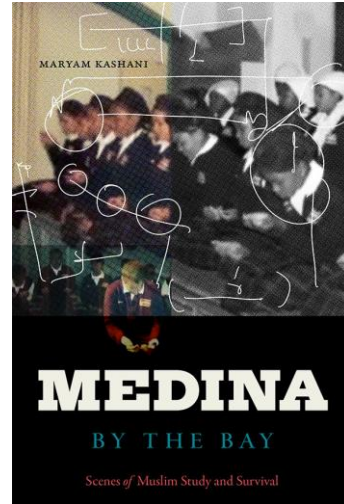


Maryam Kashani. *Medina by the Bay: Scenes of Muslim Study and Survival*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. Pp. 328. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4780-2517-7. Price: \$28.95.

Book review doi: <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v64i1.7032>

*Medina by the Bay* is an extensive ethnocinematic study of Muslim communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, tracing Muslim lives at the intersections of immigration, resistance, race, ethnicity, and religion. Presenting a fresh and effective account of the efforts of Muslim survival in the area, it blends techniques of cinema to provide for intimate storytelling, one wherein scenes from everyday life are told in montage-style narrations. These portraits in words are braided around the story of American Muslim communities who are constantly at the forefront of racial violence, institutional segregation, Islamophobia, surveillance, and migration. The book also tries to sketch out the tensions between “Muslim ways of knowing” as models and sources of knowledge against historicist liberal secularism ethics.



Conceived as an ethno-film, the book opens with a cast of characters, including, among other individuals, the author’s camera, which is named “Nūr” (Light) in Arabic after the Prophetic tradition of naming things. The book under consideration is divided into an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, and ends with a hefty notes section. Each chapter intervenes with the subject of Muslim life, relating it to the dynamics of power relations within the community, state and as an ethic. Narrating different trajectories, the chapters try to deal with Islamic understandings of consciousness as an individual and as a community, the struggles of Muslims in the Bay Area in reconciling the material world (*dunyā*) with religion (*dīn*) and their efforts in developing a political epistemology centred around Islam. While chapters one, two and three describe the beginnings of various organizations, efforts of specific Imams and activists, and how state surveillance is transforming Muslim ways of living around the Bay Area, chapters four and five elaborate on specific courses of Islamic learning, its ethics, and its practice of an alternate praxis rooted in Islamic knowledge and the sense of community.

The Introduction opens, in a traditional screenplay sequence, with a blues rendition of the *adhān* call, an inheritance of African American tunes breaking in the backdrop of the Great Migration and refugee histories in the twentieth century. Further, this section introduces the book's overarching aim of seeing the Muslim communities in the Bay Area as a conceptual frame, social geography, and "infrastructure of feeling" (p. 18).

Chapter one "Medina by the Bay" delves into the practices of teaching and gaining Islamic knowledge, namely, *da'wah* (socio-religious activism), *ta'līm* (teaching/instruction of 'ilm, knowledge and 'ulūm, sciences of Islam), supplemented by *ta'dīb* (cultivation of *adab*) (p. 42). The author, maintaining its scenic narration, intersperses the text with five montages that help understand the time-space around which Islamic knowledge practices are transmitted. It tries to situate the formation of the Zaytuna College, a Muslim liberal arts college, within the complex underpinnings of Black liberation movements, African American migration from various parts of the United States, as well as Arab and South and West Asian immigration into the Bay Area in the twentieth century. The chapter articulates the earlier role that the Nation of Islam and "revivers," the Honourable Elijah Mohammad, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X), and more specifically Warith Deen Mohammad played in arguing for an Islamic "strategy of material and spiritual survival" (p. 82) in the 1930s and 1940s. With the establishment of the Islamic Center of San Francisco in 1959 and later the Masjid Al-Islam (where the As-Sabiqun movement was established in 1995) and the Masjid Al-Waritheen in Oakland and Berkeley, the texts complicate the work of these centres as just prayer spaces but which also took on roles of schooling, engaging students in Islamic discursive traditions, community, and fundraising centres.

Chapter two "Roots, Routes and Rhythms of Devotional Time" is a further imagination of an *ummah* that "inherits an anti-racist and abolitionist legacy that moves Islamic ethics and politics toward liberation grounded in Islamic visions of justice" (p. 87). It largely looks at Yemeni scholar Habib 'Umar bin Muhammad bin Salim bin Hafiz's 2011 tour "Tranquility amidst Turbulence" and his student Imam Zaid Shakir's—an African-American Islamic scholar and co-founder of Zaytuna College—interactions in his Islamic History class. The chapter aims to narrate the forging of "kinship by faith," where individuals are seen as followers of the *Ṣaḥābah* (Prophet Muḥammad's Companions) by placing them in a spiritual bond, in an orbit of Islamic consciousness that shares the tradition of "beliefs, practices, and knowledge (p. 89).

Chapter three “Codewords and Counterinsurgent Continuities” takes on the matter of state surveillance and infiltration policies, the “terror-industrial complex” (p. 123) and how Muslim lives and social relations are controlled at the granular level. It wishes to see the continuities in the mechanisms of COINTELPRO, the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counter-Intelligence Program (1956-1971), the Domain Awareness Center, and related policing programs which have been historically deployed to manage Muslim and Black populations. Especially in the aftermath of 9/11, the author situates such continuities in state monitoring practices to “demonstrate its legitimacy” (p. 125) and to demand the assimilation of Muslim ethics into liberal humanist values.

Towards the end, chapter four “Out of Bounds” considers the implications of how aspects of Muslim belonging and knowing act as “embodied and relational practice” (pp. 154-155) and deceive all forms of descriptions. The author stresses the role of emotions and intimacy in Islamic social relations. As tears evoked embodied responses in student audiences of Shaikh Habib ‘Umar and Shaikh Hamza Yusuf, a white American Muslim scholar and co-founder of Zaytuna College, it signified the moving, passionate, and affective nature of Islamic recitations. In this reflection, the author also works with the concept of “intimate distance” when she considers Islamic gender norms. Liberal notions of physical distance and gender separation are done away with, and social relations are enjoined by a new “visibility politics” that “suggests other possibilities of agency and being” (p. 169). Here, it is pertinent to say a word about the author, too, as she becomes one of the primary interlocutors. Maryam Kashani, the author, herself born and raised in the Bay Area, becomes a critical and malleable subject in the figuration of the textual act of description of the stories of people she meets and writes about.

Lastly, chapter five “Epistemologies of the Oppressor and the Oppressed” takes up the study of Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* in the Islamic discursive tradition of *ikhtilāf* (difference) and the question of resistance, violence, and redemption. The chapter argues for redefined libertarian epistemologies in practice, which are centred on Muslim ways of knowing and their anchoring at the individual-community complex space and Islamic metaphysics. Fanon’s text stressed “salvation of the hearts, minds and bodies” (p. 188) in opposition to intellectual liberation, but for him, there is still a “complacency of accepting one’s fate” (p. 197). The Zaytuna scholars, however, see suffering as a redemptive ethic, one that is part of one’s life and something that bestows meaning to material lives. The conclusion titled “In the Way: Towards a Conclusion/Opening” is the author’s note to Muslims, arguing

for relational solidarity and the incorporation of diverse beliefs, ethics, and desires into Islamic poetics of existence.

This is a deeply personal work in which we see the imprint of the author throughout. The author uses “we” to include herself in the body and metaphysics of the work. She concedes that her subject position is also undergoing changes during the writing of the book. Also, the book makes a much-needed distinction between Muslim and Islamic, emphasizing the fallible nature of Muslims and their redemption through repentance.

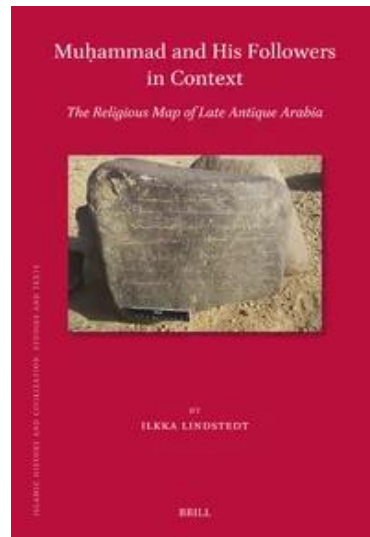
Shaiq Ali\*

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Ilkka Lindstedt. *Muhammad and His Followers in Context: The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia*. Leiden: Brill, 2023, Pp. 390. Paperback. ISBN: 978-90-04-68712-7. Price: \$167.

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The book *Muhammad and His Followers in Context: The Religious Map of Late Antique Arabia* (2024) by Ilkka Lindstedt offers a promising perspective of epigraphic and contemporary sources to contextualize Prophet Muhammad’s (peace be on him) social and religious community and his times in “late antique Arabia.” Using a historical approach to study the religious map from the first century CE till after the death of Prophet Muhammad around 700 CE, Lindstedt’s main thesis pivots around his claim that although the “rise of Islam was an impressive and formidable historical development,” the historical inquiry into the “Islamic origins have been lopsided” (p. 2). He proposes that, contrary to the popular narrative about the people of Arabia having dominantly polytheistic beliefs, monotheism was widely practised. Therefore, there should be no dichotomy between “pre-Islamic” and “Islamic” periodization while studying the “Arabian and Near Eastern history” (p. 2). This thesis, that is, monotheism (of sorts) and polytheism were both practised in Arabia, is already a fact, and an informed reader may not find anything new in this hypothesis.




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