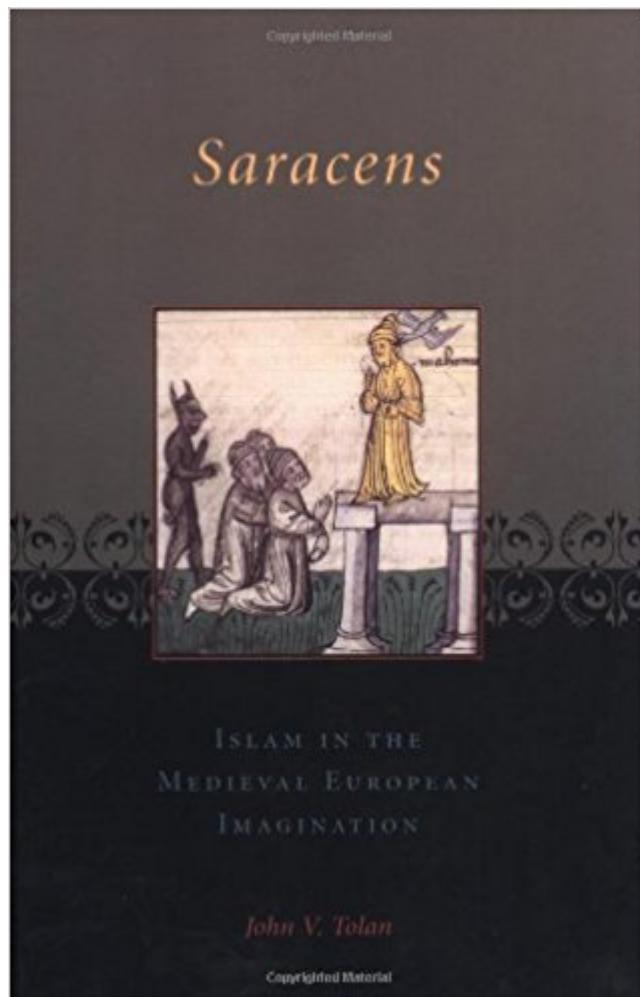


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# Saracens



## **Synopsis**

In the first century of Islam, most of the former Christian Roman Empire, from Syria to Spain, was brought under Muslim control in a conquest of unprecedented proportions. Confronted by the world of Islam, countless medieval Christians experienced a profound ambivalence, awed by its opulence, they were also troubled by its rival claims to the spiritual inheritance of Abraham and Jesus and humiliated by its social subjugation of non-Muslim minorities. Some converted. Others took up arms. Still others, the subjects of John Tolan's study of anti-Muslim polemics in medieval Europe, undertook to attack Islam and its most vivid avatar, the saracen, with words. In an effort to make sense of God's apparent abandonment of Christendom in favor of a dynamic and expanding Muslim civilization, European writers distorted the teachings of Islam and caricatured its believers in a variety of ways. What ideological purposes did these portrayals serve? And how, in turn, did Muslims view Christianity? Feelings of rivalry, contempt, and superiority existed on both sides, tinged or tempered at times with feelings of doubt, inferiority, curiosity, or admiration. Tolan shows how Christian responses to Islam changed from the seventh to thirteenth centuries, through fast-charging crusades and spirit-crushing defeats, crystallizing into polemical images later drawn upon by Western authors in the fourteenth to twentieth centuries. Saracens explores the social and ideological uses of contempt, explaining how the denigration of the other can be used to defend one's own intellectual construction of the world.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A significant contribution to the study of Islam's place in the medieval Christian imagination, this

work is highly recommended. (Choice)Tolan's book is welcome as a rare systematic treatment of medieval Christian attitudes toward Muslims.... Tolan's remarks invite us to explore the important question of why that is so. (Tomaz Mastnak *Speculum*)Saracens contains comprehensive notes, a thorough bibliography, and an excellent index... A useful summary of the current state of hitoriography in the field. (William E. Watson *History*)Tolan's model for Christian attitudes toward Islam is the reactions of early Christians to the Roman Empire... Tolan's book is full of interesting details on individual thinkers' views on Islam and provides a welcome addition. (Anna Sapir Abulafia *American Historical Review*)Medievalist Tolan shows how the relatively fluid European beliefs about Islam turned rigid in the 13th century, leading to strict laws that separated Christians from Muslims and produced even greater distortions in perception. (Saudi Aramco *World*)Had the late Edward Said and Daniel Norman collaborated to produce a volume incorporating their particular hermeneutical expertise and scholastic grasp of religious polemics it may well have looked something similar to John V. Tolan's *Saracens*.... Tolan's work, which is superbly researched, explores the plethora of distorted representations of Islam perpetuated throughout the period. (Mohammed Siddique Seddon *Muslim World Book Review*)The best of all recently published books on Christian-Islamic relations. (Gregory Miller *Riligious Studies Review*)A thoroughgoing reference work like *Saracens* was long overdue; it is also quite timely. (David Blanks *Catholic Historical Review*)

In an effort to make sense of God's apparent abandonment of Christendom in favor of a dynamic and expanding Muslim civilization, European writers distorted the teachings of Islam and caricatured its believers in a variety of ways. What ideological purposes did these portrayals serve? And how, in turn, did Muslims view Christianity? Tolan shows how Christian responses to Islam changed from the seventh to thirteenth centuries, through fast-charging crusades and spirit-crushing defeats, crystallizing into polemical images later drawn upon by Western authors in the fourteenth to twentieth centuries.

While I found Tolan's book to be full of useful information and references to medieval authors I was very disappointed that he did not devote adequate space to the Byzantine Empire. He lumps all the 'Eastern' Christians into one chapter of 30 pages in length. This includes various confessional groups like (Monophysites, Nestorians and Orthodox) and authors who lived under Islamic rule and those who didn't. Chapter 3 deals with some important authors and texts. There is Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, Anastasius of Sinai, the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, John of Damascus (of

course!), the Passion of Anthony Ruwah, Gregory of Decapolis, Theodore Abu Qurrah, Timothy of Baghdad, the Risalat al-Kindi and Theophanes the Confessor. All these deserved more discussion. They are all lumped together without any attempt to distinguish any confessional bias that might distinguish them from other groups. As a rule, authors living in Byzantine territory (thus safe from Muslim wrath) tended to be more critical and harsh than their contemporaries living under Islamic rule. These authors also tended to say more inaccurate things (like accusing Muslims of crypto-paganism). I was especially disappointed that Tolan didn't discuss Nicetas of Byzantium (also referred to as Niketas Byzantos). Tolan knows who he is. He is mentioned twice but you would never know that this 9th century author wrote a full length polemic against Islam. Nicetas tried to be thorough so he used a Greek translation of the Quran (he didn't know Arabic). This work is virtually unknown. Tolan missed a perfect opportunity to introduce this work to a wider audience. Tolan also ignores the correspondence between Byzantine Emperors and Caliphs and the depiction of Muslims in Byzantine historians/chroniclers (with the exception of Theophanes the Confessor). For Tolan, Western encounters are more important. This reflects the intended market for this book. For such an obvious bias of omission I have to deduct some stars.

Tolan's *Saracens* and his follow-up, *Sons of Ishmael*, are sophisticated, meticulous, and elegant investigations into a complex and shifting collective of medieval attitudes, texts, and sources. His preference for utilizing less-regularly cited primary documents is a marvelous gift, and he readily references other, more 'mainstream' works, which enables a scholar to follow his research trail in a logical and clear fashion. He avoids over-theorization in favor of summation and presentation, both needed and appreciated steps taken while he is writing formational texts in a growing field of study. Any student or scholar working on or interested in the formulation of medieval visions and attitudes towards Islam will be indebted to Tolan's careful scholarship. Highly recommended.

*Saracens* by John Tolan provides a good introduction to the literate medieval person's mindset. Most literate people in the Middle Ages were religious leaders, so the majority of the sources he cites are church leaders. Tolan shows how beginning in the 8th C Syrian Christians were overrun by followers of Islam, most often referred to as Saracens, Ishmaelites, or Arabs. Isadore of Spain had three categories for non-Christians: Jews, pagans and heretics. His typology was taken as truth for early medieval Christians and they spent much time and energy trying to force Islam to fit one of the pre-existing molds. The original dhimmis (second class conquered peoples, Jews and Christians)

took a very Old Testament approach. Islam was viewed as a temporary trouble; a punishment sent by God to purge Christians of their sins. They thought that it was just another barbarian invasion which would soon run itself out and dissolve. They saw no reason to learn anything about Islam, but focused more on internal divisions and problems. Once Islam conquered Spain in 711 Western Europe began to pay attention, and saw Islam as a new religious threat to be refuted. Some attempt was made to learn about Islam, and a few tracts and treatises were written against it. But the Westerners who were safe beyond the Alps still had no idea what they were talking about. However when fear of the 'other' was added to half-truths and misperceptions Islam was distorted by church leaders. Muhammad was portrayed as a trickster, false prophet and a practitioner of black magic. The sexual and worldly treasures to be found in paradise were denounced as sin by celibate Church leaders. The Christian dhimmis in Spain and Syria living under Islam and daily interacting with it tended to view it as a heresy, while the intellectuals living in safety branded it pagan idolatry. Finally the Qur'an was translated into Latin and Westerner leaders could actually study it. Gradually a more accurate view of Islam was developed and arguments through reason were enacted to convert the Saracen. Even with the best minds of the times trying to refute Islam through conventional means they were more often than not unsuccessful. Franciscan and Dominican missionaries went to Spain, North Africa, and the Holy Land in attempts to either gain a martyrs crown and a heavenly reward (typically Franciscan) or gain converts through special schooling and training in order to dialogue with them (Dominicans). As arguments through reason failed Saracens were viewed as less intelligent than normal pagans or heretics. If reason was not enough to persuade them then force was deemed necessary. Christian leaders became disillusioned as missionary attempts failed, and as crusade after crusade failed to gain permanent possession of the Holy Land. Islam did not fit into their nice little categories; and finally some scholars began to accept it as a separate religion. Hostility continued to rise as Christian's vilified Islam and the centuries old stereotypes persisted in later arguments. The tensions and rivalries founded by misrepresenting a new religion have impacted future generations down to our own day.

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