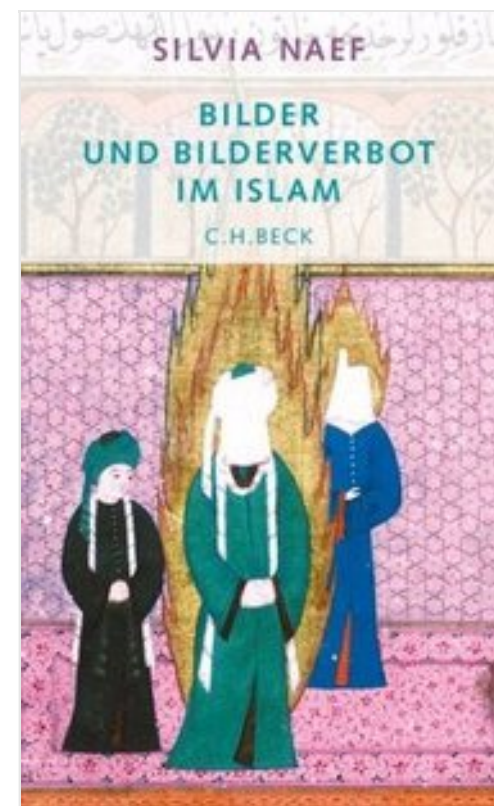


# Aniconism in Islam

## From Koran to Caricature Debate

**Since the caricature debate, if not before, questions have been asked about the role the ban on images actually plays in Islam. Nimet Seker has been reading the new book on the subject by the Geneva-based scholar of Islam Silvia Naef**



Afghanistan, March 2001. An explosion as loud as thunder, heard fifty kilometres away, shatters the peace of the valley of Bamiyan. The Taliban bored countless holes into the more than 1500-year-old statue of the Great Buddha, packed them with explosives and detonated it. In a matter of seconds the Great Buddha disintegrated in a massive cloud of red sandstone and clay. The ground shook beneath the cascading rubble.

Confronted with barbarity like this, it is easy to form the impression that Islam is fundamentally opposed to images. The fierce protests during the caricature debate only reinforced this impression. But doesn't this contradict that fact that images abound in the Islamic world, even in rigorously orthodox Saudi Arabia?

### Images of the Prophet

The question of the ban on images seems to elicit nothing but contradictions, particularly in the modern Islamic world. In her book, Silvia Naef, an expert on Islam and Islamic art, aims to clarify the issue at last. In doing so she ventures into complicated terrain.

The cover of the German edition of the book shows a miniature: a man standing, hands folded, in green robes and turban on a flower-patterned carpet. Instead of his face we see a white surface in the form of a veil. Behind his body is something that looks like a golden flame. This is the Prophet Mohammed. The golden flame is his nimbus.

The miniature is not unusual: there has always been figurative painting in the Islamic world, even paintings of the Prophet.

So how are we to understand the ban on images?

In order to examine the question thoroughly, Naef goes back to its religious and theological roots. The first thing that becomes clear is that there is no ban on images in the Koran. Only in the Prophetic sayings, the *hadith*, are there indications to suggest a restrictive attitude. This can be explained in terms of a fear of idolatry in the polytheistic environment in which Mohammed lived. Figurative images are condemned in the realm of ritual, i.e. everywhere where people pray.

## **Modern influence**

Naef devotes considerable space to the opinions of scholars, but comes to the conclusion that the ban on images has no great significance: “There are no tracts on the subject of images.” It is only in modern times that scholars have given imagery much thought, in view of the flood of images created by new techniques and media – film, photography, television, portrait painting.

Naef divides them into ‘reformers’, ‘fundamentalists’, and ‘revolutionary Islamists’. *Fatwas* and scripture are cited. Even within the repudiating attitude of the fundamentalists it becomes clear that there is a broad spectrum of opinion, with some images considered allowable while others are forbidden. So here too one can hardly speak of an “absolute ban on images”.

However, Naef also speculates as to what the motivation behind a radical ban on images might be. Is the ban aimed at the images themselves, or at the message that these images convey?

Surely the fundamentalists’ real target is the modern world, as symbolised by these images?

In the past, says Naef, figurative images always had a place in Islamic art: namely in the private sphere, which was neither sacred nor open to the public. In the Christian West it was very different. There, figurative imagery was firmly placed both in the sacred realm and in public.

According to Naef, the widespread idea that there have never been any figurative images in Islam results from a perception formed according to the Christian view in dealing with such images. In Islam, images have a different function to the one they have in the Christian West.

## **The image in the Islamic world**

The scholar of Islam, who lectures at the University of Geneva, also turns her attention to the dissemination of imagery in the Islamic world.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, in the land of the Wahhabis, photographs and painted portraits of the royal family are not unusual. Royal features even grace the country’s banknotes.

Of course, it was not ever thus. Important figures contributed to the dissemination of the image in the public realm. One of the first photographers in Iran was Nasr ad-Din Shah. He photographed women from his harem, who were kept strictly closeted away; among them also his mother and a number of concubines.

In Istanbul Sultan Abdulhamid II built up a large collection of photographs with countless albums and instruments. He oversaw the creation of valuable documentary photographs of the Ottoman Empire. The Armenian Abdullahyan brothers were counted among the best photographers, and in their function as court photographers Abdulhamid bestowed many honours upon them.

## **Muslims too need clarification**

The value of Silvia Naef's monograph is twofold. Here is a systematic and compact overview of the question of the ban on images and its actual practice in the Islamic world. Since the caricature debate, if not before, it has become clear that there is still a need for clarification on this issue – among Muslims as well. In this respect, Silvia Naef has written a book that is long overdue.

Furthermore, by questioning the actual content of many widespread preconceptions, Naef also helps us to overcome our intellectual limits where the understanding of certain questions is concerned. In so doing, this book also contributes to a deeper understanding of Islam.

Nimet Seker

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*Silvia Naef: Bilder und Bilderverbot im Islam. Vom Koran bis zum Karikaturenstreit [Images and the Image Ban in Islam: From Koran to Caricature Debate]. C.H. Beck Verlag, 160 pp.*

*Translated from the German by Charlotte Collins*

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