



The idols of ISIS: from Assyria to the internet

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BOOK REVIEW

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Taking its impetus from the infamous video depicting the destruction of the historical artefacts of Iraq's Mosul Museum in 2015 by ISIS militants, this book deals with the question of the role of images in politics in general, primarily from an Islamic perspective. The image is examined here in all its complex forms, from idols and other visual representations to its role in music, poems, and narratives. The first chapter discusses the question of idolatry and image in the context of Islamic Scripture, the prophetic traditions, Islamic exegesis, and the thought of later Muslim thinkers like Alfarabi and Sayyid Qutb. The second chapter traces this question through the context of European archaeological finds belonging to Near Eastern antiquities in the Middle East, and the cultural role played by museums in the mind of both Europeans and Middle Eastern populations, including their political views and artistic productions. The third and last chapter connects the use of images in ancient Assyria with the modern use of new information technologies and social media by ISIS as instruments of terrorist propaganda.

The narrative framing of the work as a whole presents the book as a *pièce d'occasion*, and like many similar books, this book seems bound to become obsolete. In fact, considering the happily declining fortunes of ISIS, the book already seems dated. But this assumption would be a mistake. The book is in fact a serious and thoughtful reflection on universal problems. One could perhaps complain that the author has made a mistake in calibrating his reflection to a passing political event. This might be a partly justified criticism — if and only if the author does not continue deepening his thoughts on this subject in future publications; it is a subject on which he clearly has much more to say. Be that as it may, one must confess that the form of his study actually responds to one of the major problems facing scholars today: it is difficult to produce serious scholarly works which are actually relevant to real-world events while still following current scholarly practices. Who would dare publish a scholarly work on the subject so elegantly discussed here without any diacritical marks and copious footnotes? The author has benefitted from the form of the popular essay on current events to speak about subjects as complex as aniconism, Qur'anic exegesis, Mesopotamian archaeology, and Islamic political thought. This cannot be but appreciated by readers.

Despite its modest appearance, the book contains ideas which are bound to prove controversial if properly understood. Considering the limitations of this review, I will restrict my observations to a single point: the question of the status of the image in its larger sense in Islamic thought. This is a fundamental theme which rightly runs through the whole book, and although the author does not say so explicitly, it also concerns Judaism and Christianity. He points to the central importance of images, and the questionable iconoclastic tendency of the Abrahamic religions, by raising a question about images, right at the beginning: 'Can we find better ways to live together in their midst?' (p. 8). The answer seems to be that living well presupposes the existence of images. In his own roundabout way, the author joins the illustrious company of Muslim philosophers, who were also very much aware of this problematic aspect of their divine law: in his Summary of Plato's *Laws*, Alfarabi points to this difficulty,

no doubt in his usual tactful manner, by writing that the 'art of singing occupied a wonderful position among the Greeks, and their legislators paid complete attention to it.' Alfarabi agrees with the Greeks and claims that this art 'in truth . . . is very useful.' Much later in the same work, Alfarabi explains that care for such institutions 'is also obligatory in every time' but immediately adds that 'the care for that was greater in those times.' The relationship between 'these times' and 'those times' seems to be the one between decay and health. Alfarabi's view was also shared by Averroes, who in his commentary on Plato's *Republic* speaks of the virtues of musical education, while adding that this 'teaching has decayed in this time of ours.' The clash of the Platonic teaching with Islamic Law is also implicitly brought up by Averroes in his remarks concerning painting.

There are legitimate questions regarding the relationship between a free way of life, or what the author calls 'political life', and the imitative arts or the role of the 'image.' It is certainly a point worthy of attention. This point has, for instance, received a remarkable treatment from Pierre Manent, who argues for the central political importance of a 'mediator' or an intermediary between humans and gods or the divine in the formation of the Western free way of life. Despite the persuasive character of such a perspective on the relationship, or lack thereof, between Islam and 'political life,' however, one should also consider its limited explicative power. It is true that Islam has a critical attitude towards images in general, but so does Judaism and also, interestingly, many Christian reformed denominations, which are often described as highly influential in the formation of modern political ideas and institutions of our political way of life. This limitation does not, obviously, diminish the worth of this book's perspective; all theoretical constructions have their own limitations. It would be impossible, for instance, to explain all aspects of liberal thought by the membership of its theoreticians in some economic class, nor can the rise of capitalism be accounted for only by some aspects of Protestant theology. The author is certainly aware of this, hence his caution in overemphasizing the causal relationship between Islamic aniconism and the political fortunes of Muslim societies. But one cannot deny that such theoretical explanations can shed some light on different aspects of the complex reality and historical development of human societies, the complexity of which eludes any simple reduction to single factors, and can only be understood through, perhaps, an infinite number of perspectives. Each of these perspectives clarifies some aspects of reality while obscuring others —but this seems inevitable. We should therefore neither disregard the fruitfulness of theoretical reflections, such as the one presented by the author, nor misinterpret the author's intention by carelessly exaggerating its explicative power.

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