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Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia by Ronit Ricci (review)

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Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia. By RONIT RICCI. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 336 pp. \$45.00 (cloth); \$7.00–36.00 (e-book).

Drawing from Sheldon Pollock’s concept of a “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” (*The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, 2003), Ronit Ricci introduces and elaborates on an “Arabic Cosmopolis” in *Islam Translated*. Ricci’s “Arabic Cosmopolis” refers to vast regional literary networks in which many Muslims adopted and adapted Arabic to their vernacular languages, driven primarily by the single, scripture-based religion of Islam. In these networks, translation and religious conversion become central.

This book is the first work focusing on the power of language to help us better understand the process of Islamization in non-Arabic speaking societies by focusing on a single literary example, the *Book of One Thousand Questions*, from the Arabic source composed in the tenth century to the translations into the Javanese, Malay, and Tamil languages between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

Following the introduction, the book is divided into three parts: translation, conversion, and conclusion. The introduction emphasizes the importance of literary networks—without denying the oral networks—connecting Muslims across boundaries and culture, including South Asia (“the lands above the winds”) and Southeast Asia (“the lands below the winds”), comprising shared texts on a broad range of

topics. Ricci's inclusive definition of literature and its specific genres (like *masalah*, *suluk*, or *puranam*) was intended to avoid an outsider's definition that does not do justice to a wide range of agencies and modes of production (histories, stories, biographies, and so forth).

Chapter 2 contextualizes the use of the term "translation" and briefly explains the main story in the *Book of One Thousand Questions*: a Jewish man, Abdullah ibnu Salam, conversed with Muhammad on religious topics and converted to Islam. It explains the first translation into Latin, before examining the Javanese, the Malay, and the Tamil contexts and terminologies. Chapter 3 discusses the Javanese genre (called *suluk*, meaning "traversing the Sufi path") of the translation of the *Book* (*Serat Samud* and its variants), written in Javanese script or in Javanese in Arabic script (*pegon*), emphasizing "mystical teachings that were central to Javanese Islam," including the one regarding Unity of Being and the idea of secret knowledge, which was introduced by the Sufi master Ibn al-Arabi in the thirteenth century and became popular across the Muslim world. The competition between Judaism and Islam was reconceptualized as the "narrative emphasis shifted to intra-Muslim and intra-Javanese—concerns, tensions, and debates," being shaped by the Islamic revivalism, Dutch colonialism, and Sufi networking. Thus, Abdullah ibnu Salam shifted from a Jewish disciple to Muslim guru.

Chapter 4 explores the Tamil translation of the *Book* (*Ayira Masala*), in a poetic fashion, from Arabic and Persian versions, being shaped by local context, particularly the minority position of Tamil Muslims, Portuguese colonialism, and Hindu terms (such as the *vedas* and *marai* to refer to the Torah, Gospels, Psalms, and Qur'an). The version emphasized the distinction of Muslim and non-Muslim, although it did not make any specific reference to Jews or Christians. Despite the common theme, the Tamil translation spoke to a specific audience as well as to more general readers.

Chapter 5 examines the Malay *Seribu Masalah* (Book of One Thousand Questions), characterized by the strong influence of Arabic in the Malay language and the prose narrative style. The Arabic *Ya Rasulallah* was retained to refer to "O God's Messenger," an example of untranslated Arabic terms. Other particularities include the mention of clothing and music (although negatively). Chapter 6, "Cosmopolitan in Translation," explores how Arabic traveled to and, more important, impacted the literary cultures of Muslim South and Southeast Asia and was no longer accepted as a foreign language by many Muslims. It explains why certain Arabic terms such as *munafiq* and *kafir* remained untranslated while other Arabic terms were rendered in the local lan-

guage. It argues that “Arabic—at many levels and in various forms—emerged as an integral element of Islamic cultures in these regions” (p. 181).

Chapter 7 reaffirms the complex, nonlinear process of conversion to Islam, as exemplified in the *Book*, now offering comparative narratives: Ibn Salam or Samud’s conversion to Islam after a conversation with Muhammad, and the conversion of Java by the Nine Saints (*wali sanga*). The *Book* of Samud points to a conversion by the disciple rather than the teacher and exhibition of the persuasive knowledge. The *Book* not only serves a didactic purpose but also offers guidance and a model of embracing Islam by persuasion. Chapter 8 discusses multiple representations of Abdullah Ibnu Salam, Judaism, and the Prophet as described in the *Book*. In Javanese, Ibnu Salam was depicted as a Javanese guru rather than a Jewish scholar, and the Prophet Muhammad became a teacher and replaced Ibnu Salam. Chapter 9 concludes the discussion, broadening the notion of the Arabic cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia into one about “the formation of a new literary and religious repository that was richly interconnected both with a distant past and a local present” (p. 245). For both specialists and nonspecialists, Ricci has significantly contributed to the advancement of the study of Islamization in its literary dimension that may be parallel to the same language in other regions and other languages in the same region and elsewhere in the world.

I had some questions that were left unanswered in this fine book. First, the relationships between the processes of Islamization, translation, conversion, Arabization, and localization are not as clear as they should be. In one place it is stated that “translation is, in itself, as form of conversion” (p. 188). In another place, translation and conversation are regarded as mutually constituted processes (p. 260). In another place, the wider process of localization is used: “the first and major localization is achieved by the use of the familiar language and idiom, which immediately makes texts sound similar to that which is already known” (p. 247). Whether Islamization, Arabization, and localization are distinct and separate or distinct and integrated through analyzing the *Book* is not quite clear.

Another question concerns the extent to which the European way of translation is really different from South and Southeast Asian ways of translation. Ricci argues that the former was characterized by the emphasis on the individual translator and preoccupation with fidelity in translation, whereas the latter by anonymity, creativity, and change. In addition to this, the use of “Arabic Cosmopolis” as closely related to an Islamic *ecumene* begs another question: why did many Christians,

Hindus, and Buddhists also incorporate some Arabic words, such as “Allah,” *al-Kitab*, *nabi*, and *salam*? Also important is the extent to which “South and Southeast Asia” is a coherent region, given its multiple connections to East Asia, the Pacific, and even Europe, regardless of geography. Another interesting aspect that deserves further analysis is the relationship between Muslims and Jews as depicted in the *Book*. The *Book* seems to have singled out one kind of relationship: a Jew who converts to Islam. Are there other texts that focus on Jews who remained Jews and encountered Muslims? What about Qur’anic references that suggest variation? Ronit Ricci discusses prior texts and intertextuality, and the Qur’an should have been one of the central literary traditions that the authors across the region were well aware of.

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The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society. By BRAD S. GREGORY. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012. 592 pp. \$39.95 (cloth).

This is an enormously bold, ambitious book. Contrary to what its title might suggest, its subject is not restricted to the Protestant Reformation. It is not restricted even to history. In *The Unintended Reformation*, Brad Gregory offers a sweeping indictment of contemporary life in the West, and a sweeping historical narrative—or a series of six narratives, to be precise—to explain how we got to where we are today. Harnessing historical scholarship to cultural criticism, Gregory argues that some of the most problematic features of contemporary life do not just have their roots in the past, but are the direct result of things that happened centuries ago. Wasteful consumerism, exploitative capitalism, unbounded selfishness, an unthinking secularism in the academy, and, crucially, a “hyperpluralism” of creeds and philosophies that leaves society without any agreed basis for morality, except for a permissive relativism. It is a dark portrait of the present Gregory paints, and he blames its features mostly on Martin Luther and the other religious revolutionaries of the sixteenth century.

Not that Gregory believes those distant reformers sought any of these outcomes. Without intending to do so, though, they destroyed the unity of Western Christendom, establishing in its place a diversity of irreconcilable truth claims. In the Middle Ages, argues Gregory, Christianity had functioned as a common, “institutionalized worldview” that