

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

October 4, 2016

Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Dreams & Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing*, I.B. Tauris, 2015, 239 pp., \$94.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781780761428.

Dreams are unsettling for dreamers regardless of their creed or communal identity. However, how long dreams haunt dreamers is an entirely different story. While studying in seminary, I encountered many perplexities with respect to dreams. I remember a senior theologian who reminded his pupils about the importance of dreams. He once attempted to explain the meaning behind the appearance of the rivers of heaven in dreams by virtue of Quranic verses, insisting that they do not imply the promise of grace or paradise but, rather, they foretell that one will end up with a wife who urinates in her bed. I was amazed at how a theologian could extrapolate such interpretations. In the work under review, Elizabeth Sirriyeh tries to situate such amazement in a larger historical trajectory in order to reveal the impact of earlier traditions on dreaming in the “world of Islam.”

Sirriyeh elucidates the history of dreams and dream interpretation and their social functions in Islamicate culture over the course of nine chapters. Although it is not formally organized in this manner, I think it is beneficial to divide the book into two sections: the first three chapters examine dreams and dream interpretation historically from pre-Islamic to Islamic societies, and in the remaining chapters she shifts attention to the social imaginaries of dreaming among subsequent people of the faith.

The first chapter explores the patterns of dreaming and interpreting dreams in pre-Islamic contexts. Sirriyeh pays special attention to Artemidorus’s manual on the modes of dream interpretation. Identifying the patterns articulated therein, she demonstrates how they reoccur in the Abrahamic traditions’ methods of interpreting dreams, even to the extent of sharing identical readings of specific symbols. She gives the example of how both Jewish rabbis, based on the Babylonian Talmud, and Artemidorus understood “a raven seen in a dream as representing an adulterer” (23). Another fascinating observation Sirriyeh makes in this chapter is how within the Christian tradition the appearance of angels in dreams “could help to explain conversions or perhaps encourage them” (26). After outlining common narratives and similar interpretative models found in dream manuals from the pre-Islamic to early Islamic eras, she concludes that there were “essentially conservative qualities of dream interpretation in the region” (28). As to the questions, why do dreams matter and why do believers in and practitioners of the Abrahamic traditions seek ways to interpret them, Sirriyeh proffers a poetic answer: “to release the dreamer from the powerful and evil hold of the uninterpreted dream” (12).

In Chapter 2, “The Prophet as Model Visionary,” Sirriyeh introduces Muhammad as “a perfect dreamer, visionary and interpreter of dreams” in order to justify how “dreaming lies at the very foundation of Islam” (xi). Important stories about Muhammad are explored in order to demonstrate the embedded dreaminess of his emergence as God’s messenger. But, as she explicitly states, “we are not interested in establishing the historical truth of these accounts” (34). Rather, this chapter follows the arguments surrounding what kinds of events were theologically deemed to be valid visionary dreams worthy of religious interpretation and whether or not such experiences and powers are limited to the prophet alone. Muhammad’s ascension, in particular, receives a great deal of attention. Sirriyeh, like many of the Muslim scholars who have commented on this event, remains ambivalent about its relationship to dreaming. “It is left unclear,” she writes, “as to whether the whole experience was a dream vision, since the angels came for Muhammad while he was sleeping in the Ka’ba. The reader may conclude either that it was indeed a dream or alternatively a physical event” (45). This brings me to a slight criticism I have of her work. Namely, she neither clearly defines what constitutes a dream nor differentiates dreams from (prophetic) visions. Consequently, her analysis is difficult to follow at times.

The third chapter builds upon the fundamental insight that dreams matter in Islam due to their symbolic identification with Muhammad. Sirriyeh continues her investigation by looking at the work of early scholars who collected sayings of the prophet pertaining to dreams. She recapitulates, for instance, the “tripartite division of dreams” that Muhammad Ibn Sirin (d. 728) proposed: “the speech of the soul, nightmares from Satan and good tidings (*bushra*) from the God” (59). Furthermore, in this chapter Sirriyeh addresses a particular manner of dream interpretation that distinguishes the Islamic tradition from other prior and contemporary practices. This distinctive mode is “anecdotal,” and as such does not “attempt to inform the reader of the meaning of particular dream images, but only of the overall meaning of the dream” (65). Therefore, she suggests, this manner of interpreting was utilized to “glorify the prophet and Caliphs...[and also] to promote individual morality” (73). The third chapter ends with a comparison of a philosopher’s—i.e., al-Kindi’s—approach to dream interpretation with that of a Sufi mystic—al-Bistami.

Chapter 4, “The Dream Must Be Interpreted,” engages with the symbolic regime of Islamic dream culture and its modes of interpretation. For instance, she highlights how in dream manuals it is common that “[v]arious species of flora and fauna” are “interpreted as representing different types of humans. Thus a palm tree is understood to represent an Arab man because the palm grows in Arab lands...but a peacock signifies a non-Arab because it lives in foreign countries” (86). Elsewhere in this chapter she lightly touches upon the work of Ibn Qutayba, author of the oldest Muslim dream book. Here I might add that in a certain sense, Sirriyeh mirrors the methodology of the dream interpreters she encounters throughout the text and consequently gives them a taste of their own medicine. That is, she situates figures like Ibn Sirin, Hunayn b. Ishaq (d. 873 or 877), al-Kindi, etc., historically and contextually, in the same manner of Artemidorus who asked for the social status of the dreamer in order to offer meanings. Her method is astute because it considers the interpreter as much as his work. She explains the predicament of Hunayn, for example, who was looked upon with suspicion because of his Christian faith in the court of the Muslim king. He shaped his translation of Artemidorus in a manner that portrayed the author as a monotheist by downplaying the plenitude of Greek gods and goddesses. Furthermore, in this chapter, Sirriyeh demonstrates the intertextual relationship between dream manuals and the Qur’an. She gives the example of Kamal al-din al-Damiri’s *Hayat al-Hayawan* (“The Life of Animals”) and how he “relates [camels] and their appearance [in dreams] to several verses of the

Qur'an" (99). These links are traced back to their Qur'anic origin in order to show the symbolic closure that was imposed by the interpreters according to their cultural imaginaries.

The fifth chapter focuses on how medieval Muslims viewed Christians appearing in their dreams and vice versa. Dari (Pseudo-Ibn Sirin), for example, suggested that dreaming about a church was an ill omen, portending the graveyard or even hell. Sirriyeh conjectures, "it is possible that the experience of the Crusades may account for the more aggressively negative interpretation" (107) of Christians and Christian imagery. She further develops the idea of the other in the sixth chapter by looking at Muslim women dreamers. While Christians were widely considered the other from without, women were (and are) marginalized from within. Sirriyeh demonstrates how in the Islamic mode of interpretation, as well as Artemidorus's, when women appeared to have masculine traits in their dreams—e.g., having a beard—they "can acquire honour and status through becoming like a man" (136). Interestingly, she notes this as one instance where Muslim oneirocrits found "no need to censor or reject the Greek understanding" (136). Sirriyeh does, however, overlook important dream narratives that were initiated by the wives of the Prophet like Maria and Aisha. This is because of her reliance on Sunni sources that underplayed those dreams. Shi'i sources have addressed them more extensively and would have been a welcome inclusion to her overall analysis.

Chapter 7, "Envisioning God and His Prophet," explicates Sufi narratives of their dreams in which God and/or the Prophet have appeared. In particular, she looks at the works of Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209) and, especially, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240). In the milieu of Islamic mystics, dreams, Sirriyeh explains, "could also serve to promote an individual's status among disciples and the masses" (140). Thus, there emerges a fundamental difference between dreamers: the dreams of common Muslims were distinguished from those of the Prophet, the Shi'i Imams, and Sufi mystics because the commoner would not experience visions of God through their hearts. Hence, one can see how dreaming and its interpretation became powerful tools for those who forged religion and dictated modes of personal spirituality.

The eighth chapter is the shortest chapter of the book and deals with communing with the righteous dead in dreams. More than anywhere else in the book, this is where common Muslims appear. Dreaming offers a way of transcending one's own materiality and breaking the limits of flesh in order to communicate with the dead. In these dreams, Muslims frequently request guidance and enlightenment. For instance, we learn that dead ancestors "appear to be widely respected among Kyrgyz and their words are taken seriously as emanating from the world of truth" (175). Another example given is Nabulusi, the lesser shaykh of the Naqshbandi order, who sought guidance of the great deceased saints.

The final chapter introduces "the impact of Western modernity on Muslim attitudes to the visionary life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (xii). Sirriyeh investigates issues such as the relationship between social media or advanced technologies and dream interpretation. However, the chapter is too concise to accomplish this task with the rigor it deserves. One virtue of this chapter I want to mention is its readability due to the fact that Sirriyeh includes her personal encounters with Muslim dreamers (189-191). In doing so, not only is it enjoyable to read, she is able to situate the culture of dreaming and its operation amongst Muslims through moving examples such as the mother who pardoned her son's murderer because she had a dream about him (192). Sirriyeh is attentive to the dreamers' descriptions and how the embedded cultural codes learned from the unseen world are integrated into the everyday lives of believers. She suggests that the *personal* "ancient form of dreaming" (193) has become more effective and tangible in the contemporary Islamic world. That being said, she laments the diminishing value attributed to dreaming in general (195).

Overall, Elizabeth Sirriyeh's scholarly investigation on this important but commonly overlooked topic is highly commendable. In particular, scholars and students of Islamic Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, social and cultural history, mysticism, religious psychology, philosophy, and theology will find great value in this book. Hopefully her work will inspire further research in this and related areas.

Younes Saramifar  
Research Fellow, SCW  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

© 2016: Younes Saramifar

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Saramifar, Younes, Review of *Dreams & Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing*, *SCTIW Review*, October 4, 2016.  
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1280>.

ISSN: 2374-9288