Reading Milton through Islam

Monday, 12 May 2014

Building 37 (behind Old Observatory)

American University of Beirut

John Milton’s works remain the central pillar of late-Renaissance English studies, and scholarship on Milton has importantly enriched our understanding of the political and religious upheavals of the seventeenth-century. Innovative recent scholarship continues to expand the range of relevant contexts beyond Europe, however, unearthing the vitality and resonance of the Miltonic text within religious and political debates across borders, through time, and in multiple languages. One of the global sites where this vitality and resonance is being recognized is the Arab world and the Islamic world more broadly. The publication of the first two complete translations of Paradise Lost into Arabic (in 2002 and 2011) invites fresh critical explorations from a multiplicity of perspectives: comparative, historicist, world-literary, presentist. Attention to spatially and religiously diverse reception contexts offers new avenues of inquiry into texts such as Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, Samson Agonistes and Areopagitica and into the cultural heritages they represent, uphold, and contest. By exploring how Milton, Islam, and the Middle East address and implicate one another, this conference aims to raise (obliquely or head-on) the question of what Milton offers here, now and in the future, and to reflect on how forms of the past still inform the present.

Speakers

- Gordon Campbell (University of Leicester)
- Islam Issa (University of Birmingham)
- Feisal G. Mohamed (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

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Abstracts

Gordon Campbell (University of Leicester)

Through a Glass Darkly: Milton's Image of Islam

Many contributors to this conference will have expertise on the subject of Islamic perceptions of Milton. I should like to concentrate on the other side of his coin, Milton's perceptions of Islam. The distorted images of Islam that still live on in the 21st century have their origins in the views of writers such as John of Damascus, who is known in the Arab world as Yuhannā al-Demashqi, the Syrian monk who denounced Islam as a Christian heresy, while enjoying freedom to practise his religion under dhimmi laws that numbered him amongst the people of the book. After a brief account of the views that Milton's generation inherited from his medieval predecessors, I will turn to an account of 17th century perceptions of Muslims as tyrants, pirates, kidnappers and heretics, and then examine the representation of Muslims and Islamic institutions in Milton's writings. The paper will conclude with reflections on the inheritance of mutually hostile stereotypes in the 21st century.

Islam Issa (University of Birmingham)

Milton’s Areopagitica in the Arab World Today

This paper places Milton’s opinions on freedom of expression, in particular his seminal prose work, Areopagitica, into the context of the Arab world today. Areopagitica (1644) was translated into Arabic only very recently (2009) by
Mohamed Enani. This study analyses the relevance of Milton’s arguments about liberty in light of Egypt’s current protocols with regard to book publication, and the ongoing political and social fluctuations occurring in the region. It also compares Milton’s civil war context with the political and social rhetoric present in Egypt’s increasingly polarised society.

Through philological analyses of the translation’s linguistic and religious emphases, it will be established that *Areopagitica* has a potential relevance not only to the socio-political contexts of the region, but also to the Arab world’s prevailing Islamic culture. At its core, Islamic teaching emphasizes the importance of both scripture and freedom. As a result, reading is an important Islamic activity, and allows the religion to be perceived as a complete way of life, concerned with both religious and worldly issues. Milton’s tract touches on ideas of ‘religious and civil wisdom’, linking such wisdom with ‘discovery’ and ‘freedoms’. While such ideas seem to match aspects of Islamic belief, this paper considers how we are to understand such issues when literacy rates of Muslim majority countries remain lower than the global average, and when censorship is in many ways rife in media, as well as in works of fiction and non-fiction. This study provides numerous links between Milton’s tract and the Arab world today, drawing attention to the poet’s perhaps surprising relevance to the region. It also shows how such comparisons point us towards the relevance of Milton’s other works, namely his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, and a number of his sonnets.

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**Feisal G. Mohamed** (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

**Milton and the intellectus agens: The Enemy Within**

“The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced,” Carl Schmitt has famously pronounced, “is that between friend and enemy.” Milton’s politics are often premised on a distinction between the amity of the enlightened few and a benighted global majority often associated with the East, and specifically with Islam. We find the distinction articulated most clearly in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which declares that an “Englishman forgetting all laws, human, civil and religious… is no better than a Turk, a Sarasin, a Heathen”; it also informs the sustained association of Satan with barbarous Middle Eastern rule in *Paradise Lost*. The animosities reflect in many ways growing contact with the Islamic world arising with the expansion of English trade—at times rapid, at times halting, always contested—contact that also pressed home the awareness, expressed by Milton’s friend Roger Williams in *The Hireling Ministrie None of Christs*, that the world’s Muslims significantly outnumbered their Christian counterparts in the period. Over his career, Milton’s cosmopolitanism, like his nationalism, becomes
characterized by an ever more pronounced sense of the worldly power of the benighted majority, occasioning an emphasis on the inward turn of the enlightened few. But in a way that is most visible in the invocation to light in *Paradise Lost*, the language of Milton’s inward turn draws, as Douglas Hedley recently noted, on the *intellectus agens* tradition with its roots in Islamic philosophy. We shall explore these roots, and examine their potential influence on Milton’s poetry. Is Milton consciously drawing on Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, or is his engagement of this category only a response to such contemporaries as John Smith? Has he distinguished himself from *falsafa*, or has he developed an idea of the enlightened politico-religious subject that has admitted an enemy within? Exploring these questions might reorient the intellectual history informing Milton’s anthropology, and also complicate our response to the Islamophobic language in which he indulges with unsettling frequency.

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