

## ISLAM AND THE DEVOTIONAL OBJECT

In this book, Richard J. A. McGregor offers a history of Islamic practice through the aesthetic reception of medieval religious objects. Elaborate parades in Cairo and Damascus included decorated objects of great value, destined for Mecca and Medina. Among these were the precious dress sewn yearly for the Ka'ba and large colorful sedans mounted on camels, which mysteriously completed the Hajj without carrying a single passenger. Along with the brisk trade in Islamic relics, these objects – and the variety of contested meanings attached to them – constituted material practices of religion that persisted into the colonial era, but were suppressed in the twentieth century. McGregor here recovers the biographies of religious objects, including relics, banners, public texts, and coverings for the Ka'ba. Reconstructing the premodern visual culture of Islamic Egypt and Syria, he follows the shifting meanings attached to objects of devotion, as well as the contingent nature of religious practice and experience.

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SEEING RELIGION IN EGYPT AND SYRIA

RICHARD J. A. MCGREGOR

Vanderbilt University



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## PREFACE

I have had the pleasure of working on this book for more than a decade. My interest in writing about Islamic material culture and visual practice was stirred by two observations. The first was the presence of so many impressive objects in the living practice of Islam. Religion – at least modern voices tell us – is concerned with lofty and metaphysical things, and shuns the material world. We hear that Islam in particular is mistrustful and even hostile to images, representation, and sensory indulgences. Why then, I wondered, are the colors, forms, designs, images, along with the eyes, hands, and bodies, of adherents who respond to them, so prevalent? My experiences on the ground in one part of the Islamic world, and my explorations into Egyptian and Syrian history yielded one example after another.

The second observation was more abstract, coming out of my reflections on the modern study of religion. Despite the immense intellectual heritage available to us as scholars – inherited from the Middle East, Africa, and Europe – we still have only imperfect tools for making sense of what I came to call the objects of devotion. Arabic poetics, Kantian aesthetics, Islamic theology, and postmodern phenomenology, all have contributions to make, but they do so only in partial ways. It seems academics are only now beginning to find ways of accounting for the power and presence of religious objects.

Like much of the humanities, the study of religion has responded to the “material turn.” Buoyed by what we now call the New Materialism, a recovery of the being, presence, and even agency of objects, religious studies is finding its voice in the field. Books have recently appeared, such as *Christian Materiality*, *The Embodied Eye*, *More than Belief*, and *Religion: Material Dynamics*, all of which chart different paths into the study of religion, with objects and their related human practices as their guides.<sup>1</sup>

The book before you follows in the wake of these and other studies. It opens with an introductory chapter, both a genealogy of my attempts to make sense of the observations outlined above, and a proposal for a way forward into the material study of this corner of the Islamic world. The chapter concludes

with a proposal for a “machine” – that is to say, a dynamic object, operating within given and bounded environments, producing what the circumstances of history will allow.<sup>2</sup> The six chapters that follow, center on a series of Islamic objects as they engage with and occupy the complex religious landscapes they encounter. The objects of devotion, then, are the machines of religion.

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I could not have written this book without the support of my wife Katharine Loevy. I cherish deeply our adventures in affairs of both the head and the heart.

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For Arabic terms I have followed a simplified version of the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. The Arabic letter ‘ayn thus appears as (‘), and the *hamza* appears as (ʾ). I have not included macrons on long vowels, or subscript diacritics. My intention is to make the book more inviting to the nonspecialist reader. In the same spirit, I have provided only the most essential Hijri date equivalents to the Gregorian calendar years. Arabic terms appearing in common English dictionaries are not italicized. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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