Islam and the English Enlightenment 1670-1840 is one of those rare books that uniquely changes traditional discourses in history, literature, philosophy and politics, as Humberto Garcia examines how ‘sympathetic literary and cultural representations of the Islamic republic contributed significantly to Protestant Britain’s evolving self-definition between 1670 – 1840’ (p.xi). Using the primary lens of literature and history, Garcia aims to reconstruct continuing narratives about the English Enlightenment and more generally, ‘our Judeo-Christian heritage’ and ‘our secular present’ (p.xiv). He argues that they are ‘not the exclusive property of Western Europe but a shared yet too-often forgotten heritage in which cross-cultural exchange between the early modern Christian West and the Muslim world was not unfathomable or even predominantly hostile’ (p.xiv).

By his own admission, the book is a ‘corrective addendum’ to Edward Said’s pioneering work, Orientalism (1978) (p.xi). This is where Garcia differs from Said, as Orientalism ‘recast Eastern religions as alien and reactionary in contrary distinction as the “Enlightened” and “progressive” West’ (p.13). This produces an ‘imperialist taxonomy in which Europe is the privileged centre of world history’ (p.13). Thus, Garcia shows that there was intercultural contact between England and the Muslim world, and that the latter influenced British Christian and political identity in the 17th – 19th centuries. Garcia uses notable writers such as Henry Stubbe, John Toland, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley and Robert Southey to show how some of England’s leading scholars were not only impressed by Prophet Muhammad’s socio-political achievements in Makkah and Madinah in the seventh century, but were importing his ideas in order to redefine Whig principles and challenge Anglican authority. These writers also looked at the achievements of Muslim empires at the time such as the Ottomans who Lady Mary Wortley Montagu regards as progressive in granting women greater rights compared to Britain (p.61).

Garcia attributes the temporary fascination of these writers with Islam to what he terms as ‘Islamic republicanism’ (p.1). This refers to the notion that Islam was an egalitarian religion, promoting tolerance, justice, gender rights and a purer, deistic conception of religion through the concept of tawhid (Oneness of God). This was in stark contrast to the values of England during this period, as some Christians grew increasingly disenchanted with the Church, Passion, Trinity and French Revolution. The Anglican state also banned Unitarians, Quakers, Catholics and Anti-Trinitarians from holding public office, obtaining legal preferment and earning degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. Here, Garcia argues that the aforementioned writers saw in Prophet Muhammad (or as they called him, Mahomet) a ‘Prophet and Priest, who…crush’d the blasphemous Rites of the Pagan and idolatrous Christians…’ (p. vii, Coleridge) and ‘the blueprints for a dissenter-inclusive toleration policy’ (p.31).

Chapter one deals with Henry Stubbe, the refutation of Whig radicalism and the notion of deism. Chapter two focuses on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who adopts a subversive deist voice that defends Turkish women’s socio-economic freedom under Islamic law. Chapter three looks at

---

1 Imranali Panjwani is a Tutor and Final Year PhD Candidate in Theology & Religious Studies at King’s College London. He can be contacted at: imranali.panjwani@kcl.ac.uk
Edmund Burke’s defence of Mahometan-republican virtue during the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings in 1788. Chapter four examines Walter Savage Landor’s *Gebir* as a radical extension of Burke’s anti-colonialist discourse. Chapter five deals with the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey. Finally, chapter six focuses on Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley. The literary style of Garcia is evidential, using a combined approach of literature and history to set these writers’ works in a broader context of British and Muslim events and exchanges. This is the strength of the book – Garcia argues the literary works he examines have been largely ignored as important sources of dialogue in the intellectual relationship between Britain and Islam. In his analysis, however, Garcia does not deal with major Shi’i saints such as ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad and in particular, al-Husayn who was martyred by Yazid b. Mu’awiya in Karbala. It would have been interesting to see what conclusions Garcia would draw from these figures, as they directly contribute to his theme of ‘Islamic republicanism’ and are mentioned by some of the authors he cites, including Thomas Carlyle.

The book’s conclusion is equally important. Garcia places his contribution within current events relating to Islam in the global world. Citing the backlash of Rowan Williams’ speech on the inclusion of *shari’ah* law in Britain and the continuing ‘clash of civilizations’ dialogue, Garcia states that ‘by casting Islam as a reactionary religion, these narratives continue to act as a stumbling block in initiating a productive dialogue with the Muslim world’ (p.231). Overall, the book is an original and in-depth contribution to the issue of reconstructing Eurocentric narratives about the Enlightenment and teasing out the diverse literary works of English writers who saw the universal values of Islam as adaptable to Enlightenment Britain. No doubt, the argument which permeates the book is a challenge to numerous preconceptions concerning Islam, the Enlightenment period, British history, Christianity, secularisation and modernity.