

RECONSTRUCTING EARLY ISLAM: TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES¹

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To judge by several recent surveys, it has become an academic truism that “Islam” belongs to “late antiquity,”² even if both the chronological and geographic range of the period remains controversial,³ and precisely how “Islam” is to fit in is unclear. The most ambitious of these surveys is typical: it organizes its material in a number of attractive categories (e.g., “Sacred Landscapes,” “War and Violence,” “Empire Building,” and “The Good Life”), but in these Muslims have hardly a role to play, being paraded out in a single, dry chapter entitled “Islam” instead.⁴ In explaining everything, “Islam” explains nothing. In pointing this out, I do not mean to suggest that late Romanists are in any way to blame, not least of all because we owe the most imaginative and ambitious attempts to integrate Islam into late antiquity to late Romanists rather than Orientalists.⁵ What I mean to suggest is that our categories deserve scrutiny. Surely I am not the

¹ I am indebted to J. Kenney, C. Melchert, R. Nettle and J. Piscatori for reading, correcting and otherwise improving a draft of this article, and to J. Johns for two valuable references.

² See, for example, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-classical World*, edited by G.W. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999); M. Maas, *Readings in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); the last volume (the 14th) of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, which is entitled *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), is naturally more conventional: it stocks part iv (“The Provinces and the Non-Roman World”) with the barbarians of earlier generations of scholarship, including “The Arabs” (678–700), which ends with a section on “Mecca, Muhammad and the Rise of Islam.”

³ See the “Introduction,” *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, edited by F.M. Clover and R.S. Humphreys (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); R. Martin, “Qu’est-ce que l’antiquité tardive?” *Aiôn: le temps chez les romains*, edited by R. Chevallier (Paris: A. & J. Picard, 1976), 261–304; a plea for including Sasanian Iran in late antiquity is made by J. Walker in his “The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran,” *Ancient World* 33 (2002): 45–69; I am indebted to the author for making this article available to me.

⁴ H. Kennedy, “Islam,” in *Late Antiquity*, 219–237.

⁵ P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, A.D. 150–750* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

only Islamic historian who, though recoiling at the use of “essentializing” definitions, practices his craft without a clear understanding of why the history made by Muslims is conventionally described in religious terms (“Islamic”), while that of non-Muslims described in political ones (“late Roman,” “Byzantine,” “Sasanian”), or of exactly how “Islam” can be said to have a “role” in the transition from antiquity to the middle ages.⁶ It may be that the explanation lies in the totalizing claims made on behalf of the tradition—that “Islam,” as a “civilization” or “way of life,” which “does not distinguish between religion and politics,”⁷ differs in some essential way from other late antique religions; but we shall see that these claims have histories of their own.

How are we to understand the religious and political movement(s) of the first/seventh and second/eighth centuries that we conventionally understand to signal “the rise of Islam”? The contribution that follows is intended to highlight how difficult this is to answer by discussing some of the terms and categories that historians conventionally use. I shall begin with general comments about “Islam,” turn to some models and assumptions shared by Orientalists and historians on the one hand,⁸ and Muslim modernists of both the politically minded (viz. “Islamists,” “fundamentalists”) and apolitical variety on the other,⁹ and conclude with more general comments about late antiquity and early Muslims. Throughout I emphasize the social and political significance of our knowledge of Islamic history, especially early Islamic history; nowhere do I break new ground in the primary texts.

I

Historians generally concern themselves with human actions as they take place in time and space, including acts of cognition—ideas—as

⁶ I allude here to the curiously titled collection of articles on the Pirenne thesis, *Bedeutung und Rolle des Islam beim Übergang vom Altertum zum Mittelalter*, edited by P.E. Hübinger (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968).

⁷ For an overview and criticism of the idea, see D.F. Eickelman and J. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 47ff.

⁸ The distinction between these two will become clearer below; compare P. Crone, “Serjeant and Meccan Trade,” *Arabica* 39 (1992): 216–240.

⁹ For a concise overview of the distinction, see R. Nettler, “Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism,” in *Religion and Democracy*, edited by D. Marquand and R. Nettler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 50ff.

they are expressed in time and space. This should be no less true of historians of the first/seventh-, second/eighth- and third/ninth-century Near East than it is of historians who work on different areas in different periods.

The observation may be utterly banal, but it is worth making because professional conventions sometimes serve to obscure the project. When someone describes himself as a “historian of Islam” or writes a book on the “origins of Islam,” “Islam” usually functions as a trope. The subject of his teaching and research is frequently not religion as such (a complex of ideas to which we shall presently turn), but rather the individual and corporate actions taken by Muslims, usually, but not necessarily, *qua* Muslims, everything from paying taxes and fighting wars to trading and building cities. *The Cambridge History of Islam*, for example, is not so much about the ideas or beliefs that are said to constitute the religious tradition as it is about what some Muslims did in history, especially those actions of political consequence that, collectively, constitute “Islamic civilization.”¹⁰ Of course some historians care little about battles and buildings, and are interested instead in “religious” ideas—or, to borrow from Baird,¹¹ in ideas of which we may choose to ask religious questions (the difference is vast). Although they may prefer the term “Islamicist” to “historian,” their project remains the same. For Islam obviously has no material existence and can be studied only insofar as it is a series of ideas, which are or were held by believers and non-believers, actualized in the symbolic language of text or praxis, and transmitted and transmuted through history. We take it for granted that the series constitutes the tradition—that is, that an idea actualized once survives to be actualized at a later period—but cannot prove it.

Now there is nothing particularly Islamic about the reification of discrete action or practice into phenomenalized concept. On this count, historians of Islam are playing the same game that other historians play: in this respect, a history of early Christianity or Norman feudalism will share the same model of historical description as a history of early Islam. But for Islam much greater claims are also

¹⁰ The criticism of the *Cambridge History* made by R. Owen, “Studying Islamic history,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4 (1973): 287–298, could be made of a great deal of Islamic history written 25 years later. Another example can be found in the volume on late antiquity with which I began.

¹¹ R.D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 25.

made, and we can explore these by turning to H.A.R. Gibb (d. 1971), who provided the following description in 1932. (I have added the italics for emphasis.)

Islam is indeed much more than a system of theology: it is a *complete civilization*. If we were to seek for parallel terms, we should use Christendom rather than Christianity, China rather than Confucianism. It includes a whole complex of cultures which have grown up around the *religious core*, or have in most cases been linked to it with more or less modification, a *complex* with distinctive features in political, social and economic structure, in its conception of law, in ethical outlook, intellectual tendencies, habits of thought and action. Further, it includes a vast number of peoples differing in language, character and inherited aptitudes, yet bound together not only by the link of a *common creed*, but even more strongly by their participation in a *common culture*, their obedience to a *common law* and their adoption of a *common tradition*.¹²

In the form presented here, this construction of Islam manifests the discredited racialism of an earlier period (“peoples differing in language, character and inherited aptitudes”). Even so, its essential idea—that “Islam,” which, as “complete civilization” is “bound together” by common ideas and practices, imposes itself upon the political, social, economic, legal, ethical and intellectual “tendencies” of its adherents—is familiar from Gibb’s other work, such as his “An Interpretation of Islamic History” (“Islam is a concept which, phenomenalized in a number of linked but diverse political, social and religious organisms, covers an immense area in space and time”).¹³ Gibb was not the first to describe Islam in these ways, however.¹⁴ More important, he was not the last: the model still retains its hold on the study of Islam amongst medievalists, despite the attempts by anthropologists,

¹² Thus H.A.R. Gibb, *Whither Islam? A Survey of Modern Movements in the Moslem World* (London: V. Gollancz, 1932), 12.

¹³ Gibb, “An Interpretation of Islamic History,” *Journal of World History* 1 (1953): 39, which is reprinted in his *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, edited by S.J. Shaw and W.R. Polk. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), chapter 1. Compare his “The Heritage of Islam in the Modern World (I),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1 (1970): 4, “For the characteristic expression of Islam, even as a religion, is its social organization as a Community, uniting secular or temporal elements with the religious or spiritual in *one single, interwoven system*” [emphasis added]. In general, see A. Hourani, “H.A.R. Gibb: the Vocation of an Orientalist,” in his *Europe and the Middle East* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), 104–134.

¹⁴ The first Orientalist to tackle Islam as a civilization was probably A. von Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen* (Vienna: W. Braumüller, 1875–1877), where the “Orient” represents “Islam.” In several respects the work anticipates A. Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1922).

sociologists, social theorists—and, it must be said, the occasional historian—to shake it free.¹⁵ That this is the case does not require demonstration. In what follows I should like to suggest that the Islam defined by Gibb is a distinctly *modern* Islam, and that this distinctly modern Islam is the common possession of Orientalist and modernist Muslims alike.

Islam is a “religion” and, more than that, a “civilization.” Where do the ideas come from and how do they condition scholarship? It is true that Muslims of the pre-modern period occasionally manifested an understanding of “religion” that was very precocious by European standards; some Muslim heresiographers are even championed as the world’s first comparative religionists.¹⁶ And there can be no doubt that diverse cultural forms were in one way or another associated with the religious tradition more strictly speaking; Islam being the faith of the rulers and the logic of their rule, it possessed a cultural ubiquity that Rabbinic Judaism could never generate. There clearly *were* institutions, practices and symbols that were distinctly Islamic (or Islamicate, as Hodgson would have it).¹⁷ All this said, the grammar underlying Gibb’s remarks clearly owes much to those who produced the historiography and *Religionswissenschaft* of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which completed the process whereby “religion” was conceptualized as a sphere of human action and belief that was distinct from other human activities (e.g. political movements or economic production), endowed with its own evolution (origins being given particular emphasis), and made a transcendent object through history.¹⁸ Al-Shahrastānī’s *Milal* no more reflects a modern understanding of “religion” than Ibn Khaldūn’s *ʿumrān* (“organised habitation”) or *ḥaḍārah* (“city life”) anticipate what we understand by “civilization” and “culture.”¹⁹ As Wilfred Cantwell Smith put it, “[t]he idea was widely accepted that religion is a something with a definite

¹⁵ A discussion that is both synthetic and provocative can be found in A.H. el-Zein, “Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for an Anthropology of Islam,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 227–254; for the occasional historian, see Lapidus, below.

¹⁶ Thus W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1963), 294f.; E.J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), 11.

¹⁷ M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974), vols. 1 and 2.

¹⁸ For Gibb’s reading on religion, see Hourani, “H.A.R. Gibb,” 121f.

¹⁹ I draw the translations from A. Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn: An Essay in Reinterpretation* (London: Frank Cass, 1982).

and fixed form, if only one could find it";²⁰ (this was a period in which things such as religion and society were being "found" for the first time).²¹ Of course in the case of Islam, we are not talking about a process as precipitous or radical as the nineteenth-century invention of Hinduism,²² and Cantwell Smith clearly envisions a relatively long process of reification. The nineteenth century remains decisive in this process, however, and after some equivocating, he concludes that his general axiom—"that a religious system appears as a system, an intelligible entity susceptible of objective conceptualization, primarily to someone on the outside"—holds true for Islam.²³ Like all other Orientalists, Gibb, of course, *was* "someone on the outside," and doubly so: he was a non-Muslim who devoted much of his professional life to understanding and explicating pre-modern Islam with the tools of nineteenth-century philology and history.

Gibb's view of Islam as religion and civilization was thus a product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century categories of analysis (Toynbee [d. 1975] being especially influential in Gibb's case)—which is of course what we should expect.²⁴ Put another way, the idea of religion as a transcendent reality having taken hold during the nineteenth century, Islam was now accordingly held to be subject to description, and the striking feature of its description for Gibb, as for other Orientalists, was its totalizing and pervasive character. This is not to deny that there was more than one way for Orientalists to approach "Islam,"²⁵ or, as we have already seen, that there were distinctive cultural patterns associated with Islamic rule. Moreover, just like pre-modern Christians, it is certainly the case that pre-modern Muslims lived in nothing less than a full and coherent world of belief and action. There are few sentences in Lucien Febvre's rich evocation of "religion's domination of life" in a sixteenth-century French town

²⁰ Smith, *Meaning*, 47.

²¹ On "this new object called society," see T. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 120ff.

²² Compare R. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999).

²³ Smith, *Meaning*, 107 and 115.

²⁴ Note that as late as the 1870's, one could conceptualize this civilization as "oriental," rather than Islamic; thus von Kremer's *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen* (see above, note 14). A decade later, G. Le Bon had written his influential *La civilisation des arabes* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et cie, 1884).

²⁵ Compare J. van Ess, "From Wellhausen to Becker: The Emergence of *Kulturgeschichte* in Islamic Studies," in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, edited by M. Kerr (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1980), 27–51.

of his own synthesis that could not survive translation into an Islamic context: "From birth to death stretched a long chain of ceremonies, traditions, customs, and observances, all of them Christian or Christianized, and they bound a man in spite of himself, held him captive even if he claimed to be free."²⁶ But this world of deep-rooted but implicit beliefs and rituals is a far cry from the reified Islam of the French and English Orientalist tradition, out of which modern Islamics developed and at the heart of which is said to stand an essential center (Gibb's "religious core") that transcends and pervades varieties of lived human experience and history to produce an associated civilization.²⁷ "What Orientalism contributed to the study of Islamic societies was the concept of Islamic civilization," as Burke has written in a collection of articles on Islamic studies; the statement is a bit bold, but it effectively puts the lie to some Orientalists' naïve positivism: they were constructing as much as they were describing pre-modern Islam.²⁸ Turner paints with a broad brush, too, especially because his reading is focused upon later Islamic history (particularly Gibb and Bowen's work on the Ottoman empire). Still, there is little resisting the force of his argument. Orientalism's inclination towards a homogeneous and essentialist model of "Islamic civilization" frequently predetermined its conclusions: the civilization was either static or in decline.²⁹ Lapidus took issue with the reified Islam of his teacher's tradition, but historians have not answered his call for a Geertzian solution.³⁰ By now it is probably too late, since "systems of meaning" have been shown to present problems of their own.³¹

European Islamicists were not alone in this process. Alongside the nineteenth-century Islam constructed by Orientalists one must place

²⁶ L. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, translated by B. Gottlieb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 336.

²⁷ On the problem of "religious cores," see E.J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 38.

²⁸ E. Burke, "The Sociology of Islam: The French Tradition," in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, 75; for background on the "civilization of Islam," see Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East*, especially 66ff.

²⁹ B.S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1978).

³⁰ I. Lapidus, "Islam and the Historical Experience of Muslim Peoples," *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, 101.

³¹ For some historians' misgivings, see L. Hunt, "Introduction: History, Culture, and Text," *The New Cultural History*, edited by Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 12f.; D. LaCapra, "Culture and Ideology," *Poetics Today* 9 (1988): 377–394; compare also B. Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 30ff.; and L. Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 97ff.

the far-reaching re-invention of Islam that Muslim modernists were themselves effecting, and this for the manifestly apologetic purposes of providing a new language of cultural authenticity vis à vis European nationalism. Already in the thought of al-Afghānī (d. 1897) one can find the distinction between “Islam” and the “West,”³² a formulation as foreign to classical Islamic thought as it would be emblematic of Islamic modernism of the twentieth century.³³ In fact, the modernists’ reconceptualization of Islam was profound, and despite all their noisy claims of cultural authenticity, the Islamists of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries speak a language coined by their modernist forebears of the late nineteenth and early twentieth, their shibboleth being a call for a “return” to an Islam that never was.³⁴ There are several features of this Islam-that-never-was, one of which is a neo-scripturalism that upends the classical hierarchy of the scripture (Qur’ān) and Tradition; as Calder puts it, “whereas the pre-modern writers affirm that tradition controls understanding of revelation, modernist Islam tends to say the opposite, that revelation is a means to get rid of the (burdensome and irrelevant) complexities of a tradition which, perhaps, it is implied, has not served the community well.”³⁵ A second and related feature—and surely the most salient—is Islam as totalizing alternative, Gibb’s “single, interwoven system”,³⁶ or, as the protestors’ banners in Cairo frequently read, “the solution” (*al-hall*), an “alternative” that is “an obligation and necessity.”³⁷

³² See N.R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn “al-Afghānī”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). The terms *dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* define legal boundaries rather than contrasting civilizations.

³³ Especially given Gibb’s and other Orientalists’ close engagement with the modern history of Islam, it is tempting to suggest that what has been said in the light of the 1970s and 1980s might be said of the 1870s and 1880s: “Contemporary events are dangerous guides to thought. Islam has become so much of a preoccupation of Western politics and media that we are tempted to think of it as a single, unitary, and all-determining object, a ‘thing’ out there with a will of its own”; see M. Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: An Anthropologist’s Introduction* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 18.

³⁴ Compare S. Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Essays on Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2ff.

³⁵ N. Calder, “Law,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), 2:995.

³⁶ For Gibb at his most preposterously totalizing, see his “The Heritage of Islam in the Modern world (I),” 4: “There are numerous descriptions of the manner in which the pagan African, when converted to Islam, immediately displays the same emotional responses characteristic of the born Muslim of different classes.”

³⁷ The last paraphrases Y. al-Qaraḍāwī, *al-Hall al-islāmī farīdah wa-ḍurūrah* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-risālah, 1988); compare Y. Haddad, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge*

Totalized, Islam is now something that can be applied. *Nīzām*, which in typical usage in classical Arabic means the political “order” decreed by God, becomes in modern Arabic a “system” of life assembled by ideologues to be applied by politicians; a similarly ubiquitous term of modernist and Islamist rhetoric is *minhāj*, “program.”³⁸ According to one modernist (al-Jundī), “Islamic history—like Islam itself—cannot be understood except by the principle of integration and comprehensiveness. For it is a unity of interconnected links no matter how numerous the facets. It is an ‘integrated whole’ which does not disintegrate despite the appearances of division.”³⁹ The idea seems as natural to us as it would seem strange to al-Ghazālī. As Geertz put it, there is a world of difference between “being held by religious convictions and holding them.”⁴⁰ The phrase captures as well as any the Islam of modernity—that is, the Islam described by Orientalist and Muslim modernist alike.

Beyond the impact of the West, precisely how it came about that Muslim modernists re-invented Islam remains unclear. Much depends on one’s model. It was once thought adequate to describe the process in terms of intellectual history: the ideas that had come to prevail were Western ones, and these the modernists were keen to adopt and transform; a variation on this model is at work even in some fairly iconoclastic works.⁴¹ *La Civilisation des arabes* of G. Le Bon (d. 1931), for example, heavily influenced the *Ta’rīkh al-tamaddun al-islāmī* of J. Zaydān (d. 1914).⁴² Given that Orientalists of the late nineteenth

of History (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 9: “For the normativist [i.e., Islamist], religion is not only the central part of life, it is the totality of life, that from which all of reality proceeds and has its meaning.”

³⁸ Thus Sayyid Quṭb’s “divine programme”; see Quṭb, *Fī zilāl al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-shurūq, 1973–1972), *muqaddimah* 13ff.

³⁹ Haddad, *Contemporary Islam*, 159.

⁴⁰ C. Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 61.

⁴¹ On the ‘tropes and notions of political and social thought’, which form a ‘universal repertoire that is inescapable’, see al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 1996), 33f. and 49, drawing, of course, on B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991).

⁴² Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 169; on Zaydān in general, T. Phillip, *Gurḡi Zaydān: His Life and Thought* (Beirut and Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1979). It also is a notable thing that Toynbee’s *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), seems to have found an Arabic translator already by 1949 as *Al-Ḥaḍārah fī al-mīzān*, translated by Amīn Maḥmūd al-Sharīf (Cairo: Wizārat al-tarbiyah wa-al-ta’līm, 1949). And it is a strange thing that a biography of Muḥammad written by a non-Arabist can find a readership in the Middle East; see K. Armstrong, *Sirat al-nabī Muḥammad*, translated by F. Naṣr (Cairo: Suṭūr, 1998).

and early twentieth centuries were frequently more familiar with Islamic thought of their time than historians are today, one might imagine that influence was a two-way street: after all, Zaydān may have drawn on Le Bon, but D.S. Margoliouth translated Zaydān into English.⁴³ Be this as it may, some would now prefer to see things in terms of social practice, rather than in terms of the transmission of ideas. Spelled out a bit more fully: Muslim modernists of the nineteenth century construed Islam in essentially new ways not because they read Comte or Hegel (to take two obvious examples),⁴⁴ but because they were witnessing and participating in social practices that generated and reflected radically new configurations of power—everything from the printing press and classroom to the army's serried ranks.⁴⁵ Whether one posits a causal connection between these new configurations of power and attendant social, political or economic changes also turns on one's model: those following in Anderson's footsteps would be inclined to identify causes (e.g. capitalism, especially of the print variety), while those following in Foucault's more stringent anti-positivism would be disinclined to do so.

II

To recapitulate: for all their voluminous reading in the sources for "classical Islam," Orientalists such as Gibb were "outsiders" in Smith's sense, experts to whom Islam could now appear "as a system, an intelligible entity susceptible of objective conceptualization." The context of this conceptualization was both academic (eighteenth- and nineteenth-century categories of analysis) and political, and the signal feature of the "system" was its law-based totalizing character. Mean-

⁴³ Jurjī Zaydān, *Umayyads and 'Abbāsids: Being the Fourth Part of Jurjī Zaydān's History of Islamic Civilization*, translated by D.S. Margoliouth (London: E.J. Brill, 1907); Gibb himself wrote *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), in addition to his *Whither Islam?*

⁴⁴ On some antecedents, see A. Dallal, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750–1850," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993): 341–359.

⁴⁵ The spread of print culture in this process, which was given great emphasis by Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, has received considerable attention; see, for example, B. Messick, *The Caligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 115ff.; on armies and their organization, K. Fahmi, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army, and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

while, Muslim modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries worked with categories they shared with Orientalists. The “tradition” (such as it was) had always been in some measure dynamic, but the unprecedented social and political change of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced altogether new paths for those claiming religious authority and altogether new constructions of belief and action.⁴⁶ The call for a “return,” which has typically been made by those with little or no religious training by pre-modern standards, to an “Islam” that is knowable only through texts and conceptualized as a “system” of thought and belief that admits application, thus ironically underlines how far many these authorities have distanced themselves from the classical tradition. I shall return to this point below.

Of all the implications that could be drawn from the above, the grossest and least original is that the philology and history of the Islamic Near East, no less than the archaeology of the Holy Land,⁴⁷ possess both histories of their own and politics of their own.⁴⁸ Said and many, many others have argued along these lines.⁴⁹ All the same, I should like to explore it further.

We may begin where *Orientalism* figuratively ended. How do we know the history of the Middle East and what are the politics of our knowledge? Whether “objective” knowledge is *precluded* by politics (by which I mean the networks of power and authority, private and public, in which scholarship is produced) is highly contentious and remains unresolved.⁵⁰ Certainly scholarship on the Rabbis has not gone unaffected by the existence of a politically autonomous Jewish state,⁵¹ and the historiography of pre-modern Europe has been

⁴⁶ Compare Geertz, *Islam Observed*, where the destructive force of modernity is greatly emphasized.

⁴⁷ Compare N.A. Silberman, “Power, Politics and the Past: The Social Construction of Antiquity in the Holy Land,” in *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, edited by Thomas E. Levy (New York: Facts on File, 1995), 10–20; see also below.

⁴⁸ That an introductory textbook such as G. Endress, *Einführung in die islamische Geschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982), which is translated as *An Introduction to Islam*, translated by C. Hillenbrand (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), begins with a chapter on “Europe and Islam: The History of a Science” presumably reflects both post-*Orientalist* anxieties and a long-standing self-awareness on the part of German Orientalism.

⁴⁹ E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); an adequate survey of the resulting debate can be found in A.L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (London: Longman, 2002).

⁵⁰ See, *inter alia*, *Telling the Truth about History*, edited by J. Appleby, L. Hunt and M. Jacob (New York: Norton, 1994).

⁵¹ Cf. C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

deeply conditioned—some would say pre-determined—by the rise of modern nationalism and the consequent construction of medievalism and its proto-nationalist states;⁵² the historiography of the Merovingians is a case in point.⁵³ In fact, there is no question that the historiography of the pre-modern Islamic world has at least been *influenced* by nationalist politics. As Ende has exhaustively shown, many Arab Muslim modernists of the first half of the twentieth century rehabilitated the Umayyad dynasty for manifestly nationalist purposes.⁵⁴ It is true that, the occasional exception aside,⁵⁵ baldly nationalist narratives such as those discussed by Ende have exercised little influence upon the professional study of Islam, at least by the standards set by later periods of Islamic history.⁵⁶ Philologically inclined Orientalists have generally seen their task as one of explicating (rather than challenging) the tradition, and since the tradition conventionally describes politics in terms of dynasties, so do Orientalists.⁵⁷ Still, it is not difficult to see the nationalist model that lies behind the classic of the early period, *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz*, now exactly a century old;⁵⁸

⁵² See P.L. Kohl, "Nationalism and Archaeology: On the Constructions of Nations and the Reconstructions of the Remote Past," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27 (1998): 223–246; and H. Härke, "Archaeologists and Migrations: A Problem of Attitude?" *Current Anthropology* 39 (1998): 19–45.

⁵³ See P. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁵⁴ W. Ende, *Arabische Nation und islamische Geschichte: die Umayyaden im Urteil arabischer Autoren des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Beirut and Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1977).

⁵⁵ Surely the discipline of Iranistik, the most glorious achievement of which must be the 7-volume *Cambridge History of Iran*, owes something to the Qajar and Pahlavi achievement of Iranian nation building. There is no analogue in the *Cambridge History of Islam* to A.H. Zarrīnkūb "The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath," in the *Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, edited by R.N. Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968–1991), 1–56; compare Zarrīnkūb, *Dū qam-i sukūt* (Teheran: Amīr kabīr, 1957).

⁵⁶ For the Ottoman case, see C. Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁵⁷ Michael Brett must be correct when he writes that "[u]nlike the history of Europe, which is normally written in terms of states created by dynasties, the history of the Islamic Near and Middle East is frequently written in terms of the dynasties which created the states"; M. Brett, *The Rise of the Fatimids: The World of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the Fourth Century of the Hijra, Tenth Century C.E.* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 2001), 5. To his discussion of dynastically oriented historiography of the Fatimids, one may now add P. Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and its Sources* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

⁵⁸ In fact, it is already present in G. Weil's *Geschichte der chalifen*, 5 vols. (Mannheim: F. Bassermann, 1846–1851). Although our understanding of the Umayyad dynasty has improved considerably since Weil's and Wellhausen's days, the dynasty remains the category of our understanding—at least for the beginner; thus G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate A.D. 661–750* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

here Mu'āwiyah, Ziyād b. Abīhi and al-Ḥajjāj are regarded as the champions of state building, and “[t]he end comes when, with the victory of the Abbasids, the Arabs ‘perish’ in a ‘nationless universal government’.”⁵⁹ To this day, questions of Arab and Persian ethnicity remain prominent in discussions of the ‘Abbāsīd Revolution.⁶⁰

More than that can be said, especially about those who have worked on the early Islamic tradition. It can scarcely be accidental that the model implicit in some Israeli work on the Islamic conquests of the first/seventh century derives from the archaeology of the Israelite “conquest” of Canaan in the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C.E.⁶¹ The resulting conclusions—that Arabic-Islamic accounts of conquest violence misrepresent protracted social processes of settlement and function only to legitimize Umayyad claims to the Holy Land—are readily disproven and clearly wrongheaded, since some early, non-Islamic sources that are independent of the Islamic tradition tell a similar story.⁶² I leave it to others to determine if the conclusions are cynical. In related cases it is also perfectly clear that the pre-modern history of Palestine and Muslim/non-Muslim relations have not escaped modern politics: not all historians have followed one reviewer’s admonition that “[L]’historien a un rôle essentiel à jouer dans le monde contemporain, apprendre la tolérance aux différentes composantes ethniques, religieuses ou nationales vivant ensemble en les aidant à mieux se connaître et à mieux connaître les autres.”⁶³ European and North American varieties of Islamic history-writing also seem to betray their politics.

⁵⁹ Thus van Ess, “*Kulturgeschichte*,” 43.

⁶⁰ See E. Daniel, “The ‘ahl al-taqādum’ and the Problem of the Constituency of the Abbasid Revolution in the Merv Oasis,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 7 (1996): 150–179; and A. Elad, “Aspects of the Transition from the Umayyad to the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 19 (1995): 89–132.

⁶¹ See J. Koren and Y.D. Nevo, “Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies,” *Der Islam* 68 (1991): 87–107; compare. M. Sharon, “The Birth of Islam in the Holy Land,” in *The Holy Land in History and Thought*, edited by M. Sharon (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 225–235; and Sharon, “The Umayyads as *ahl al-bayt*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14 (1991): 114–152.

⁶² See R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997); C.F. Robinson, “The Conquest of Khūzistān: A Historiographical Reassessment,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (forthcoming).

⁶³ See T. Bianquis, Review of *A History of Palestine, 634–1009* by M. Gil, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 38 (1995): 99; that Gil’s book is actually about the Jewish communities of Palestine is well known. Very little needs to be said about Bat Ye’or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam*, translated by David Maisel et al. (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

It is noteworthy that the fiercest critics of the early Islamic historical tradition were employed and trained in what amounts to a post-colonial Europe of the late 1960s and early 1970s,⁶⁴ while in North America, where political and cultural sensitivities were and remain more fragile, contributions to this revisionist scholarship have been late in coming, and in some cases only really branched off from European transplants in American soil. Schacht may have moved from Oxford to New York, but his program of recovering pre-classical legal thinking was only renewed in London. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the European Orientalists of that earlier generation, whose move to North America in the 1950s and 1960s marked the beginning of a tradition of Islamics in the Cold-War US,⁶⁵ more successfully imported sociological and functionalist approaches to Islam than they did the source-critical skepticism that inspired earlier, seminal works of European Islamics: one can draw a line from Goldziher to Noth, or from Gibb to Lapidus, but not from Goldziher to Gibb to Lapidus.

Be this as it may, it is certainly the case that the post-*Orientalism* debate has been more controversial than productive. Some old-fashioned Orientalists have predictably taken umbrage at the problematization of knowledge for which *Orientalism*, amongst other works of the 1980s and 1990s, argued; the charge that their discipline was nothing more than a colonial project especially rankled.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, some hard-core neo-traditionist Muslims have gone as far as to suggest that only Muslims can possess “real” knowledge of Islam.⁶⁷ Both

⁶⁴ I have in mind here A. Noth, *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1973); and the revised edition by Noth with Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, translated by M. Bonner (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994); M. Cook and P. Crone, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); J. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Wansbrough, *The Sectarial Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); and P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁶⁵ Gibb and Gustave von Grunebaum (d. 1972) are particularly good examples; compare *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*, edited by G. von Grunebaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

⁶⁶ Thus J. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1992), xiii and 94.

⁶⁷ See the notes appended to Ibn al-Naṣīb al-Miṣrī, *The Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law* [*Umdat al-sālik wa-uddat al-nāsik*], translated by N.H.M. Keller (Evanston: Sunna Books, 1991), 1042 (the founding fathers of Orientalism are “dogs”; Muslims should only read other Muslims); and Y. Dutton, Review of *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on the Islam’s Holy Book*, edited by Ibn Warraq,

can therefore be said to share what may be called an initiation-based epistemology: traditional Orientalists required endless training before admitting initiates into their guild (Gibb himself is famously said to have characterized the first 10 years of Arabic study as difficult, the second 10 years as somewhat easier),⁶⁸ while the neo-traditionalist Muslim requires nothing less than entrance into faith itself. Knowledge comes from committing to Arabic philology or converting to Islam.

Of course few practicing Orientalists or historians now hold that philology *alone* suffices for an understanding of pre-modern Islam, a fact that is closely related to the demise of faculties and departments of Oriental Studies and the corresponding appearance of Islamic history and Islamic religion in faculties and departments of History and Religious Studies. "An ability to parse Homer did not give one knowledge of Ionian land tenure, or gender relations, and the same must go for Arabic"⁶⁹ (which is very different from denying that the *sine qua non* of writing Islamic history is the ability to construe the classical language). Even so, it is a measure of just how conservative the professional study of Islamic history remains that the noisiest controversy of the last 25 years concerns the *reliability* of our written sources, rather than the models according to which we are to understand and use them. Virtually to a man and woman, we are all unreconstructed positivists, determined to reconstruct texts or the reality we take them to reflect.⁷⁰ Neither the "linguistic turn," which dissolves the referential bond that is supposed to tie reader to text to reality, nor the new cultural history, by which I mean an approach that construes the "state" or "religion" as discursive objects rather than transcendent universals that become particularized in specific historical moments, has had any real impact on the field.⁷¹ As Turner

Journal of Islamic Studies 11 (2000): 231f. (only monotheists can understand revelation, and the Qur'an is the "best and most complete example" of the phenomenon).

⁶⁸ As Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*, 9, put it "Once the novice has mastered the Arabic which the Orientalist, by professional agreement, recognizes as 'a difficult language', there are few difficulties involved in research."

⁶⁹ F. Halliday, "'Orientalism' and Its Critics," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20 (1993): 154f.

⁷⁰ I include here J. Wansbrough, although his positivism is so ambivalent that it requires exegesis of its own; for a number of views on his views, see the issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion: Special Issue, Islamic Origins Reconsidered*; *John Wansbrough and the Study of Early Islam* 9.1 (1997), edited by H. Berg.

⁷¹ As far as monographs are concerned, the closest we come to the linguistic turn is T. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic History: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbasid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and this is not as

has written, the “major problems of research for Orientalists are matters of philology, not epistemology.”⁷² However one wishes to regard this conservatism—and, generally speaking, I would regard it as a very good thing, since philology in general and source criticism in particular are proven methods that have led to real and probably irreversible results⁷³—one consequence is that Orientalists and modernists occupy much the same methodological ground.

The apparent rancor between Orientalists and Muslims thus serves to mask even more common models and methods, at least two of which are especially important. The first is the view that the beginnings of Islam are both recoverable (in part or in detail) and decisive. Below I shall outline how some of the conclusions reached by more recent Western scholarship can be brought to bear upon modernist debates. Here it is enough to point out that whereas the modernist typically locates a *normative* Islam in its beginnings, much recent Western scholarship has come to speak of a *formative* Islam, when enduring patterns of thought and institutions were established. To speak of “normative” Islam is to speak in a prescriptive language of theology or law; while to speak of “formative” Islam is to speak in a descriptive language of evolution and functionalism.⁷⁴ But how does one *know* this early period? Here we arrive at the second piece of common ground occupied by historian of Islam and modernist Muslim alike. Both typically share a text-based positivism—the truth of what once happened can be comprehended because it is preserved in books; put uncharitably, it is a “fetish for facts” that is satisfied only by adducing textual evidence. Of the European context of these ideas, little needs to be said here. More should be said, however, about the modernist appropriation of these ideas.

Now it can hardly be disputed that pre-modern Muslim scholars had often claimed to know and to pursue the truth; they had also lived in a world of texts. Still, the remarkable exception aside, their enthusiasm for the truth was generally counterweighted by a respect

close as it first appears. It has been left to outsiders to marry the study of early Islam with cultural history or social theory; thus al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), and M. Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam: Mind, Economy, Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁷² Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*, 9.

⁷³ J. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: S.P.C.K., 1984), 3.

⁷⁴ On unacknowledged functionalism, see Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*, 82ff.

for tradition,⁷⁵ and their reliance on texts was mediated by the spoken word, memorized line and improvisational techniques of traditional learning. Put differently, modern texts possess a sheer facticity that no pre-modern *‘ālim* would have granted, steeped as he was in a culture of audition and orality, one in which authority lay not in the inert written word, but in an interplay between text on the one hand, and its reader and commentator on the other, one where multiple meanings were not merely accommodated, but in some measure even encouraged: if anything was fetished, it was *ikhtilāf*—agreeing to disagree—rather than facts.⁷⁶ The nature of the interplay between scholar and text obviously varied from place to place, time to time, and genre to genre, but there is some reason to think that early on it especially favored the scholars.⁷⁷ The hugely imaginative and manifestly improbable readings proposed by second/eighth- and third/ninth-century Qur’ān commentators reflect the discontinuities of the early scholarly tradition⁷⁸—scholars in the third/ninth century clearly did not know what certain Qur’ānic terms had meant to Muḥammad and his audience—as well as the commentators’ authority to impose meanings of their own. *Tafsīr* clarifies and occludes meaning. Similarly, legal literature. One does not have to accept Calder’s re-dating of early Islamic legal texts to be impressed by his larger point: third/ninth-century legal thinking and writing were far more dynamic, eclectic, adaptive and creative than we have been inclined to believe.⁷⁹ Although the balance of authority would in some respects shift away from the scholar and towards the texts as time passed, the authority of the reader and commentator would always outweigh that of the written word.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ See above, note 35.

⁷⁶ See Calder below and F. Malti-Douglas “Texts and Tortures: The Reign of al-Muṭaḍid and the Construction of Historical Meaning,” *Arabica* 46 (1999): 313–336; compare Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 148ff., where Arabic is said to be closer to European languages to “the play of difference that produces meaning.”

⁷⁷ Compare G. Schoeler, “Schreiben und Veröffentlichen: Zu Verwendung und Funktion der Schrift in den ersten islamischen Jahrhunderten,” *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 1–43; partially translated as Schoeler, “Writing and Publishing: On the Use and Function of Writing in the First Centuries of Islam,” *Arabica* 44 (1997): 423–435.

⁷⁸ For some examples, see P. Crone, “Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qur’ān,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 1f.; Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 203ff.; and (for an example from *ḥadīth* collections), J. Burton, *An Introduction to the Ḥadīth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 143.

⁷⁹ See N. Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), especially 198ff.

⁸⁰ The best general study on manuscript culture remains F. Rosenthal’s *The Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947).

It has taken modernity and modern social dislocations to shift social authority decisively away from the *madrasah*-trained ‘*ālim* and his world of *ijāzah*, *samā’*, *mashyakhah* and *riḥlah fī ṭalab al-‘ilm*, towards the (often self-trained) reader of authoritatively edited and mass-produced editions. The effect of these editions, which, in inspiration, were generated by the same nineteenth-century project of scientific historicizing that had generated interest in “civilization” itself, has apparently not yet been measured. Suffice it to say here that many modernists cut their academic teeth by editing texts, and that “the return of Islam” in the past 30 years or so has produced a boom in editing and publishing works from the classical Islamic past.⁸¹

Texts contain “facts” from which we can recover “reality.” What, in practice, does this actually mean? As we have already seen, for those of us who remain committed to its underlying assumptions, it has produced results. For those who do not, the idea has produced confusion. For example, it may be that we have nothing less than the invention of a “system” of “Islamic law” that no pre-modern jurist would have recognized. According to this point of view, our unexamined positivism has mistaken literary conventions for reflections of social praxis; far from recording how Muslims applied or practiced law, “legal” discourse is highly theoretical, experimental and “reflexive,” rather than practical or pragmatic.⁸² Now this is a radical proposition, and one that requires further research; but given how our views of legal discourse have been so deeply conditioned by our experience of modernity’s legal *codes*, it certainly enjoys verisimilitude. Less radical but no less important is the suggestion that our “fetish for facts” has led a long tradition of Western scholarship on Prophetic *ḥadīth* to reduce the sociologically complex and historically contingent functioning of the Sunnah to the relatively narrow issue of its authenticity.⁸³ We may not be the first historians of religion to focus upon the “truth” of a given tradition’s doctrine at the expense of its significance and cultural meanings, but we must count as amongst the most stubborn.⁸⁴

⁸¹ There are many examples, including Muḥammad ‘Abduh (al-Jurjānī, Badī‘ al-Zamān, Ibn Sīdah, the *Nahj al-balāghah*), Rashīd Riḍā (Ibn Taymīyah, al-Jurjānī) and Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, among others); on their readings of Umayyad history, see Ende, *Arabische Nation*.

⁸² Thus Calder, “Law,” 979f.

⁸³ Compare W.B. Hallaq, “The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth: A Pseudo-Problem”, *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 75–90.

⁸⁴ Compare J. Neusner, “The Study of Religion as the Study of Tradition in

III

Stubborn, but not entirely irrelevant. For it is in the past that a program for the present is inscribed. As Mahdi put it:

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that among modern Muslims, in particular, almost every movement of thought, whether religious, political or social, has tried to anchor itself to real or imagined facts of Islamic history, carefully selected and interpreted to justify or attack a current practice or future course of action. The fact that these movements of thought have been so numerous, often radically different, and sometimes even opposed to one another has meant that the resulting views of Islamic history might appear to the disinterested observer as ideological weapons rather than accounts of the past. Yet such is the nature of Islam (and other so-called historical religions) that there has always been and always will be a relationship between what Muslims believe to be true and right and what they believe to have taken place in early Islamic history. Their quest for justice seems to be closely related to their quest for the practice of the early Muslim community.⁸⁵

Two of the arguments that I have been making—that Orientalists' and Muslim modernists' interests and attitudes overlap and that, like it or not, knowledge of Islamic history is in some measure political—can accordingly be combined in the form of a question: What can some recent work on early Islamic history, which is historically sophisticated enough to be clearly distinguished from conventional Orientalism, contribute to the debate now raging amongst Muslims about how Islam is to constitute itself in the twenty-first century? I should like to argue that it is a two-edged sword. Critical Western scholarship can and should contribute to the long-delayed project of historicizing a number of concepts and institutions that the tradition itself has conventionally viewed as both aboriginal and fixed.⁸⁶ In this way, it

Judaism," in *Methodological Issues in Religious Studies*, edited by R.D. Baird (Chico: New Horizons Press, 1975), 36. Of course, those who mount a *defense* of the authenticity of the corpus of Prophetic *ḥadīth* fall into the same category, and here, too, one is struck by how modern this discourse is; an example is M.Z. Şiddīqī, *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development and Special Features* (Cambridge: Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 1993 [1961]).

⁸⁵ M. Mahdi, "On the Use of Islamic History: An Essay," in *Arab Civilization: Challenges and Responses: Studies in Honor of Constantine K. Zūrayk*, edited by G.N. Atiyeh and I.M. Oweis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 64.

⁸⁶ Compare M. Arkoun, "Islam, Europe, the West: Meanings-at-Stake and the Will-to-Power," in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, edited by J. Cooper, R.L. Nettler and M. Mahmoud (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 187: "Unfortunately, the political classes do not cultivate historical memory as critical historians endeavour

can serve to subvert the epistemological authority of modernist traditionism. But this recent work can also recover a history of early *jihād* that runs nervously close to the prescriptions of the Islamists, one which will have little appeal to those who seek to “domesticate” Islam in line with the prevailing forms of modern Christianity and Judaism.⁸⁷ The results, both good and bad, must be taken seriously.

Reduced to its essentials, the Islamist reading of the tradition holds that normative Islam is defined by the Qur’ān and the Prophet’s paradigmatic conduct (Sunnah) as it is recorded principally in third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century sources (chiefly but not exclusively legal and historical in character), these sources sometimes—certainly not always—being refracted through the work of secondary and tertiary medieval authorities (e.g. Ibn Taymīyah [d. 728/1328] and Ibn Kathīr [d. 744/1373]),⁸⁸ and typically reformulated in terms consonant with the defining feature of modernity: the nation state.⁸⁹ We have already described one of its signal results: that “system” of belief and action that is to be “applied,” and that bears so little resemblance to the implicit, taken-for-granted and densely allusive world occupied by pre-modern Muslims. The path to applying this “system” currently being blocked by corrupt and secular regimes that have failed to uphold God’s law, force of arms (*jihād*) is not only licit, but a requirement incumbent upon each individual believer.

How does this reading of the tradition, which is outlined here in an admittedly very schematic form, fare in the light of modern Islamics? Now there are serious questions about the history of the Qur’ān as both a text and a source of law—when did the text sta-

to reconstruct it; they prefer to make selections from ‘places of memory’ imposed by official historiography—images with the power to mobilize, such as noble moments and conquering heroes. . . .”; compare also A. Laroui, *Islam et histoire: essai d’épistémologie* (Paris: A. Michel, 1999), especially 125ff.; and R.S. Humphreys, “Modern Arab Historians and the Challenge of the Islamic Past,” *Middle Eastern Lectures* 1 (1995): 119–131.

⁸⁷ I borrow the word from J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 104.

⁸⁸ Both of whom, of course, sit very uneasily in the mainstream pre-modern tradition; see E. Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); and N. Calder, “*Tafsīr* From Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr,” in *Approaches to the Qur’ān*, edited by G.R. Hawting and A.K.A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 123ff., which demonstrates how radically Ibn Taymīyah and Ibn Kathīr break from tradition and why the latter is so appealing to modernists: “He [Ibn Kathīr] does not generally like polyvalent readings, but argues vehemently for a single ‘correct’ reading.”

⁸⁹ See, *inter alia*, Zubaida, *Islam*, 3.

bilize in its present form and when did it become decisive in legal questions?⁹⁰—and since these remain unsettled, we may profitably begin with Muḥammad himself, particularly because it is his legacy, rather than the text of the Qurʾān, into which so much history and law are read.

As many readers of this volume will know, the view that the law was not originally organized around Prophetic traditions, but rather *became* traditionist during the second and third Islamic centuries, derives from the work carried out by Goldziher (d. 1921) and Schacht during the first part of the twentieth century, and is now nearly axiomatic amongst those who work closely on the earliest texts.⁹¹ Far from being predetermined by the experience of the earliest Muslim community, the rise of legal traditionism is thus shown to be both secondary and controversial,⁹² in fact, one alternative (the view that Qurʾān alone should generate the law) was not so marginal as the later traditionist sources would have us believe.⁹³ Closely related to a crucial feature of Schacht's model—that the historical memory and social function of Muḥammad evolved in this “formative” period of the first/seventh, second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries, eventually endowing his conduct with paradigmatic force—is a second trajectory of research, in which H. Lammens (d. 1937), J. Wansbrough (d. 2002) and P. Crone figure prominently.⁹⁴ Here Prophetic biography is regarded as either useless or deeply problematic for reconstructing the history of the first/seventh century. The original context

⁹⁰ Crone above, note 78, and Hawting, “The Role of Qurʾān and *hadīth* in the Legal Controversy About the Rights of a Divorced Woman During Her ‘Waiting Period’ (*ʿidda*).” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 52 (1989): 430–445.

⁹¹ No crisper summary of the Schachtian position can be found than in P. Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law: The Origins of the Islamic Patronate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), chapter 2.

⁹² P. Crone and M. Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁹³ See Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 85; M. Cook, “Anan and Islam: the Origins of Karaite Scripturalism,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 161–182; and G. Hawting, “The Significance of the Slogan *lā ḥukm illā lillāh* and the References to the *ḥudūd* in the Traditions about the Fitna and the Murder of ‘Uthmān,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978): 453–463.

⁹⁴ Some of H. Lammens's work is now available in English translation: Lammens, “Koran and Tradition—How the Life of Muhammad was Composed,” translated by Ibn Warraq; “The Age of Muhammad and the Chronology of the Sira,” translated by anonymous and Ibn Warraq; and “Fatima and the Daughters of Muhammad,” translated by anonymous and Ibn Warraq; in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, edited by Ibn Warraq (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000), 169–187, 188–217, and 218–329, respectively; see also Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*; and Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 213ff.

of Qur'ānic revelations was lost to scholars of the late second/eighth and third/ninth century, who had in any case much less authentic history at their disposal than they did tales and legends that circulated orally; as a result, they imposed a meaning of their own. This, rather than a continuous tradition of memorizing or writing, produced the genre of Prophetic biography.⁹⁵ Similar criticisms have been made about the authenticity of other forms of early historiography, such as the late second/eighth- and third/ninth-century conquest narratives that are transmitted in our sources.⁹⁶

Now it is true that the Schachtian model has been challenged recently,⁹⁷ as has the view that exegetical concerns alone can be said to have produced Prophetic biography.⁹⁸ But in neither case can we say that the legal or biographical tradition has been vindicated, nor that we possess a more persuasive model for the origins of the surviving literary forms. Had the Prophet's Sunnah (or anything like it) existed and been decisive in the first Islamic century, the religious tradition would have taken a shape very different from the one we know it to have taken. And if one can no longer assume that all Prophetic *ḥadīth* are forged or that there is no authentic material in the *ṣīrah*,⁹⁹ no one has yet proposed a reasonable way of distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic.¹⁰⁰ Here it bears repeating that scholars have had much more to say about the issue of origins (in this case, the origins of traditionism and legal thinking, e.g., the "influences" exerted by Jewish and Roman law), than they have

⁹⁵ My views on the rise of the historiographic tradition can be found in C.F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), part I.

⁹⁶ Thus Noth, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition*; compare Robinson, "The Study of Islamic Historiography: A Progress Report," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (3rd series) 7 (1997): 199–227.

⁹⁷ For an attempt to reconstruct early Medinan *fiqh*, see Y. Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law: The Qur'an, the Muwaṭṭa', and Madinan 'amal* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); for a reconstruction of Meccan *fiqh*, Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*, translated by M.H. Katz (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002).

⁹⁸ See *The Biography of the Prophet Mohammad: The Issue of the Sources*, edited by H. Motzki (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000); for an overview of some of the controversies, H. Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000).

⁹⁹ See now G. Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammads* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996).

¹⁰⁰ I regard as promising the project proposed by Motzki, "The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Huqayq: On the Origin and Reliability of Some *maghāzī*-Reports," in *The Biography of Muhammad*, 170–239; but the method is extraordinarily laborious and the payoff (the historical "kernel") very modest.

about its durability—so much so that one might discern the curiously static model of post-formation (“classical”) Islam that we encountered earlier: the “system” now being in place, history no longer requires much explanation. This is clearly wrong, but it probably says as much about the paucity of Islamic historians as it does their inclinations. Were there more of us working on pre-modern Islam, there would be many more questions asked and answered.

Source-critical Islamic history has thus produced a fairly coherent account of the rise of traditionism: the model makes sense of both the social context of the late antique Fertile Crescent *and* the surviving evidence, however exiguous it may currently be. It also conforms to what the history of religions would tell us to suspect: authoritative élites are created over time rather than bequeathed by individuals, and these élites’ assertions of what is or what should be are conventionally expressed in “descriptions” of what was. Would anyone seriously argue now that Peter founded the Papacy, that, as Stephen I (254–257 C.E.) describes it, its basis is the *cathedra Petri*?¹⁰¹ Prophetic Sunnah belongs in the same category: as dogma, it is best regarded as a matter to be accepted or rejected by the believer, rather than proven or falsified by the historian, especially given the state of the evidence. For the historian it is more important to regard it as the result of a process—the concentration of religious authority in a social group that was becoming increasingly independent of state patronage during the third/ninth century—that masks a contentious formative period, one in which the status of the four “Rightly-Guided Caliphs” was at first a matter of bitter dispute,¹⁰² the Companions of the Prophet could be vilified,¹⁰³ and the early caliphs could claim religious authority as God’s deputies, rather than the Prophet’s successors, at turns contending with and patronizing the traditionists.¹⁰⁴ It

¹⁰¹ Similar questions could be put to the study of Rabbinic Judaism, where the skeptical tide began to rise in the 60s and early 70s, just a few years before it reached Islamics; see P. Schäfer, “Research into Rabbinic Literature: An Attempt to Define the status quaestionis,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 37 (1986), p. 143.

¹⁰² This dogma is widely accepted by modernists, Islamists and secularists alike; on Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s view, which excluded ‘Alī, see W. Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965), 225f.

¹⁰³ E. Kohlberg, “Some Imāmī Shī‘ī Views on the Ṣaḥāba,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 5 (1984): 143–175 (Hishām b. al-Ḥakam charges the ṣaḥābah with unbelief). On this score, a great deal of “radical” contemporary Islamic thought is moderate by pre-modern standards.

¹⁰⁴ Crone and Hinds, *God’s Caliph*; compare. M.Q. Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early ‘Abbasids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunnī Elite* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

can only be counted as ironic that it was the rise of the parvenu ‘Abbāsīd state—the dynasty later lambasted by hard-core traditionists for admitting the “foreign sciences” into Islamic learning—which seems to have been decisive for the emergence of traditionism. For it was the ‘Abbāsīds who directly and indirectly patronized learning on a massive scale, and under whose aegis city élites began to produce traditionist sons.¹⁰⁵

So behind the relative homogeneity of traditionist learning of the fourth/tenth century lies the heterogeneity of second/eighth- and third/ninth-century thought, so much of which has been lost. And if one is to speak of a normative Islam in the formative period, it is scarcely preserved by the Sunni lawyers of the classical period, whose authority was grounded in the transmission of *ḥadīth* and the (nearly) uniform Islam it attributed to the Prophet and his contemporaries. One does not have to entertain the notion of multiple “Islams” à la Neusner’s “Judaisms”¹⁰⁶ to see that regionalism was certainly a feature of early law.¹⁰⁷ On this count, then, our results clearly subvert the neo-traditionists’ *epistemological* authority, based as it is on the reliability of the *ḥadīth*, *sīrah* and historical traditions. Insofar as a reformation of Islamic thought requires dismantling the *ḥadīth*-based epistemology of the classical period—that is, that normative Islam is fully and accurately described by the *ḥadīth* literature—and rebutting the totalizing claims made by lawyers of the post-caliphal period, some of the hard work has therefore already been done.¹⁰⁸ It follows that the liberal modernist’s true friend is not the mealy-mouthed Western academic who offers irenic platitudes, but the revisionist who ruthlessly historicizes its origins.

What, in practice, can that mean? Let us take as another example the immensely controversial—and thoroughly plastic—doctrine of *jihād*.

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, chapter 5.

¹⁰⁶ For something very close to such a view, see above note 60; for a useful typology, see J. Waardenburg, “Official and Popular Religion as a Problem in Islamic Studies,” in *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*, edited by P.H. Vrijhof and J. Waardenburg (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 340–386.

¹⁰⁷ The idea is Schacht’s, but see now C. Melchert, “How Ḥanafism Came to Originate in Kufa and Traditionalism in Medina,” *Islamic Law and Society* 6 (1999): 318–347; and W. Hallaq, “From Regional to Personal Schools of Law? A Re-evaluation,” *Islamic Law and Society* 8 (2001): 1–26.

¹⁰⁸ Compare al-Azmeh, “The Muslim Canon from Late Antiquity to the Era of Modernism,” in *Canonization and Decanonization*, edited by A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1998), 191–228.

Is *jihād* obligatory upon the believer, and, if so, how is the obligation to be discharged? The question admits a number of answers. It is a salient feature of apolitical modernism that it opposes the Islamists' call that political action should be effected through *jihād*. Here it is not just a matter of reading *jihād* as *farḍ kifāyah* (that is, an obligation that can be discharged by an individual, such as the caliph, or the modern state's army, on behalf of other believers) at the expense of *farḍ 'ayn* (an obligation incumbent upon each believer to discharge on his own); this has a venerable place in the pre-modern tradition. Nor is it a matter of taking issue with what they regard as the Islamists' reckless practice of *takfir*, since that was common enough in the pre-modern period too, at least among Khārijites, who came in for plenty of criticism. For some modernists also attempt to anchor in the earliest, recoverable layers of the tradition a reading of history that distinguishes between personal belief and political action, going so far as to reduce the Prophet's "Islam" to the revelations conventionally dated to the Meccan period of his career, when he was working for internal reform within Mecca, rather than waging war with its neighbors.¹⁰⁹ From one's study in Oxford such a distinction between belief and political action appears very desirable, and it is not hard to see why it would have its appeal, particularly in Western Europe. So far as I am aware, however, this reading is a distinctly modern one; and although some early Muslims may very well have drawn the distinction, the historian cannot comfortably recover it from the texts. Insofar as one can speak of a normative Islam of the first century, at its heart lay the concept of *jihād*—that is, the *jihād* of real warfare making manifest real belief.

Given all of the thorny historiographic problems of the early first/seventh century, how does one proceed?¹¹⁰ If one grants that Muḥammad's career can be divided (equally or unequally) between a Meccan and a Medinan period,¹¹¹ one may turn to the standard periodization of Qur'ānic passages to infer and contextualize his thoughts. But

¹⁰⁹ Thus M. Charfi, *Islam et liberté: le malentendu historique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

¹¹⁰ The best survey remains F.E. Peters, "The Quest for the Historical Muhammad," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 291–315; reprinted in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, edited by Ibn Warraq (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000), 444–475. The fullest discussion of *jihād* is A. Morabia, *Le gihad dans l'islam médiéval: Le "combat sacré" des origines au XII^e siècle* (Paris: A. Michel, 1993).

¹¹¹ On the symmetry of these two periods, see U. Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims: A Textual Analysis* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1995), 197–209.

considering the problems that attach both to these periodizations and to the closure of the text itself,¹¹² we are safe only in assuming that the Qurʾān gives expression to the vision of the early Muslim community. In other words, whatever Muḥammad may have had in mind, the community decided what he had in mind by settling upon and canonizing the text that they held to be his recitation of God's revelation. Whether or not it captured word-for-word Muḥammad's revelations or was legally authoritative in this very early period, we may fairly assume that it gave voice to the community's principal values. And the text, of course, places great emphasis upon fighting (*qitāl*) and *jihād*, by which it clearly means raising arms on behalf of God and "going out" to fight (thus, amongst many others, Qurʾān 2:193, 8:39, 9:33, 48:17, and 61:4); quietism—literally, "sitting"—is scorned (Qurʾān 4:95 and 9:46, amongst others). If one is determined to pin down Muḥammad's vision in Medina, one can turn to the so-called "Constitution of Medina," which he apparently set in writing soon after the *hijrah*. Here, too, *jihād* is central to his concerns: this is a document (or a set of documents) that seems to reflect a proto-state in a full state of war.¹¹³ To this—the Qurʾānic and "documentary" evidence for *jihād*—one can add evidence of a more controversial and inferential variety, but which seems to preserve early opinion. Here I would count the veterans' names transmitted by Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Hishām (e.g., those who "fought alongside Muḥammad at Badr," etc.), which comprises part of what Sellheim regarded as the *Grundschicht* of the *sīrah*,¹¹⁴ and the early and dateable non-Islamic material, which emphasizes Muḥammad's role as a monotheist warrior.¹¹⁵

That Muḥammad took God to mean that fighting on His behalf meant real warfare against unbelievers is fairly clear, and so, too,

¹¹² A relevant verse is Qurʾān 110:1 (*idhā jāʾa naṣru Allāh wa-al-faṭḥ*), which is sometimes considered Meccan and sometimes Medinan; for a brief discussion, see Robinson, "Conquest," in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001–), 1:397–401; for a full discussion, see Morabia, *Le ḡhād*, 119ff.

¹¹³ See R.B. Serjeant, "The 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Islamic Quarterly* 8 (1964): 3–16.

¹¹⁴ R. Sellheim, "Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte: Die Muhammed-Biographie des Ibn Ishāq," *Oriens* 18–19 (1967): 73ff.

¹¹⁵ For Muḥammad being alive during the conquest of Palestine, see Cook and Crone, *Hagarism*, 4; compare also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 555; for the view that Muḥammad is a false prophet because he comes with a sword, see Robinson, "Prophecy and Holy Men in Early Islam," in *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, edited by J. Howard-Johnston and P.A. Hayward, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 252 (the discussion there underpins some of my argument here).

did the early Muslims who followed him: upon Muḥammad's death, the Medinan élite set upon a policy of war that would carry them out of Arabia into the Mediterranean and Asian worlds, the sweeping success of the conquests (*futūḥ*) coming to signal the new dispensation—God's "reckoning" and "delivering" of His bounty to His people.¹¹⁶ And war-making did not stop with 'Umar, since it clearly lay near the heart of Umayyad state-building throughout the first/seventh and early second/eighth centuries.¹¹⁷ But it is not just the state that was geared for war. It appears that taking up arms remained one of the principal forms of early Islamic piety in general. The historical and legal traditions thus trace an ongoing practice of *hijrah* (emigration for the purposes of taking up arms) and *jihād* well into the second/eighth century.¹¹⁸ From this perspective, it becomes clear that the state's policy of war was not motivated simply by a desire on the part of its élite for spoils and lands, although these must have been strong inducements; it was both a reaction to and reflection of the continuing vitality of the Qur'ānic vision of *jihād*. The Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd state might attempt to monopolize violence by professionalizing its armies, leading splashy but usually ineffectual *jihāds* against the Byzantines,¹¹⁹ or suppressing rebellions led by Khārijite charismatics, at least some of whom had apparently come off the army's rolls and all of whom called for *jihād* against whomsoever they considered unbelievers.¹²⁰ For their part, scholars might contribute to the cause by spreading *ḥadīth* that forbade post-Prophetic *hijrah*, engineering the doctrine of *farḍ kifāyah*, and "interiorizing" *jihād* in that of the *jihād al-naḥs*.¹²¹ But the original meaning of *jihād* seems to have survived, inviting readings that states, both pre-modern and

¹¹⁶ See above, note 112.

¹¹⁷ For a review of the historical literature, K.Y. Blankinship, *The End of the Jihād State: The Reign of Hishām b. 'Abd al-Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

¹¹⁸ P. Crone, "The First-Century Concept of *hiḡra*," *Arabica* 41 (1994): 352–387; Sālim b. Dhakwān, *The Epistle of Sālim ibn Dhakwān*, edited by Patricia Crone and Fritz Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 278f.

¹¹⁹ Compare M. Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1996).

¹²⁰ For a very useful overview, see, in addition to Morabia, *Le ḡhād*, M. Schwartz, "Ḡihād unter Muslimin," in *Studien zum Minderheitenproblem im Islam* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1980), part 6; on Khārijites as ex-soldiers, Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109ff.

¹²¹ I borrow "interiorize" from Morabia, *Le ḡhād*, 293.

modern, regularly found objectionable. The reading of *jihād* proposed by Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949) is a case in point, and, predictably enough, he spent lots of time in jail. Like it or not, the reading is reasonably faithful to the evidence for early Muslim practice that we historians have to hand.¹²²

IV

I have discussed traditionism and *jihād* not merely because they illustrate how knowledge of early Islamic history impinges upon the politics of the modern Islamic world, but because they illustrate something about the problem with which this essay began. Does “Islam” fit into “late antiquity,” and, if so, how? Faithful to the approach taken so far, I pose more problems than I supply answers.

The tradition itself typically offers a negative answer. “In its equation of the origins of the career of Muḥammad and its detailed depiction of Muḥammad’s life in Mecca and Medina, Muslim tradition effectively disassociates Islam from the historical development of the monotheist stream of religion as a whole. Islam is shown to be the result of an act of divine revelation made to an Arab prophet who was born and lived most of his life in a town (Mecca) beyond the borders of the then monotheistic world.”¹²³ *Jāhiliyyah, mab’ath, hijrah, futūḥ*—these are terms that describe rupture rather than transformation. Of course this is belief rather than history—a belief in the uniqueness of a particular moment, when the laws of history, such as the role of context and continuity, are suspended.¹²⁴ And this belief—that Islam, and, by extension, Islamic history, are exceptional—is held not only by most believers, but in a closely related form by many Orientalists, whose long training and unexamined prejudices have often lead them to emphasize the distinctiveness and mystery of Islam—and thus their own interpretive authority. Arabic is difficult, Islam is different: the two ideas combine to form the purported exceptionalism of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, and thus make for

¹²² Ḥasan al-Bannā, *Majmū‘at al-rasā’il* (Beirut, n.d.), 41ff.

¹²³ Hawting, “John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997): 24.

¹²⁴ Compare E.M. Moreno, “El surgimiento del islam en la historia,” in *V Semana de Estudios Medievales* (Logrono: Gobierno de La Rioja, Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 1995), 16.

a compelling assertion of professional privilege amongst Orientalists.¹²⁵

Assertions of professional privilege, in addition to less interesting reasons, thus go some way towards explaining why the few attempts that have been made to offer an affirmative answer to our question—that Islam *does* fit into “late antiquity”—have generally come from those on the margins or outside of the mainstream Orientalist tradition. None has been entirely persuasive, however. Neither Becker, who saw Islam as the fruit of Hellenism, nor Wansbrough, who obliterated its Arabian origins, can be said to command a consensus;¹²⁶ meanwhile, Brown can reasonably be said to have made Islam look Christian,¹²⁷ and Fowden can reasonably be said to have made Byzantium appear Islamic.¹²⁸ Surely part of the confusion lies in what we mean by “Islam” and at what period we are interrogating it. An inconclusive conclusion may begin where the evidence is strongest: in the post-conquest provinces.

The conquests may have changed the political map of the Near East, it is said, but we know that they did not obliterate it. As Kennedy puts it in the volume with which I began, “. . . reflection will soon suggest that the changes [of the first/seventh century] cannot have been so sudden and dramatic, especially at the level of the structures of everyday life, and that the Islamic was as much, and as little, a continuation of late antiquity as was western Christendom.”¹²⁹ The decisive evidence adduced here and elsewhere is the material evidence, which in practice nearly always means the archaeology and art history of Syria and Palestine: “Late Antiquity surviving,” as Brown puts it in a caption underneath a photograph of mosaic work on the Umayyad mosque of Damascus.¹³⁰ “Who Built the Dome of the Rock?”

¹²⁵ Compare Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 56; the shared perspective of Islamist and Orientalist is also pointed out by Halliday, “‘Orientalism’ and Its Critics,” especially 155.

¹²⁶ C. Becker, “Das Islam als Problem,” *Der Islam* 1 (1910): 1–21; for a reading of pre-Islamic history as monotheist polemic, see now Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹²⁷ Or at least a generic late antique monotheist: thus Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 191: “. . . the Muslim guided his conduct by *exactly the same considerations* as did any Christian or Jew throughout the Fertile Crescent” (emphasis added).

¹²⁸ The Byzantine “commonwealth” is strikingly ‘Abbāsid in description; compare F. Millar, “Byzantium, Persia and Islam: The Origins of Imperialist Monotheism,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 7 (1994): 509–511.

¹²⁹ *Late Antiquity*, 219; the symmetry between “Islam” and “Christendom” is again worth noting.

¹³⁰ Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 195.

Peters asks himself, and although the answer he gives (Heraclius) cannot be correct, he is entitled to ask the question.¹³¹ To be sure, there is some contrary evidence that suggest breaks in trade patterns;¹³² not all is “transformation,” and an adequate understanding of the first/seventh and second/eighth centuries should not preclude *a priori* the possibility of decline: Islamicists need not join what amounts to a cult of late antique continuity.¹³³ All this said, insofar as the art historical evidence from Syria and Palestine suggests a broader cultural adaptability and eclecticism at work amongst early Muslims at large, it makes more intelligible how they appropriated and transformed ideas and institutions elsewhere, particularly in Iraq: traditionism (in general) and several legal problems and categories (in particular) can scarcely be understood without reference to Rabbinic Babylonia.

Indeed, there is no question that Islamic traditionism developed alongside and in some respects interacted with Rabbinic Judaism, with which it shared Iraq; even the most conservative scholar of Prophetic *ḥadīth* would have to concede that Muslims and Jews approached and solved problems in strikingly similar ways. Call it “borrowing” or call it “symbiosis,”¹³⁴ the fact remains that Muslims and Jews rubbed shoulders and shared ideas. Another fact is that we have hardly begun to understand how Islamic and Jewish traditionism relate or why traditionism became so compelling during the late second/eighth and third/ninth centuries; in part this is because the evidence is so problematic,¹³⁵ and in part because our interest in problems of authenticity and reliability has bordered on the obsessive.¹³⁶ Elsewhere I have made some suggestions about traditionism’s

¹³¹ F.E. Peters, “Who Built the Dome of the Rock?,” *Graeco-Arabica* 2 (1983): 119–138.

¹³² For an overview, see A. Walmsley, “Production, Exchange and Regional Trade in the Islamic East Mediterranean: Old Structures, New systems?” in *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, edited by I.L. Hansen and C. Wickham (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), 265–343.

¹³³ Compare J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz’s polemic, “Late Antiquity and the Concept of Decline,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 45 (2001): 1–11.

¹³⁴ Compare A. Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Bonn: F. Baaden, 1833) and S. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); see also Calder, *Studies*, 161ff.

¹³⁵ For an attempt to solve some of the problems, see M. Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam,” *Arabica* 44 (1997): 512ff.

¹³⁶ Despite its idiosyncrasies, Burton, *Introduction*, reflects the field’s preoccupation. That this shared world of Mesopotamian traditionism has been ignored by historians of late antiquity says much more about their training and orientation (especially as late Romanists and Byzantinists) than it does about the significance of the phenomenon itself.

appeal to social élites and the integrating effects of its procedures (e.g. travel and command of Arabic),¹³⁷ but these ideas are tentative and in any case entirely functional in approach. What are we to make of the fact that the great third/ninth-century compilers hailed from the East rather than the political heartland?¹³⁸ In asking questions such as these, we safely leave aside sensitive questions about authenticity and reliability, and we may therefore find ourselves communicating more usefully with Muslim scholars of all persuasions. The stakes being lower, the payoff may actually be higher.

But what of the first/seventh century? One still needs reminding that neither traditionism nor Marwānid architecture is history made by first-generation Muslims in the Ḥijāz, but rather that of second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-generation Muslims in the conquered lands. In other words, although the evidence demonstrates precisely the sort of cultural continuities that one would expect of barbarian conquerors assimilating “upwards” towards the standards set by cosmopolitan subjects, it sheds no direct light on the “Islam” that had made them conquerors in the first place. Given all the controversies surrounding our literary and historical sources, one hesitates to argue against such spectacular examples of cultural continuity as the Dome of the Rock or the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, much less against the archaeological “data” that suggest continuities in urban plans and settlement patterns. Still, the fact of the matter is that until we have some reliable archaeological data from Arabia proper, we have no direct material evidence for the “Islam” of the conquerors themselves and thus no way to argue for continuity across the conquest divide. What would Abū Sufyān have made of the paintings at Quṣayr ‘Amrā? It is impossible to say. We may be able to move from the Ghassānids to the Umayyads *within* Syria,¹³⁹ but that is a very different thing from moving from the Quraysh of the Ḥijāz to Marwānid caliphs and princes who were born, operated and ruled in Syria. The non-Islamic literary evidence, which is all written outside of Arabia, knows too little of what was going on there to be very useful. As long as our evidence remains so weak, the models we choose to apply will exert disproportionate power on our explanations.

¹³⁷ Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 170f.

¹³⁸ Compare R. Mottahedeh, “The Transmission of Learning: The Role of the Islamic Northeast,” in *Madrasa: la transmission du savoir dans le monde musulman*, edited by N. Grandin and M. Gaborieau (Paris: Editions Arguments, 1997), 63–72.

¹³⁹ Compare E.K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 174ff.

Of course all of the preceding assumes two things, both of which are part of the traditional narrative, and, taken together, contribute to the claim of exceptionalism. The first is that the *Sitz im Leben* of primitive “Islam” was a pre-conquest Ḥijāz. The second is that this pre-conquest Ḥijāz was insulated from the cultural currents of the metropolitan Near East of late antiquity. The propositions leave us with the understanding of Islam that prevails in surveys of late antiquity: the “Islam” of Muḥammad is a “detonation” (read: discontinuity),¹⁴⁰ while that of the post-conquest Umayyads assimilates to late antique traditions (read: continuity).

There are two possible resolutions to this problem of initial discontinuity. One may take the Ḥijāz out of the desert and put it into mainstream of late antique ideas, or one may take the engineers of earliest Islam—in effect, the “author(s)” of the Qur’ān—out of Arabia and put them in second/eighth- or third/ninth-century Iraq or Syria. The second solution is the more radical, and in its purest form belongs to Wansbrough, who pushed the closure of the Qur’ānic text into the late second/eighth or early third/ninth centuries. For all its immense heuristic value, it cannot be sustained by the available evidence,¹⁴¹ and replaces one problem (cultural discontinuity) with another: the conquests, having lost their ideological fuel, become accidental. Such an idea is unattractive to begin with, and even harder to maintain now that we cannot fall back upon the supposed weakness of the Byzantine army of the first/seventh century: “The Arabs took over territory by energetic conquest, not by default on the part of their opponents.”¹⁴² Surely it is belief of one sort or another that accounts for this “energy.” The first solution—that the Ḥijāz somehow belongs to late antiquity—has proven altogether more popular, and although it is subject to hyperbole,¹⁴³ it seems to me far more promis-

¹⁴⁰ “Detonation” is Brown’s word; see Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 189.

¹⁴¹ See Crone, “Two Legal Problems”; and F.M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), 22–63.

¹⁴² M. Whitby, “Recruitment in Roman Armies from Justinian to Heraclius (ca. 565–615)”, in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III: States, Resources and Armies*, edited by A. Cameron (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 122.

¹⁴³ Thus, according to Brown, who was building upon Watt’s work, “[T]he inhabitants of Mecca and Medina were far from being primitive Bedouin. The towns had grown rapidly through trade and were supported by settled agriculture. They were ruled by oligarchies, who had suddenly found themselves the merchant-princes of the seventh-century Near East”; Brown, *World of Late Antiquity*, 189. A retreat is made on the following page: “Yet for all these foreign contacts . . .”, but Muḥammad still ends up conforming to a late antique type.

ing. For the cultural insularity of the Ḥijāz *is* starting to break down: a *koine* of late antique religious architecture that includes the Ḥijāz can now provisionally be identified,¹⁴⁴ and the argument for an Aramaic contribution to the Qurʾānic lexicon has recently been revived.¹⁴⁵

We can also see this in the least promising of all places. If traditionalism is a clear marker of post-conquest continuities, what of *jihād*? The conventional answer has been that *jihād* is a distinctly Islamic phenomenon, by which is meant that it resulted from Muḥammad's compelling synthesis of radical monotheism and tribal violence: ferocious but fissiparous tribesmen became God-fearing conquerors campaigning for a single cause.¹⁴⁶ Cook and Crone described Islamic civilization as the issue of the marriage of "barbarian force and Judaic values."¹⁴⁷ This may be the case. But it may also be that Muḥammad's spectacularly successful call for monotheist violence was exceptional only in its success. For the last convulsions of the Byzantine-Persian wars of the sixth and early seventh centuries had a crusading spirit about them, especially Heraclius' final charge into Sasanian Iraq in 627 or 628, a campaign that began ceremoniously at Easter of 622, brought low the God-hating Khusraw, and eventually culminated in the restoration of the Cross to Jerusalem.¹⁴⁸ "For fallen is the arrogant Chosroes, opponent of God," as a seventh-century Byzantine historian put it, in ways not dissimilar from the Qurʾānic representation of Muḥammad's Meccan adversaries, among others.¹⁴⁹ In fact, the missive announcing Heraclius' success, which survives in the same source (the *Chronicon Paschale*), reads much like the material we find embedded in the Islamic accounts of the conquest of Ctesiphon in al-Ṭabarī's

¹⁴⁴ J. Johns, "The House of the Prophet' and the Concept of the Mosque," in *Bayt al-Maqdis: Jerusalem and Early Islam*, edited by J. Johns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially 100.

¹⁴⁵ Thus C. Luxenberg (a pseudonym), *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung des Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000).

¹⁴⁶ Compare F.M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

¹⁴⁷ Cook and Crone, *Hagarism*, 74.

¹⁴⁸ *Chronicon Paschale, 284–628 A.D.*, translated by M. Whitby and M. Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 182ff.; compare Sebeos, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, translated by R.W. Thomson with commentary by J. Howard-Johnston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 1:78ff. and 2:218ff. I owe to James Howard-Johnston the idea that Heraclius and Muḥammad were speaking a similar language.

¹⁴⁹ For the range of the Qurʾānic *hizb*, see R. Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1971), 233.

Ta'rikkh. What we seem to have is not just another common historiographic idiom, but rather a common conception of how to effect God's will on earth. *Jihād*, it turns out, does in some form belong to late antiquity. Put differently: what made early Muslims distinctive from other late antique monotheists was not their embrace of religiously sanctioned warfare, but their designs: whereas Heraclius' *jihād* resulted in the destruction of a state (the Sasanian), Muḥammad's resulted in the formation of a state—the most robust state of late antiquity.

V. Conclusion

I conclude with two brief propositions.

1. First, the totalizing definition of “Islam” as law-based civilization and program says as much about modernism as it does pre-modern Muslims: our knowledge does not issue directly from texts, but is mediated by (largely) unacknowledged categories and models. The professional study of pre-modern Muslims can thus benefit from greater understanding of the social and cultural changes produced by modernity, especially those that condition understandings of religious traditions. In the meantime, let us abandon “Islam” as a term of historical explanation.
2. Second, the supposed “exceptionalism” of Islamic history says as much about professional expertise and religious belief as it does the history made by Muslims: the laws of history (insofar as they exist) are not suspended in southwest Asia. This said, culture still matters: it is not accidental that Ḥasan al-Bannā articulates his revolutionary ideas in recognizably Islamic terms, and however radical modernists' views might appear to pre-modern Muslims, the religious tradition of texts (including evolving procedures of reading, writing and understanding), practices and memories continues to exert influence. The professional study of contemporary Muslims can thus benefit from the historical expertise that is generally associated with Orientalist learning.