign that Muslim writers or audience […] understood the nature of resemblance inherent in the Byzantine icon” (98). Follow-
ing mainly Grabar and Natif (2003), the author goes back to early Islamic written accounts describing representations of the Prophet having supposedly existed in older times (92–98). The chapter ends with two episodes related to the Sufi Jalal al-din Rumi reflecting contradictory attitudes towards the visual expressed in Medieval Islam: the first episode shows the impossibility of a real resemblance between a human and a painting, stressing thus the inanity of mimetic art (98), whereas the second one criticizes the belief that images have a soul (98–99). “Idols, Icons, and Images in Islam” (100–138) is dedicated to pre-Islamic Arab polytheist practices, their perception by early Muslim authors (101–111) and to Muslim attitudes towards idolatry in India, the country that for Muslim authors incarnated such practices (113). Basing his account on the rich descriptive material available among historians and travelers, Elias concludes that there is “no identifiable, sustained Muslim attitude toward Hindu idols or images” (136). Attitudes differed and ranged from destruction, humiliation to acceptation of Hindu statues. Iconoclasm had mostly symbolic character and concerned mainly the most venerated Hindu icons. Hoarding was another reproach Muslims made in order to justify the destruction of idols (130–131): keeping precious metal in the shape of a statue instead of circulating them meant a reduction of wealth. “Beauty, Goodness, and Wonder” (Ch. 5, 139–174), opens the question of what an Islamic notion of aesthetics could be. Elias criticizes the common approach by Islamic art historians as too much influenced by Western conceptions (139–140). He also doubts that literary texts, often quoted in order to explain Islamic art, might be the key for its reading and understanding (161). Referring to al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Elias thinks that the Islamic attitude toward the visual could rather be found in what Pinney (2004) has named “corpothetics”, an attitude implying the reaction of the whole body to visual stimulations (174). “Alchemy, Appearance, and Essence” (Ch. 6, 175–197) gives an insight on alchemical theories and their influence on visual conceptions, as the ones developed by the Arab mathematician and scientist Ibn Haytham (965–1040), whose optical studies have inspired Hans Belting for his comparison between artistic conceptions in the Islamic world and Europe. “Dreams, Visions,
and Imagination” (Ch. 7, 198–215) goes into the theme of “vision” and examines how philosophers in Medieval Islam believed in the existence of a Realm of Images (ʿālam al-mithāl), and that things created in it could pass into the physical world, transforming thus a metaphysical image in an actual one (215). This theme was at the heart of Sufi thought treated in Ch. 8 (“Sufism and the Metaphysics of Resemblance,” 216–235). Although pointing out that Sufis “did not have the visual arts in mind when they were composing their works” (218), the author finds a sort of visuality in the texts of authorities as al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, and asserts that the “visual is not only mediated by the textual, but, in fact, the textual serves as the visual” (235). This introduces the last two chapters, “Words, Pictures, and Signs” (Ch. 9, 236–263) and “Legibility, Iconicity, and Monumental Writing” (Ch. 10, 264–283). Starting from the early developments of calligraphy, the author stresses its importance in Islamic societies from early inscriptions to Pakistani truck decorations (280–281). He also notes the iconic value of Islamic architecture. As in other parts of the book, popular culture is the object of special consideration, namely when treating of different types of talismans (272–274). The chapter insists that the iconic value of inscriptions of any kind – including those in mosques – is often superior to its textual significance, thus stressing the visual element of calligraphy, a point that contributed to its success as an independent and complete artistic genre (283). The “Epilogue” restates the aim of the book, namely the “refram[ing of] the study of resemblance, seeing, and visual images and their use through a counterintuitive focus on Islamic materials” (288), in order to understand how Muslims did and do perceive religious visual objects, a question that cannot “be reduced to simple questions of whether Muslims tolerate visual religious art” (288).

In our view, this purpose has been reached by the author, through his chronologically and geographically overarching study, based mainly on written material (only 8 illustrations are provided). The book explores a vast literature, primary and secondary, including original texts in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, in fields as different as theology, history, travels, literature, mysticism, conveying a sense of what Muslim attitudes toward religious representations might have been through the ages. The author tries, successfully, to show how Muslims dealt with visuality. Excurses into other religious traditions strengthen this perspective. If some parts - for instance those on images in Christianity—summarize
well-known topics, they function, in the larger context, as reminders and are useful in comparison. The most innovative contribution, besides the overview the book gives, is the inclusion of often neglected material on the Indian subcontinent\(^4\). Indeed, in a context that is polytheistic and were images of idols of every kind were omnipresent, Jamal J. Elias shows that there was nothing close to a preconceived and self-imposing Islamic attitude, funded in the texts. Conquerors and rulers acted in various ways, taking local circumstances and meanings into consideration. This inclusion of a confrontation to idolatrous practices at a time when Islam was a widespread and ruling religion allows situating Islamic positions toward religious representations in a more global light than the usual comparison with Christianity and might help to better understand the historically developed attitudes in this field. It also has contemporary implications, since it proves to what extent the destruction of images, advocated by jihadist groups, is more an “invention of tradition” than a position rooted in tradition.

This said, there are some surprising omissions. Probably Hans Belt- ing’s already quoted and widely read *Florence and Baghdad*, although published in English in 2011, was not available yet when Elias’ book went into print. It would have been interesting to cross-referencing it with many of the points evoked in chapter 6. The absence of Jack Goody’s *Representations and Contradictions: Ambivalence Towards Images, Theatre, Fiction, Relics and Sexuality* (1997),\(^5\) is more surprising, especially since this author is mentioned with other writings in the bibliography. Although aimed at writing a global history of representations (and other practices), Goody’s reflections about the nature of images and the reasons for avoiding them cross Elias’ own ones in many points and could have reinforced his argu- mentation.

Nevertheless, the present book is a significant contribution on the much discussed issue of Islamic attitudes toward religious images, written from an interdisciplinary point of view which reflects the author’s research interests. It also contributes to a field that still receives only limited attention in academic research. It should be read by all those who have questions on this topic.

