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Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment*. London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 360. US\$35.00.

This study fills an important gap in the history of the study of Muslim (or Islamicate) societies and their languages and scholarship, focusing on the period from the later sev-

enteenth to the eighteenth century, which, as Bevilacqua shows, marked the flourishing of the “Republic of Arabic Letters” in Europe. In this study, Islam does not refer in a narrow sense to the religious symbolic system but, rather, to the broad interests of Orientalist scholars regarding Islamic societies and terminology. “Orientals,” in the words of Antoine Galland, translator of the *Thousand and One Nights*, not merely meant “the Arabs and the Persians, but also the Turks and Tartars, and almost all of the people of Asia up to China, whether Mahometans and pagans or idolaters” (117).

In a journey of “Oriental” philological (mainly Arabic, Turkish, and Persian) and empirical discovery (drawing on the expanding genre of travel literature), a key notion was comparison: at one point Muslims were no longer seen as mere heretics (as had been the case in the Middle Ages and Renaissance) but became “good” pagans (in the vein of *prisca theologia*) and, as such, worthy of study. To support this evaluation, scholars drew on notions of analogy and genealogy between Islam and Christianity, thus writing Islamic thought into European Christian history. Such intellectual networks and ideas lost force when the sense of analogy between European scholars faded away, under the influence of secularization and the increasingly dominant political and military position of Europe in the Mediterranean region. Islam was increasingly seen as responsible for the “backwardness” of Muslim societies (200–201).

The first chapter explores the Oriental library and the ways the earliest collections came into existence, through travel, commerce, and war booty. Private initiatives can be distinguished from patronage by the state and church, not only in France (Royal Library), England (the Bodleian), and Italy (the Archduke of Tuscany), but also in the Vatican.

Chapter 2 focuses on two major achievements in the study of Islam as a religion. Lodovico Marracci’s *Alcorani Textus Universus* (Entire text of the Qur’an) was printed at Padua in 1698, containing his “Preliminary to the Refutation of the Qur’an” and a translation of the Qur’an by the London solicitor and self-taught student of Arabic, George Sale. Marracci aimed at a refutation of Islam and the spread of Roman Catholicism to the Eastern churches. In Marracci’s life, interacting with Arabophone Eastern Christians, and the ambition to convert Muslims, played an important role. He argued that this conversion could only be based on a reliable translation, and he deemed the Qur’an itself the best weapon against Islam. Nevertheless, Marracci also saw Islam as in agreement with natural religion: a pagan would therefore rather convert to Islam than to Christianity! Marracci’s translation exerted enormous influence in Europe, as no reliable translations had hitherto existed. While it was admired, however, it was also criticized in the framework of Catholic and Protestant differences. Incidentally, George Sale extensively used Marracci’s work but remained silent about it. While Sale’s translation was rendered in accessible language, Marracci’s was very literal and hence more difficult to understand.

“A New View of Islam” (chap. 3) focuses on the dual process of normative reevaluation and knowledge production that marked the formation and flourishing of the Re-

public of Arabic letters. Focusing on the contributions by scholars such as the Utrecht professor Adriaan Reland, Richard Simon, George Sale, John Toland, and Henry Stubbe, it describes how Protestant, freethinking, and Deist writers all began to refute erroneous elements of the older polemics and, while usually not giving up the idea of the need of refutation, became aware of the necessity to base it upon a correct interpretation of the Islamic sources. Moreover, some arrived at a more positive evaluation of the Prophet Mohammed as a great legislator and statesman.

The *Bibliothèque Orientale*, the first Western encyclopedia of Islamic history and letters, published in 1769 by Barthélemy d'Herbelot, is the topic of chapter 4. The author depended on collections of Oriental manuscripts in Italy and France and analyzed Islamic culture in its broadest sense, which made his work a study in cultural history of the Muslim world. The *Bibliothèque Orientale* expanded previous knowledge, relying especially on written sources and dismissing travel literature. The enterprise was, as Bevilacqua argues, not the fruit of a counterculture but of mainstream and moderate Catholic thought. Around 1760, d'Herbelot had joined a circle around Bishop Bossuet that met to discuss the Bible in order to counter the Scripturalist claims of freethinkers and Deists. Yet d'Herbelot's main accomplishment was that he, independently from that sort of interest and activities, "gave Islamic historical, religious, and literary achievements due attention without needing to relate them to the study of Christianity" (112). Chapter 5, "Islam in History," discusses a selection of historical writings by members of the European Republic of Arabic Letters. Here, in what is perhaps the key chapter of the book, texts by Edward Pococke, Eusèbe Renaudot, Simon Ockley, and Johann Jacob Reiske are studied in regard to their sources and methods. Focusing on the early history and expansion of Islam (until the Ottoman period), they relied chiefly on manuscripts and far less on travel literature, which these authors translated and digested themselves. They, too, showed how Islamic history was comparable to Christian history, focusing on analogy and difference.

As chapter 6 argues, the received wisdom that the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment led to better knowledge about Islam because it freed it from the shackles of Christian polemic, is incorrect. Members of the Republic of Arabic letters had already shown that Islam was a valid alternative to Christianity, close to natural religion and rationality, and they saw "Muhammad as legislator and the concept of Islam as a civilization whose achievements in philosophy, science, poetry and the arts were worthy of investigation" (168). Writers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Gibbon relied in part on their work and sometimes read it with a clear bias, which actually meant a step back in terms of the advancement of learning.

The true value of the contribution of the Republic of Arabic letters, however, was hardly remembered in later days, and Bevilacqua tries to remedy this ignorance. The shift he proposes is reminiscent of David Sorkin's analysis of the notion of the Religious

Enlightenment; although Sorkin's research falls outside the scope of Bevilacqua's study, in my view it might have supported his thesis. Bevilacqua's study is carefully argued and convincing but also leaves questions unanswered. For example, he does not always make clear how he has come to select his main authors and to what extent the work was part of a European "global" network. A second question regards the limits of the network: were the Middle Eastern Christians members? And what about the Muslim (religious) scholars, diplomats, and booksellers who are mentioned and discussed throughout this book—for instance, those with whom the Leiden Arabist Jacobus Golius corresponded intensively? In conclusion, this a very thorough, beautifully edited, and stimulating contribution to the study of the Republic of Arabic Letters that calls for further discussion and study, hopefully by Alexander Bevilacqua himself.

Gerard Wiegers
