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Book Review

ISLAM AND BLACKNESS

By: Jonathan A.C Brown. London: Oneworld Publications, 2022.

Mohammed Rashid A.T²⁵⁸

Jonathan A.C. Brown's critical engagement with the themes of race and slavery in Islamic history represents a significant contribution to contemporary Islamic studies, particularly in addressing the recurrent accusations of antiblackness within Islamic tradition. Brown begins by reaffirming the foundational Islamic principle that race holds no ontological or moral significance in the sight of God. Drawing on Qur'anic verses such as "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and colors" (Qur'an 30:22), and prophetic traditions such as the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ final sermon declaring the equality of all races, Brown asserts that Islamic theology is inherently anti-racist. Distinctions among people are based solely on taqwā (God-consciousness), not lineage, color, or ethnicity. Nevertheless, Brown acknowledges that a gap exists between Islamic ideals and historical Muslim practices, especially in the domains of slavery and ethnocentric bias.

Central to Brown's argument is the claim that race itself is not a fixed biological reality, but rather a social construct with shifting definitions across time and place. To articulate this, he utilizes the phrase "people racialized as Black" to underscore the idea that blackness has been historically defined in relation to structures of power and exclusion. And he also proposes that Blackness should be capitalized to denote such a meaning. Physical features such as skin

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tone and hair texture, though real, acquire racial significance only within particular socio political frameworks.

Brown situates the rise of antiblack narratives in the West within a broader context of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and theological metaphors in Christian Europe. He notes that Western Christianity's symbolic associations of blackness with sin, evil, and moral inferiority contributed to the development of enduring cultural and religious stereotypes. These stereotypes were eventually mapped onto global hierarchies of race, especially during the height of European imperialism.

Brown's discussion of colorism draws attention to a widespread phenomenon wherein lighter skin is often valorized over darker tones—not necessarily as a function of racial ideology, but as a proxy for class status. In both European and Asian contexts, lighter complexions have historically been associated with indoor leisure, privilege, and nobility, while darker skin was linked to outdoor labor and subjugation. While such biases are deeply entrenched in many Muslim societies today, Brown argues that they are products of broader cultural and economic systems rather than teachings derived from Islamic scripture.

Brown introduces the intellectual framework of Afropessimism, particularly its thesis that blackness occupies a position of permanent subordination within the structure of modern society. According to theorists like Frank Wilderson, anti-Blackness is not merely one form of racism among others but is constitutive of the very logic of the modern world. While Brown stops short of endorsing Afropessimism in full, he references its insights to illustrate the depth of structural antiblackness, including within parts of the Muslim world where cultural hierarchies often reinforce discriminatory attitudes against Africans and African descendants.

One of the most pointed critiques addressed in Brown's work is the allegation that Islam and the Arab world have a unique and

inherent predisposition toward the enslavement of Black Africans. He identifies this accusation as emerging from three distinct, yet often overlapping, ideological sources: white supremacist and conservative Western commentators who seek to demonize Islam; Afrocentric scholars who regard Islam as an alien, even colonial, force in Africa; and pro-Israel public diplomacy that uses the charge of Arab slavery to deflect from criticism of Zionism by undermining Muslim moral authority.

Brown critiques this narrative as historically reductive and ideologically motivated. He stresses that slavery in the Muslim world was never race-based in the way that Atlantic chattel slavery was. Rather, it was a multi-ethnic institution in which slaves could be Arab, Persian, Turkic, African, or European. Furthermore, Islamic law and ethics placed significant constraints on the treatment of slaves and allowed for emancipation as a highly meritorious act.

Brown offers a corrective to common misconceptions by situating early Islamic society within its proper historical context. In pre-Islamic Arabia, slavery was not tied to skin color, but to tribal marginality, military defeat, and economic circumstances. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ's early followers included many socially marginalized individuals—such as Bilāl al-Ḥabashī (a Black Abyssinian), Khabbāb ibn al-Aratt (a non-Arab), and Ṣuhayb al-Rūmī (of Byzantine origin)—whose loyalty and status were elevated by the new Islamic ethos. Brown emphasizes that their marginalization was socio-political rather than racial.

Addressing concerns over Qur'anic and hadith usage of color metaphors, Brown explores how Arabic utilized terms like *aswad* (black) and *abyaḍ* (white) in both literal and figurative senses. While “black” could connote physical features or symbolic meanings such as sorrow or loss, “white” often connoted joy, purity, or nobility. These associations, Brown argues, were conventional and not racially essentialist. Early Muslim audiences did not interpret such metaphors

as expressions of racial hierarchy, nor did they equate symbolic whiteness with physical skin color.

Brown's historical critique includes an examination of many Orientalist literatures which portrays Muslim men—particularly those of African or Arab descent—as sexually predatory and morally degenerate. These narratives not only shaped Western perceptions of Islam but also racialized Muslims in the global imagination. Brown underscores how such portrayals served colonial and imperial agendas, reinforcing both anti-Muslim and antiblack stereotypes under the guise of civilizational critique

Jonathan A.C. Brown's scholarship provides a vital corrective to both internal and external misconceptions about race in Islamic history. He carefully distinguishes Islamic doctrine from historical practice, acknowledging the presence of racial prejudice in some Muslim societies while insisting that such attitudes are culturally contingent, not theologically mandated. His work contributes to the broader effort to decolonize Islamic studies and challenge the essentialization of Islam as a racially oppressive force. By integrating historical analysis, linguistic insight, and critical race theory, Brown invites scholars and students alike to engage Islam's past with intellectual honesty and moral clarity.