

Angel Millar. *The Crescent and the Compass: Islam, Freemasonry, Esotericism, and Revolution in the Modern Age*. Colac: Numen Books, 2015. 218 pp. ISBN 978-0994252548. \$19.95.

The field of “Western esotericism” has witnessed a recent and long overdue upsurge in studies on global, “non-Western” and/or non-white forms of “esotericism.” Such is evidenced, for instance, in the anthologies *Occultism in Global Perspective* (2013) and *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* (2015), but also in the topics discussed during the most recent conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), “Western Esotericism and the East.” In line with these enterprises, the study of the interstices between (Western) esotericism and Islam, and of Islamic forms of “esotericism,” is gaining ground. Angel Millar’s timely book, *The Crescent and the Compass: Islam, Freemasonry, Esotericism, and Revolution in the Modern Age* could be considered part of this promising new context. It is important to note, however, that Millar’s survey is written for a general audience.

As the title indicates, Millar, a journalist and author, sets out to explore the connections between Freemasonry – and affiliated esoteric movements and currents – and Islam. With regard to the former, Millar vows to be concerned with more “secretive, esoteric, and spiritual forms of the fraternity” and, with regard to Islam, with “spirituality and radical thought,” primarily “over the last century and a half.” (13) These vague parameters do not become much more concrete, but we cannot dismiss the possibility that this lack of clear geographical, historical, or conceptual boundaries is a strategic move on Millar’s part, as it offers him ample room to include a very heterogeneous set of subtopics and people. In fact, in describing ideas of such widely diverse figures as Noble Drew Ali, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Anders Behring Breivik, and René Guénon, among many others, it seems as if one of the main goals of *Crescent and the Compass* is to provide an overview of the manifold persons, movements, currents, and institutions that in one way or another are grounded in, are connected to, or espouse ideas about Islam *and* Freemasonry, in diverse geographical, cultural, social, and historical contexts.

Millar draws his ambitious web of historical connections in eleven short chapters, complemented by an introduction, conclusion, and afterword. The first provides an introduction to Sufism; chapter two then offers a primer

to its connections with Freemasonry. It explores many of the instances in which the two “meet,” from the union of Freemasonry and Sufism in Turkey to ostensible parallels in initiation rituals. The remaining nine sections each address a different context in which Islam has encountered Freemasonry and affiliated organizations, and/or the other way around. Masons, for instance, have sought inspiration in Islam, as is the case with those affiliated with the Noble Order of the Mystic Shrine; Muslims, alternately, have joined Masonic lodges, as al-Afghani did. Likewise, Millar successfully directs our attention to the anti-Masonic tendencies in the Middle East, and to the interplay between Masonic influences and anti-Masonic tendencies in Breivik’s manifesto.

We should applaud Millar’s attempt to demonstrate and underscore this wide variety, which definitely is the text’s major strength: Millar argues convincingly that the historical connections between Muslims and Freemasonry are much more abundant, and much more complex, than is usually given credit for. Moreover, Millar successfully demonstrates that the relationship between Islam and Freemasonry is constantly shifting. For instance, whereas nineteenth-century Islamic reformers believed in Freemasonry’s revolutionary potential to assist in their anti-colonial struggles, contemporary Islamists interpret the fraternity as the sinful root of American culture and society. Likewise, Freemasons were drawn to Islam for a variety of reasons, for instance because of an interest in Islamic “mysticism” or because it offered an alternative to Christianity. However, the excess of case studies is also the text’s foremost weakness. Due to the enumeration of such a large number of events and connections it is difficult not to get lost in the abundance of details, which are sometimes informative and entertaining, but often unnecessary and excessive. One would have wished that Millar had been more critical in debating which connections to explore.

One should note that Millar’s text also seems to have a second, underlying aim. In addition to exploring the connections between Islam and Freemasonry, Millar seeks to push his own spiritual agenda, which he makes explicit towards the end of the text, but that haunts most of his chapters: all religions, he argues, share a mystical core or essence, and the West should venture a quest to discover this “gnosis.” (181) This “turn towards the divine” would then not only provide solace from the abundance of secularism, capitalism, materialism, and consumer culture in the modern West, but also offer a much-needed, more positive take on Islam that goes beyond the empty signifiers of “multiculturalism.” Such an approach to religion, and esotericism more specifically, although popular in the heydays of Mircea Eliade and Traditionalism, is largely dismissed in

today's academy for its trans-historical and even a-historical tendencies. That said, Traditionalism does feature frequently as subject matter in *Crescent and Compass*. Millar's sympathetic attitude towards it could not only explain its curious prominent role in the text, but also his ideas on the relationship between modernity, religion and spirituality.

To be sure, it seems that for Millar, certain "esoteric" forms of Islam in particular, such as Sufism, are a crystallization of the "gnosis" that he urges the West to find. In other words, Millar seems to suggest that his Western readers should take cue from the esoteric forms of Islam that he claims underly the ideas of many of his protagonists. Unfortunately, though, Millar occasionally interprets their ideas through the prism of his own spiritual agenda when the actual evidence is inconclusive. Take, for instance, the chapter on Shaykh Abdullah Quilliam (1856–1932). Quilliam was an early convert to Islam and founder of the UK's first mosque, but was also heavily involved with "fringe masonry." Miller argues that Quilliam seemed to consider Islam as part of the same elite underground spiritual milieu as fringe Masonry, a milieu in which people drew "on ancient, and non-Western religions, and that sought to discover a secret common thread – either historical or theological – between them." (71) However, as the evidence for the latter claim is largely absent from the text, Millar seems to overstate this last point, and does so in light of his own ideological commitments.

The chapter on the role of conspiracy theory in Islamic fundamentalist thought could, on the other hand, be interesting for readers of this journal, not only given the absence of Islamic voices in standard works on conspiracy theory, but also because conspiracy theories in Muslim societies seem to have a very different emphasis than their Western counterparts, which today often link Masonic lodges to the establishment of a secret and totalitarian "New World Order." One can construe from Millar's text that in the Islamic world the emphasis often seems to lie on Masonic influences on cultural values. Millar conveys that "Islamists" regard the West as fundamentally "freemasonic" in nature, and thus see the Craft as the root of such Western "evils" as women's rights and pornography: a (Judeo-)Masonic conspiracy to corrupt "Muslim culture." (131) Such theories are, according to Millar, part and parcel of the current Islamist anti-Western propaganda, yet have been part of Islamic cultures and societies since the nineteenth century, rooted as they were in European conspiracy theories, in particular *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The next chapter, "Black Nationalism in the USA," has the potential to be just as informative, given the frequent neglect of African American voices

in these sorts of texts and the academic study of (Western) esotericism in general. What's more, we encounter here for the first time instances in which Freemasonry played an important role in the actual formation of what could be considered Islamic religions, such as the Moorish Science Temple of America and the Nation of Islam. Millar's section on Prince Hall Freemasonry is indeed instructive, as it conveys the importance of Freemasonry's radical and transformative potential in nineteenth-century black communities. However, his discussion on the influence of the Order and other esoteric streams in the religious thought of Noble Drew Ali and Elijah Muhammad is considerably less illuminating. Millar seems more concerned with simply listing the esoteric streams and currents that influenced Ali and Muhammad, and the potential (if highly debated) roots of their esotericisms, rather than outlining which ideas influenced these religious leaders, and the ways in which these ideas transformed, altered, or enriched their thought.

This chapter is therefore one of the least compelling ones, especially when we consider that Millar *does* display the ability and desire to analyze the content of the connections in a few of his other chapters, such as the aforementioned one on Quilliam and his chapter on the role of esoteric ideas in the politics and thought of Ayatollah Khomeini. The quality of the chapters fluctuates too much, which amounts to a considerably less compelling read. Yet, we should credit the author for bringing such a diverse group of voices on esotericism, Freemasonry, and Islam together in one book. Millar is right: there *is* a lack of scholarship on this topic and if anything, *Crescent and the Compass* is evidence of the fact that we need more—much more—research. Millar's text and subject therefore offer a glimpse of the exciting road that lies ahead of us.

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