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Islam and the Scottish Enlightenment

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Abstract

This essay considers the representation of Islam in Scottish Enlightenment historical narratives of progress from ‘rudeness’ to ‘refinement’. Although such accounts of social change pay little attention to religion as a category of analysis, Islam performs an important rhetorical function in those works (for example, William Alexander’s *The History of Women*, 1779) that invoke the condition of women as an index of improvement. William Robertson reframes the idea of ‘Islamic society’ by focusing on centuries of ‘commercial intercourse’ connecting European and Asiatic civilisations, however, and a later ‘Scottish Orientalism’ similarly attends to the everyday lives of ordinary Muslims even as it also addresses levels of collective social progress in more impersonal terms. Influenced by these writings, the crusading fictions of Sir Walter Scott, I argue in conclusion, offer no sustained engagement with Islam but nonetheless suggestively explore the ramifications of cultural encounter, with *The Talisman* (1825) according symbolic centrality to a Muslim protagonist.

In *Islam and the English Enlightenment 1670–1840* Humberto Garcia examines how ‘sympathetic literary and cultural representations of the Islamic republic contributed significantly to Protestant Britain’s evolving self-definition between 1670 and 1840’.¹ Garcia identifies a tradition of ‘Islamic republicanism’ in the writing of this period, and he presents it as a branch of the ‘radical Enlightenment’ that conceived of early Islam primarily as ‘a model and an idiom for the definition of political liberty’, where the prophet Mohammed was less the founder of a new religion than a reforming legislator who established a tolerant egalitarian state.² Garcia’s book pays particular attention to the 1790s, when writers including Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey invoked the Islamic near East as a source of political virtue, aligning ‘Mahometan’ enthusiasm with an uncorrupted non-Trinitarian Christianity. Coleridge and Southey collaborated on a poem entitled ‘Mahomet’, and although it remained

unpublished, fragments by both authors survive, with Coleridge's prophet a scourge of 'the blasphemous Rites of the Pagan / And idolatrous Christians,' and Southey's a figure in flight from Mecca, pursued by those who seek to punish him for his own blasphemy.³

Garcia's study is impressively wide-ranging but its focus is the 'English' Enlightenment, and the writers it discusses are predominantly Protestant free-thinkers who in different ways conceived of Islam as a congenial monotheism. In this essay I will consider instead the place of Islam in a distinctively Scottish tradition of Enlightenment thinking, now widely acknowledged as a highly influential intellectual formation across British and European culture from the mid- to late-eighteenth century onwards. One key idea to emerge from the Scottish Enlightenment was a model of historical development according to which all societies advance via successive stages, from hunter-gathering through pastoralism and agriculture to commerce. This economically deterministic account of social change pays relatively little attention to religion as a category of analysis, and therefore clearly diverges from the 'English Enlightenment' tradition examined so well by Garcia. As I will show in what follows, Islam nonetheless performs an important rhetorical function in some Scottish histories of the progress of society, especially those that regard the condition of women as an index of improvement.

The idea that a society might be defined as 'Islamic' is in turn itself interrogated by William Robertson's account of the 'commercial intercourse' connecting European and Asiatic civilisations, and a later 'Scottish Orientalism' similarly attends to the everyday lives of ordinary Muslims even as it also seeks to assess levels of collective progress in a more impersonal manner.⁴ Where for Robertson cultural encounter is a driver of change and where for scholar-diplomats such as Sir John Malcolm it yields insights that may challenge the authority of academic analysis, in the crusading fictions of Sir Walter Scott, as I will discuss in conclusion, encounter encompasses both conflict and collaboration. Scott's enormously popular novels exemplify particularly well the way in which Scottish thinking about social development came to exert a significant influence beyond the immediate milieu of Scottish Enlightenment literati. They offer no more sustained examination of Islam than any other Scottish texts published in the period, but as I will argue, *The Talisman* (1825) strikingly

accords a symbolic centrality to a Muslim protagonist as it reflexively explores British history and identity.

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In his essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, David Hume dismissed the Qur’an as the ‘wild and absurd performance’ of a ‘pretended prophet’.⁵ Hume’s provocations aside, however, in the best-known texts of the Scottish Enlightenment there is little reference either to the Qur’an or to the prophet Mohammed. When works such as Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) and John Millar’s *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771) refer to ‘Arabs’, for example, they emphasise the nomadic lifestyle rather than the religion of the people in question: the adjective ‘wild’ for Millar, in his account of ‘wild Arabs’, denotes a temporal stage where people ‘have made but small progress in the pastoral life’.⁶ Alexander Jardine, in *Letters from Barbary* (1788), would later accentuate the judgmentalism suggested by this idea of ‘small progress’, presenting the history of ‘Mahometan’ society as one of lost opportunities for ‘improvement’, because the prophet, like the Spartan law-giver Lycurgus, ‘meant to exclude luxury [...] and thus render mankind for ever stationary’.⁷ As in the work of Ferguson, though, such apparent stasis could also be understood not as an index of backwardness, as it is for Jardine and to some extent Millar, but as the condition of an irrecoverable political virtue throwing into relief the corruption of advanced civilisation.

Much more than Ferguson’s and Millar’s work, William Robertson’s ‘The Progress of Society in Europe’, which opens his *History of the Reign of Charles V* (1769), pays attention to the rise of Islam. This is a ‘Eurocentric’ text primarily concerned with ‘the development of a European state system characterised by the balance of power’, in Stewart J. Brown’s words, but since it reads the continent’s history as in part determined by invasion from outside it also acknowledges the significance of Muslim expansionism from the seventh century onwards.⁸ With reference to the Iberian Peninsula, for example, Robertson stated that the Vandals and Goths who had overthrown Rome ‘could not withstand [...] the Moors’] enthusiastick valour, which subdued Spain, with the same impetuous rapidity which distinguishes all the operations of their arms’. He added that ‘The conquerors introduced [...] the Mahometan religion, the Arabick

language, the manners of the East, together with that taste for the arts, and that love of elegance and splendour, which the Caliphs had begun to cultivate among their subjects.⁹ ‘Ancient’ Spanish customs nonetheless survived, according to Robertson, because the Moors, ‘at the same time that they took arms to propagate the doctrine of their prophet, permitted such as would not embrace it, to adhere to their own tenets and to practice their own rites.’¹⁰ Robertson’s work indeed presents Christian crusaders in Palestine as more fanatical than the Muslim invaders of Spain, and it suggests that the crusades, though ‘the effect of superstition or folly’, had the beneficial by-product of introducing Europeans to more enlightened and civilised cultures.

Other contemporary Scottish works addressed the ‘progress of society’ in a rather different way, however, both by focusing specifically on the role of women and by emphasising the exclusively European origins of improving agency. In *The Character and Conduct of the Female Sex* (1776), for example, James Fordyce accepted Millar’s stadial assumption that ‘savages, and those who are but little removed from their condition, have seldom behaved to women with much respect or tenderness’, but also claimed that ‘in civilised nations [women] have ever been objects of both’, exercising a ‘wonderful influence in what concerned the political welfare, and private affections, of the people to whom they belonged.’¹¹ While his sketch of the history of ‘European’ manners is not straightforward (since it acknowledges that with refinement comes corruption), it is significant that it defines European manners against the sad reality of life in ‘the Eastern regions’. Fordyce’s East takes the form of a vast tableau comprising ‘swarms of effeminate and voluptuous men who are either tyrants or slaves; and of ignorant, idle, luxurious women, whose highest destination is to gratify the intemperate desires, or humour the proud caprices of their masters.’¹²

William Alexander’s *The History of Women* (1779) is a longer work that is similarly informed by stadial assumptions, and which also accentuates the distinction between Europe and the East. Even more than Fordyce’s text, Alexander’s *History* is contradictory, moving between a narrative of progress according to which exemption from labour secures women their proper role as civilisers of men, and an argument that in modern commercial society this exemption makes women particularly susceptible to luxury. It is consistent, however, in its frequent reference to the condition of women in ‘the East’, said

to be released from labour ‘not because they are esteemed’, as in Britain, but because productive work would make them unfit for ‘voluptuous pleasure’: such women are ‘confined to seraglios and harems [...] where a large portion of their time is [...] slumbered away in [a] soft indolence and relaxation of mind.’¹³ Here Alexander’s work – like Fordyce’s – refers to a composite and generalised ‘East’, drawing on Montesquieu’s account of the determining impact of ‘climate’, but elsewhere it more specifically presents polygamy and the confinement of the female sex as effects of Islam. The history of Islam is not integrated with the history of Europe, as it is for Robertson, but is instead called upon to explain the past divergence of Europe from ‘Asia.’ Alexander asserted that ‘in the same periods in which women were gradually rising into consequence in one part of the Globe, they were losing it altogether in another. While the spirit of chivalry made them objects almost of adoration in the North, Mahomet introduced a religion into Asia, which nearly divested them of every privilege, and of all political consequence.’¹⁴

The ideological service performed by this construction of Islam is especially clear in the writing of James Beattie. In his 1783 essay ‘On Fable and Romance’, Beattie presented the culture of chivalry from which romance arose as the product of an ethnic inheritance, defining mixed sociability and the civilising influence of women against both classical republican ideas of female patriotism and the unchanging plight of women in the Islamic East: ‘With us, the two sexes associate together [...] but in Rome and Greece they lived separate; and the condition of the female was little better than slavery; as it still is, and has been from very early times, in many parts of Asia, and in European and African Turkey.’¹⁵ As Britons sought to come to terms with the loss of their American colonies, this kind of seraglio discourse helped to stabilise the meaning of ‘British liberty’ and to suggest that it remained untarnished by a conflict with adversaries who in their rebellion against colonial authority had themselves invoked the language of freedom. Even while the notion of ‘Islamic’ republican virtue continued to provide political resources for many writers, the idea that the condition of women illuminated an essential difference between explicitly or implicitly ‘Mahometan’ and other societies gained cultural traction. Although Edmund Burke, in his 1783 ‘Speech on Fox’s India Bill’, cited ‘reverence [...] to the female sex’ as one of the features of the Mughal customary society being uprooted by East India Company despotism, he would later claim, in *Reflections*

on the Revolution in France (1791), that the system of manners originating in 'the antient chivalry' helped to distinguish the 'character' of modern Europe from that of 'the states of Asia'.¹⁶

Sometimes, as here, elided with a broader notion of 'Asiatic' manners, Islam in the 1790s frequently served as a counter in political debate about the French Revolution and its consequences. Whereas Coleridge and Southey saw the prophet Mohammed as a bearer of revolutionary energy, negative constructions of 'Mahometan' manners – deriving from the popularisation of Montesquieu's work and Scottish stadial theory – could also provide a 'surrogate target' for radicals such as Mary Wollstonecraft, as in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).¹⁷ For Wollstonecraft and others, as Saree Makdisi emphasises, writing about the sway of 'Eastern' manners beyond the East itself offered a way of attacking the corruption of Britain's old regime. One index of the rhetorical malleability of 'the East' in this period, however, is that it was also possible for a writer such as Robert Heron, in his preface to *Arabian Tales* (1792), both to rehearse familiar claims about the predicament of seraglio-bound women and to suggest that in other respects 'Eastern' manners might actually embarrass Britons. Among the 'strange and singular' customs and manners instantiated by the tales he compiled, Heron listed the frequent repetition of prayers 'by all ranks, with serious devotion, almost as often in the day as our men of fashion call upon their Maker in contemptuous scorn'.¹⁸

For Scottish and other writers in the late eighteenth century, then, Islam provided something to think with, whether by virtue of the 'enthusiasm' of the prophet, because Muslims were considered to be especially devout, or since – perhaps most commonly – 'Mahometan' manners offered either a rhetorical foil or an analogue for the condition of women in modern Britain. The history of the Scottish Enlightenment's engagement with Islam needs to be regarded as one of direct, first-hand encounter as well as such detached cultural comparison, as is evident, for example, in the physician Alexander Russell's *Natural History of Aleppo* (1756), revised by his half-brother Patrick Russell in 1794. Russell did not invoke the stadialism that would be central to later writings by Ferguson, Millar, Robertson, and others, but appealed to the authority derived from his professional service 'among all ranks and degrees of people' as the basis for his familiarity with forms of social life in Aleppo. He addressed the ways in which devotional ritual structured this social life, but also demonstrated an inclusive

curiosity about not just ‘the customs and manners of the inhabitants’ but the flora and fauna in and around the city too.¹⁹

From the 1760s onwards, Britons’ ideas of Islam were more likely to be mediated via the encounter with Mughal India rather than the Ottoman empire. Alexander Dow referred to the ‘intimate connection’ between Britain and India that developed as the East India Company (EIC) consolidated its authority and assumed sovereign power in Bengal, and he translated two volumes of a Persian-language *History of Hindostan* (1768) dealing with the rise and fall of empires in India up until the era of Akbar in the late sixteenth century; in a third volume he added ‘A Dissertation on the Origin and Nature of Despotism in Hindostan.’²⁰ Dow’s aim was to publicise ‘the deplorable condition of a people subjected to arbitrary sway; and [...] the instability of empire itself, when it is founded neither upon laws, nor upon the opinions and attachments of mankind.’²¹ As this quotation suggests, Dow’s history of India is one of a ‘Mughal yoke’ established over effeminate – and therefore conquerable – Hindus.

William Robertson also engaged with the history of India, vicariously encountering the sub-continent via his sons James and David, who, like Dow, served as army officers there. The title of his work *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India* (1791) indicates that he approached this history very differently from Dow, paying particular attention to (in Brown’s words) the ‘cross-fertilisation between the civilisations of the Mediterranean and the Indus throughout recorded history.’²² Robertson presented the protection that Akbar afforded his Hindu subjects as an exception to the rule of India’s ‘Mahomedan conquerors’, who demonstrated ‘ferocious violence and illiberal fanaticism.’²³ In referring elsewhere to the rise of Islam, however, Robertson expressed more interest in how the spread of ‘[t]he Mahomedan religion [...] over all Asia and a considerable part of Africa contributed greatly towards the increase of commercial intercourse by land in both these quarters of the globe, and has given it additional vigour, by mingling with it a new principle of activity, and by directing it to a common centre’; at Mecca, Robertson stated, ‘[c]ommercial ideas and objects mingle with those of devotion.’²⁴ Significantly, then, Robertson to a large extent sidestepped both the idea of a Mughal yoke and the association of Islam with the oppression of women. Instead, he privileged a history of contact and interaction between

East and West that stretched back to the time of Alexander the Great. Like Adam Smith (in *Wealth of Nations* [1776]), Robertson distinguished between actually existing forms of empire, as manifest in the EIC's inglorious recent record, and the peaceful history of commerce – a history of, in Brown's words again, 'the largely unknown entrepreneurs, explorers, ship-builders, navigators and map-makers, who responded to the demand for Indian goods by finding new trade routes and developing new technologies of transport'.²⁵

Robertson's interest in the ramifications of commercial exchange can be seen to shape the crusading fictions of Sir Walter Scott, as I will go on to show, and his attention to the quotidian dimension of human contact behind the abstractions of 'identity' in many ways makes his *Historical Disquisition* a text for today. In the early 1790s, however, Robertson's approach was immediately contested by the evangelical Charles Grant, whose 1792 *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain* presented centuries of Mughal rule and the essential 'nature' of Hindus as jointly responsible for the degradation of Indian society.²⁶ Other late eighteenth-century Orientalists meanwhile tended to see the history of India in terms of Dow's emphasis on the 'Mughal yoke', whereby aboriginal Hindus were oppressed by invading Muslims, rather than in terms of Robertson's focus on the subcontinent's interconnection with the Eastern Mediterranean. While the Governor-General of Bengal Warren Hastings and his circle 'sought to portray themselves as inheritors of the Indian polity as refounded by the Emperor Akbar', as C. A. Bayly states, they opposed the enlightened Akbar to the despotism typified by figures such as the later emperor Aurangzeb.²⁷ British military defeat by the Islamic kingdom of Mysore (most notably at Pollilur in 1780) may for some have accentuated the perception of confronting a Muslim enemy in parts of India. Although in the early 1780s Haidar Ali could be recognised by metropolitan critics of the EIC as a powerful and independent ruler, his son Tipu Sultan was often presented as a tyrant motivated by a zeal to humiliate – and even convert – his enemies.²⁸

Elizabeth Hamilton's novel *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), dedicated to Hastings, unequivocally identifies Islam as the cause of corruption in India. Hamilton's 'Preliminary Dissertation' considers the enduring effects of the Mughal yoke, describing first how the forces of 'Fanatic zeal' had founded an empire of 'unbounded desolation', then how, as its authority waned, 'the power of one despot' gave way to the 'uncontrouled licentiousness

of numberless petty tyrants'.²⁹ This idea of 'uncontrouled licentiousness' draws upon a generalised notion of Eastern sexual despotism, here projected onto barbarous Muslims (whose aggression is contrasted with the 'mildness' of the population they conquered), but Hamilton's introduction also refers specifically to the defeat of the Rohilla Afghans by the joint forces of the EIC and the Nawab of Oudh twenty years earlier. This conflict is referred to again in the opening letter of the title character, Zaarmilla, as he expresses his gratitude for how 'the sons of mercy [...] checked the fury of the Afgan Khans, who have so long oppressed our unhappy country'.³⁰ Zaarmilla here recalls his encounter with the Persian-speaking English officer Captain Percy (modelled on Hamilton's brother, the Orientalist scholar Charles Hamilton), from whom he gains a whole new 'view of human nature'.³¹

When Zaarmilla expresses his shock at the fact that Percy's sister Charlotte had written an inscription on the Bible she gave him, Percy explains how social progress improves the status of women. He discriminates between the situation of 'Hindoo' and 'Afgan' women on stadial grounds, since the former live among men more 'advanced in civilisation' who have come to value 'reason' over 'bodily strength'. Percy additionally appeals to the influence of Christianity as a key factor distinguishing European women from women elsewhere: 'had not the powerful mandate of religion snapped their chains', he argues, then man's 'innate love of the exercise of despotic authority must have for ever kept the female sex in a state of subjection'.³² While it thus modifies its stadial narrative of the comparative condition of women, however, Hamilton's novel also goes on to interrogate the sense of British exceptionalism that emerges from this exchange. *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* is made up of a network of correspondence between Zaarmilla and others, and one of Zaarmilla's interlocutors, the Brahmin Sheermaal, attempts to disabuse his friend of his mistaken impression of Christians by relating his own experiences of life in Britain. These include his encounters with a man who had written a work apparently devoted to converting Christians to Islam – an allusion to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) – and with an English 'Rajah' who, 'convinced by the philosophers of the propriety of the system of Mahomet', thought that the daughter of a local labourer would be 'no unworthy ornament of his zenana'.³³ Zaarmilla initially refuses to credit Sheermaal's testimony, but after he arrives in what he had fondly imagined as a 'favoured Island', he recognises

that he was wrong to have thought Britain a Christian country.³⁴ Like other works of the 1790s, therefore, the novel invokes ideas about Islam for domestic political purposes, sometimes presenting an analogy between 'aristocratic' and 'Islamic' (or generically 'Oriental') manners.

Although Zaarmilla, after spending time with Captain Percy's family and friends, concludes that 'Christianity is not *yet entirely extinct*' in Britain, his observation that Christians are to be found 'in the retired scenes of life' provides a sceptical counterpoint to Percy's notion that the establishment of Christianity sharply differentiates 'Europe' from 'Asia'.³⁵ If Hamilton's work interrogates Britons' sense of themselves, however, its treatment of 'the imposter of Mecca' and the various adjuncts of 'Mahommedanism' remains stable throughout.³⁶ A similar understanding of Islam subsequently came to inform the work of the onetime radical Southey, who appealed to the prophet's political enthusiasm in his fragment 'Mahomet' and his epic poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), but then – with reference to the history of Spain – aligned Islam with empire rather than idealism in *The Chronicle of the Cid* (1808) and in another epic poem, *Roderick, the Last of the Goths* (1814). In addressing the politics of the present, in particular the conduct of the war with Napoleon in Spain and Portugal, Southey – now Poet Laureate – helped to revive the notion of an essential and irreducible antagonism between Islam and 'Christendom'. Whereas Robertson had acknowledged the extensive cultural cross-fertilisation which accompanied the Moorish invasion of Spain, Southey in *Roderick* recuperated the crusading idea of 'holy war', equating the allied campaign of resistance against Napoleon with the Reconquest which culminated in the final expulsion of Muslims from Spain in 1492.

These works by Hamilton and Southey can broadly be aligned with a larger movement of evangelically inspired moral reform which gathered strength over this period. The emergence of utilitarianism as an ideology of improvement was roughly contemporary with the evangelical revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and proponents of both these reforming projects had India in their sights. Where evangelicals sought to make converts of Indians (enabled by the 1813 renewal of the EIC charter, which permitted missionaries to proselytise), 'philosophic radicals' such as James Mill wanted, in Javed Majeed's words, 'to emancipate India from its own culture' in a still more

far-reaching way.³⁷ Against the scholarly Orientalist consensus of the Hastings era (upheld by Robertson's *Disquisition* and Hamilton's *Hindoo Rajah*), Mill in his *History of British India* (1817) rated Hindu civilisation significantly below that of the Muslims who had conquered the sub-continent. Mill's *History* warrants consideration here because of its overt use of the stadial language of 'rank' and relative position to assess the level of progress achieved by different societies. In a chapter titled 'Mahomedan and Hindu Civilisation Compared', Mill also employed the idea of an originary human barbarism, claiming that Hindus are 'distinguished by a greater deficiency in [...] practical good sense, than any people above the rank of savage, of whom we have any record'.³⁸ Mill emphasised that 'the defects of Mahomedan rule' remained 'enormous', but he nonetheless identified 'an activity, a manliness, [and] an independence' among the Muslim invaders of India, and he saw Muslim society as superior to Hindu because of its lack of a caste system, its separation of government from the malign influence of 'priesthood', and its legal codes – by which, unlike in Britain, capital punishment was a penalty for murderers but not thieves.³⁹

Mill made a virtue of never having been to India, and he presented himself as a judge offering a critically detached verdict on the scholarly and other 'witnesses' who provided him with evidence. Mill's approach to the history of India was contested from within the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, however, by contemporaries who shared the same intellectual grounding in stadial theory but also appealed to the authority of their own first-hand testimony. In his *Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (1815), for example, Mountstuart Elphinstone claimed that 'the situation of the Afghaun country appears [...] to bear a strong resemblance to that of Scotland in ancient times', presenting the idea of clan society as a measure by which to assimilate the difference of 'highlanders' in other parts of the world.⁴⁰ Sir John Malcolm more explicitly signalled a conservative scepticism about any 'improving' project of social transformation by attending to the lives of the ordinary Muslims whom he encountered while serving as an EIC envoy to Tehran. In his *History of Persia* (1815), Malcolm declared that 'no [...] Mahometan nation [had] attained a high rank', yet he added that 'he who has travelled over the greatest space will be most struck with the equal dispensation of happiness and misery', and that 'we should not assume too great a superiority over those who continue in a

more barbarous state.’⁴¹ Although Malcolm’s writing alludes to a trajectory of development from ‘rudeness’ to ‘refinement’, here and elsewhere it emphasises that the instruction afforded by ‘the school of experience’ provides a necessary corrective to purportedly ‘objective’ forms of analysis undertaken from afar.⁴² Malcolm offered a retrospect on his career in his *Sketches of Persia* (1827), in which he interrogated his readers’ preconceptions about the condition of women in the Islamic East, accentuating his own credentials as a ‘travelled’ observer. He recalled a debate with a Persian friend who accused the ‘English’ of taking their ‘ideas of the situation of females in Asia from what [they] hear and read of the harems of kings, rulers, and chiefs.’⁴³ Shortly after this, Malcolm referred to a similar debate with another Persian friend, who, disputing the frequency of polygamy in Persia, cited Mirza Abu Taleb Khan’s travels in Britain to assert that ‘a great proportion of your females [...] are in a much more miserable and degraded state than any in our country!’⁴⁴

With the ‘Scottish Orientalism’ of Malcolm and others in view, I will conclude by briefly considering the most widely circulated representations of Islam in this period, in the hugely influential novels of Sir Walter Scott. Scott did not travel outside of Europe but he aligned himself with the experience-based perspectives of men such as Malcolm and Elphinstone rather than with the utilitarianism of the reform-minded Mill: in his article ‘The Culloden Papers’ in 1816, for example, he adopted a classically stadial position on the ‘curious points of parallelism’ between the ‘patriarchal’ manners of Scottish Highland clans and Afghan or Persian mountain tribes.⁴⁵ Scott did some basic research on Islam for *The Surgeon’s Daughter* (1827), set partly in the Mysore of Haidar Ali, and in a key episode in this novel the village doctor Adam Hartley, voluntarily exiled in India after disappointment in love at home, attends Barak el Hadgi, identified as ‘one of those secret agents frequently employed by Asiatic sovereigns’. As in his other historical fictions, Scott makes judiciously sparing use of authenticity-effects rather than attempting any more comprehensive depiction of an alien culture and milieu. The meeting between Hartley and Barak el Hadgi begins with the former ‘[c]omplying with the Mahomedan custom’ and taking off his shoes outside their Madras rendezvous, a Muslim shrine, and Hartley then greets his patient ‘with the usual salutation of Salam Alaikum’.⁴⁶

Scott’s crusading fiction *The Talisman* presents a more significant moment of encounter, beginning with a famous depiction of single combat between the

'knight of the red cross' Sir Kenneth and the Saracen Sheerkohf, Saladin in disguise. Scott concludes this scene by referring to how, after agreeing a truce, the erstwhile adversaries communicate in a 'lingua franca'.⁴⁷ The subsequent chapter then takes a further step back from this action (and the rhetoric of holy war) by emphasising that in 'the ancient feudal ages', 'times of danger' were punctuated by 'seasons of good-will and of security' which created conditions for interaction between 'followers of the Cross and of the Crescent': 'in contending with the Western Christians, animated by a zeal as fiery as their own, the Saracens gradually caught a part of their manners, and especially of those chivalrous observances, which were so well calculated to charm the minds of a proud and conquering people'.⁴⁸ The novel most obviously demonstrates the imprint of Robertson's work (especially his *Historical Disquisition*) when it later describes how 'the luxury and profligate indulgence of the Christian leaders had occasioned a motley concourse in their tents, of musicians, courtezans, Jewish merchants, Copts, Turks, and all the varied refuse of the Eastern nations'. His derogatory reference to human 'refuse' notwithstanding, Scott here endorses one of Robertson's central claims, about the endurance of an under-the-radar 'commercial intercourse' between people impelled by an instinct to exchange: 'the caftan and the turban, though to drive both from the Holy Land was the professed object of the expedition, was nevertheless neither an uncommon nor an alarming sight in the camp of the crusaders'.⁴⁹

Although *The Talisman* sometimes deals in a perfunctory Orientalism (Scott has Saladin allude to 'the black-eyed houris of Paradise', for example), it often undercuts notions of an essential Eastern otherness: Saladin's countenance, we are told, was 'as unlike as possible to the exaggerated terms in which the minstrels of the day were wont to represent the infidel champions, and the fabulous description which a sister art still presents upon old-fashioned signposts'.⁵⁰ Additionally, however, as David Simpson argues, the novel's representation of Saladin offers a symbolic resonance beyond its Robertson-style emphasis on the everyday 'intercourse' accompanying the conflict of the crusades. In the guise of the physician Adonbec El Hakim, Saladin – bearer of the 'talisman' of the title – is credited with a healing agency which recalls that of the Jewish Rebecca in Scott's earlier crusade-era novel *Ivanhoe* (1819). *The Talisman* signals this intertextual connection in the episode where Richard's attendants debate whether they can trust either a Muslim or Jewish 'infidel' to treat the

disease-stricken King Richard.⁵¹ The key role played by both Muslim and Jewish 'strangers' in Scott's crusading fictions is suggestive of Scott's larger interest in interrogating the foundations of 'Christian' identity: his fiction here, in Simpson's words, registers 'a possibility, need, or desire for the sort of open-mindedness to foreign elements that the historical record (and its depiction in the novels) could not support.'⁵² The gulf between possibility and actuality to which Simpson refers is perhaps most vividly illustrated at the end of *Ivanhoe*, when Isaac of York declares that he and his family will seek exile in Granada because 'far less cruel are the cruelties of the Moors, unto the race of Jacob, than the cruelties of the Nazarenes of England' – an endorsement of Robertson's account of the (relative) religious toleration in Muslim Spain which throws into relief the more exclusive definition of national community in England itself.⁵³

In contrast to the various authors in the 'English' freethinking Protestant tradition considered by Garcia, none of the Scottish writers discussed in this essay can be regarded as straightforwardly 'sympathetic' to Islam as a kindred, Abrahamic monotheism. Instead, as I have argued, the idea of 'Islamic' customs and manners – sometimes generic, sometimes understood in relation to the history of Mughal despotism in India – often serves as a foil for forms of British self-definition in this period (if also, in Hamilton's *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, as a means of self-critique). William Robertson offsets any sharp sense of Muslim difference by integrating the rise of Islam and the history of global commerce, however, while in the 'Scottish Orientalism' of the 1810s and 1820s the stadial ranking of Eastern societies is often accompanied by relativising claims about individual lived experience. Scott's crusading fictions demonstrate a similar level of attention – and accord comparable significance – to cultural encounter, and can likewise be read as disputing the claim which has raised its head again in recent years, that Islam and 'enlightenment' are somehow antithetical to one another. Rather than displaying affirmative 'openness' to the other, Scott's work is imaginatively drawn to the lost possibilities of cultural exchange with those – such as Saladin or Rebecca – whom it presents as strangers or even enemies to a 'Christian' society. Simpson refers to Scott's 'masterful portrayals of the refusal of hospitality' in *The Talisman* and *Ivanhoe*, and this tribute to the sophistication of Scott's crusading tales identifies the present-day topicality which has latterly made other critics return to them too.⁵⁴

It also captures something of the distinctive engagement with Islam in one strand of Scottish Enlightenment thought and writing, from Robertson through to Scott – an engagement that remains essentially incurious about Islam, but which nonetheless highlights the long history of ‘intercourse’ between Islamic and other societies, and, as in Scott’s novels, considers what may happen when ranks are closed and intercourse is denied.

Notes

- 1 Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment 1670–1840* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. xi.
- 2 Ibid., p. 10.
- 3 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 171.
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