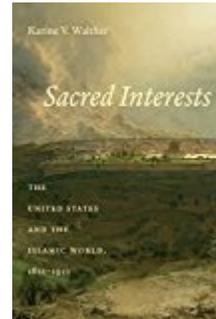


**Karine V. Walther.** *Sacred Interests: The United States and the Islamic World, 1821-1921.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 480 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-2539-3.



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“Only America can transform Constantinople,” the American diplomat Henry Morgenthau wrote in 1919. “Only America can establish herself there without suspicion of bad faith and without jealousy; only America can civilize the capital of Islam” (p. 312). Published in the pages of the *New York Times* in support of Woodrow Wilson’s liberal internationalist policies, the statesman’s plea simultaneously articulated orientalist tropes about Islamic civilizational torpor, notions of American exceptionalism, and (somewhat paradoxically) the need for US integration into the inter-imperial dynamics permeating the post-WWI Middle East. In short, the nation had a unique ability to insert itself into the affairs of the Muslim world. In this creative *Weltanschauung*, America was unburdened by complex histories of colonial empire (unlike the European powers), and possessed an exquisite combination of spiritual rectitude and democratic values. This stood in stark contrast, men like Morgenthau believed, to the inherent despotism of Islamic societies.

Henry Morgenthau joins the large cast of politicians, missionaries, academics, soldiers, businesspeople, journalists, activists, and adventurers peopling Karine V. Walther’s new study, *Sacred Interests: The United States and the Islamic World, 1821-1921*. The work spans a century, opening with American advocacy on behalf of

Greece during the 1820s and closing with the colonial partitioning of the Middle East in the wake of the First World War. In between, Walther explores the surprisingly resilient notion of Islam as a global problem in the American consciousness. The book expands on Douglas Little’s writings by integrating American actors into the global history of orientalist thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[1] Each of the four case studies in *Sacred Interests* is underexamined in histories of American foreign relations. While the field is flooded with globally oriented studies on the relationship between the United States and Muslim cultures post-1945, offerings on the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries are curiously sparse. Walther joins scholars like Robert Allison, Michael Hawkins, Timothy Marr, and Denise Spellberg in demonstrating that American attitudes towards Islam have histories that date back to the nation’s founding.[2]

*Sacred Interests* ties its constituent parts together through a relatively straightforward argument, namely that American approaches to the Muslim world during the period under study (and afterwards) were premised on notions of civilizational inferiority. Interweaving religious prejudice with biological notions of racial capacity, US policymakers and cultural figures viewed Islam and

its adherents as uniquely predisposed towards political despotism and extraordinary acts of cruelty. To address such savagery, these Americans tapped into their own spiritual and temporal frameworks, acting on assumptions “that Muslims required outside intervention and the abandonment of their faith to make any civilizational advances” (p. 6). In this line of thinking, the threat posed by Islam was countered by an “imagined community of global Christendom,” leading to American participation in transcolonial circuits of exchange with European imperial powers (p. 16). These assumptions led Americans to characterize Muslim violence almost exclusively as the product of racial-religious fanaticism, while simultaneously emphasizing the rational and corrective character of Euro-American imperial coercion. In reducing variegated Muslim societies to caricatures, Walther argues, Americans became more certain in the righteousness of their attempts to reconfigure them.

Part 1, “The United States and the Eastern Question,” begins with an examination of American attitudes towards Greece in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Walther argues that racial, religious, and political Hellenism among US elites caused them to champion the plight of the Greeks against Ottoman depredations. Men like the classicist Edward Everett emphasized that Greece was a white Christian nation under threat of extermination, and it was the responsibility of the United States—as standard-bearers of whiteness and “civilization”—to respond to such threats. American missionaries speaking out about the struggle for Greek independence “vigorously reaffirmed American desires to move beyond the restrictions of the Monroe Doctrine,” and argued international law did not apply when confronting despotic Muslim polities (p. 61). The second section of part 1 extends this analysis to American influence on the 1876 April Uprising in Bulgaria and subsequent liberation of the state during the Russo-Turkish War. Familiar narratives of Muslim fanaticism were once again mobilized in the American press, overlooking the complex ethnoreligious roots of the conflicts in Bulgaria. In the writings of the journalist Januarius MacGahan, massacres against Christian populations were emphasized while those targeting Muslims were treated leniently. Influential American-run institutions within the Ottoman Empire like Robert College in Istanbul and the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut became hotbeds of Bulgarian nationalism. In the midst of these developments, American missionaries, writers, and diplomats inserted themselves into a “complex transnational, trans-imperial, multiethnic, and multi-religious web of exchanges” that positioned them be-

tween Ottoman and European strategic interests (p. 96).

Jewish populations inhabited a unique space between Occident and Orient in the minds of American Christian powerbrokers. Part 2, “Jewish American Activism in the Islam World,” highlights the tensions inherent in this intermediary role. The late nineteenth century saw the rise of both biological notions of racial capacity among the educated classes in the United States and a xenophobic populist backlash against immigrant communities. Understanding this, Jewish activists promoted a narrative wherein “Oriental” Jews were civilizing agents in their respective homelands, forming a cultural bulwark against the predations of Muslim majorities. Interestingly, the Jewish American community aligned itself with European Jewish organizations like the French Alliance Israélite Universelle in promoting the notion that Euro-American Jews had a duty to “educate and uplift the Jews of Asia and Africa ... [mirroring] the attitudes of American missionaries toward ‘nominal’ Christians in the Ottoman Empire” (p. 114). In Morocco, Americans and Europeans used Jewish populations to defend the extension of the protégé system. “By depicting Muslim-Jewish relations in Morocco as fraught with abuse and oppression,” Walther writes, “American consuls justified extending protégé status to an increasing number of Moroccan subjects while putting money in their own pocket” (p. 127). At the Algeciras Conference in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt parlayed concerns over the well-being of Moroccan Jews into arguments for “an open-door policy in any future extension of European imperial rule in Morocco” (p. 144). While recurrent anti-Semitic pogroms in places like the Russian Empire were often given economic or political explanations, American observers were firm in their belief that violence against Jews in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa was a manifestation of Islamic cruelty.

*Sacred Interests* moves from the Mediterranean world to the fringes of Southeast Asia in part 3, “The United States and the ‘Moro Problem’ in the Philippines.” It stands apart from the remainder of the book geographically, but also because it details direct colonial rule over a Muslim population by US military and civilian authorities. It was in the Southern Philippines that notions of reforming (or eradicating, depending on whom one spoke with) Islam through the application of civilizational projects could be tested. The Moro peoples of Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, and Palawan had only been briefly and haphazardly integrated into the Spanish colonial project when sovereignty over the islands transferred to the United States in 1898.[3] Quickly par-

tioned from the remainder of the Philippines, the Muslim South fell under control of a hybrid military-civilian government (in its initial iteration), where US military officers served in dual capacities. The “Moro Problem,” as these men defined it, was at its heart a question of how to integrate a series of loosely affiliated Muslim societies into a broader Filipino national identity. For many, the question of religion was central to this challenge. As Walther notes, men like Leonard Wood (the Moro Province’s first governor) looked to European imperial antecedents for direction on how to effectively manage Muslims. Wood and his coterie met with Lord Cromer, famous for “managing” Egypt, and stopped in a variety of European colonies for instruction. Transimperial adaptations intermingled with the Christian supremacism of figures like Wood and the missionary bishop Charles Henry Brent. If the Moros could not be forced to convert, they would at least be brought towards an idealized modernity through secular schooling, capitalist development, and rationalized governance. When these colonial imperatives ran up against Muslim attempts to preserve their traditional identities the results were predictably tragic. An atmosphere of ambient violence pervaded the colonial encounter in the Muslim South, marked by sporadic massacre, cultural reconfiguration, and territorial dispossession. Walther effectively summarizes the first two decades of American involvement in the Southern Philippines.

The final section, “Resolving the Eastern Question,” returns to the narrative to Ottoman lands. The response of American individuals and institutions to the Armenian massacres of 1894-96 predictably highlighted the plight of white Christendom in a Muslim polity. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, for instance, presented Armenians as “Anglo-Saxon representatives in the Ottoman Empire,” thus elevating the importance of their plight in American eyes (p. 246). The large number of Americans involved in missionary and educational works in the Ottoman Empire led for calls to station a US naval squadron in the Levant. Pressure on President Grover Cleveland to act against the Ottomans came from all sides, including the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, who emphasized the gendered dimensions of the massacres. The last chapter of *Sacred Interests* charts US involvement with the Ottoman Empire during its violent final years. Motivated by his deep Christian faith, Woodrow Wilson promoted a paternalist notion that non-Christian peoples could be guided towards modernity. His worldview inadvertently promoted the very sort of ethnic nationalism that fueled Turkish depre-

dations against the Armenians. Nevertheless, Americans still favored a now-familiar narrative of Christian virtue and civilization under threat from Islamic irrationality and cruelty. “After five hundred years’ close contact with European civilization,” Henry Morgenthau wrote, “the Turk remained precisely the same individual as the one who had emerged from the steppes of Asia in the Middle Ages” (p. 288). In the wake of the Armenian Genocide, Americans continued to promote a vision of Muslims that emphasized their religious and racial inability to rule over “white” populations (or manage themselves, for that matter). “Although congressional opposition had prevented the country from accepting mandates over the territories of the former Ottoman Empire,” Walther writes, “Wilson and the other statesmen had succeeded in institutionalizing their racial and civilizational logic in an international system that would continue to limit political and economic rights to millions across the globe” (p. 317).

In the book’s conclusion, Walther writes of Muslims portrayed as “villains in a larger global story” by American cultural elites in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 321). Theirs was a worldview shaped by an “ethnic, racial, and religious nationalism” that ascribed fixed roles to Muslims and other “non-white” groups. These notions of civilization and savagery are what tie the disparate stories of each section together. Crucially, Walther connects American attitudes with global histories of colonial empire. In demonstrating ways the United States drew from and contributed to transnational conceptions of race, religion, and culture, *Sacred Interests* situates itself within a growing body of globally oriented literature on American foreign relations. The penchant for assessing, ranking, and reorganizing the world’s peoples during this period manifested itself in flows of ideas between and through different colonial contexts. One cannot understand the rise of the United States as a global power without studying how the nation was embedded in these dense webs of cultural exchange. Also of note is the manner in which Walther connects American actions in the Muslim world with events taking place closer to home. Entangled in the death throes of chattel slavery and the dispossessions of the frontier, cultural elites looked to their nation’s own recent histories to either differentiate themselves from Islamic societies or else affix familiar racial attributes to them. Hence, when colonial troops encountered Maranao Moro warriors in the wilds of Mindanao they often attempted to understand them through the nation’s violent encounters with Native American populations. Walther excels at sketching

out how US Islamophobia developed from a variety of sources, both at home and abroad.

*Sacred Interests* covers much ground in its one-hundred-year exploration of American interactions with the Islamic world. Each individual section is worthy of its own full-length study, although this does not detract from the importance of the project's comparative emphasis on entrenched patterns of thought and behaviour. Nevertheless, the framework does fray at points. Muslim actors themselves play marginal or nonexistent roles in many sections. This absence reduces the book's ability to explore places where American Islamophobia was contested or altered. It is a problem extending to many works that follow in the footsteps of Edward Said, which often critically assess Western visions of the Islamic world without demonstrating how these imaginings were refuted, transformed, or reinscribed in specific contexts. Such is the challenge of presenting interpretative frameworks that are analytically sound yet also grapple with the near-irreducible complexity in the daily life of empires. In the case of Walther's book, part of this challenge comes from the colonial constitution of the archives historians work within. Euro-American writers with limited experience of the Muslim world were wont to reproduce essentialized views of it, yet interactions between Americans and Muslims in these societies (and the United States itself, for that matter) complicate narratives of unremitting prejudice and exclusion. Demonstrating the persistent anti-Islamic sentiment in the West while also acknowledging its permeability involves a delicate balancing act.

Allow me to conclude by jumping forward to the present day. Speaking at a political rally in South Carolina this past February, candidate for the Republican Party presidential nomination Donald Trump evoked America's legacy in the Southern Philippines. The one-time governor of the Moro Province, John Pershing, Trump explained to his supporters, had ordered the execution of forty-nine Muslim prisoners, instructing the firing squad to use ammunition dipped in pig's blood. While the story itself was a fabrication, it did hint at the violence inherent in America's colonial occupation of the region, which was very real indeed.[4] More troubling than Trump's historical illiteracy, however, was his use of the anecdote to suggest the United States needs to go "much, much, much further than waterboarding" when dealing with captured Muslim combatants. Colonial violence from the early twentieth century, in this formulation, was corrective rather than criminal, and something that should be mimicked by US military forces today.

One can hear the assembled crowd cheering on Trump's troubling vision, wherein the ritual defilement and extrajudicial murder of Muslims is justified through conveniently distorted "lessons" from history. In Trump's language, we hear the echoes of colonial administrators from more than a century ago. Men like General Adna R. Chaffee, who once called an encounter that left over four hundred Moros dead an "extremely necessary wholesome lesson" for America's Muslim wards.[5]

The past fifteen years have witnessed a revival and expansion of anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe and North America, an observation now banal in its sad apparency. The dichotomization of a humane, civilized Western world versus a treacherous, irrational Islamic one remains a common trope. In its most vulgar manifestations, evidence of which we encounter in Trump's speech, the West can only properly address the Muslim's innate capacity for violence by responding in kind. More insidious strains appear in the writings of ideologues who promote America's exceptional ability to reform recalcitrant Islamic societies. As *Sacred Interests* demonstrates, these related strains of thought find their genesis deep in American history. Through nuanced argumentation and compelling narrative, Karine Walther provides us with a study of a topic that is at once historically resonant and urgent in its contemporary applicability.

#### Notes

[1]. See Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

[2]. Robert Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815*; Michael C. Hawkins, *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines' Muslim South* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012); Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Denise Spellberg, *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders* (New York: Knopf, 2013).

[3]. "Moro" is an imperfect designation—a product of Spanish colonialism—for the Muslim peoples of the Southern Philippines. It has become shorthand for a collection of distinct societies residing there. My use of the term here is for the sake of expediency, and I acknowledge its flattening qualities. For a further discussion, see Oliver Charbonneau, *Civilizational Imperatives: American Colonial Culture in the Islamic Philippines, 1899-1942* (PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2016), ix-x.

[4]. Press reports from the period do suggest that pigs were used by American troops to defile Muslim graves, a claim parroted in later narrative accounts of the Moro conflict. Trump's story about Pershing is likely a conflation of the Moro conflict with stories from the 1857 uprising in colonial India about the British greasing ammunition with animal byproducts to make them ritually impure. See "Buried Pig With Moros," *New York Times*, De-

ember 22, 1903, 5; Vic Hurley, *The Swish of the Kris: The Story of the Moros* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1936), 119; Kim A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies, and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 28-29.

[5]. Letter from Adna Chaffee to Henry Corbin, May 13, 1902, Box 11, Hugh Drum Papers, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

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