

Islam in European Thought

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I

From the time it first appeared, the religion of Islam was a problem for Christian Europe. Those who believed in it were the enemy on the frontier. In the seventh and eighth centuries armies fighting in the name of the first Muslim empire, the Caliphate, expanded into the heart of the Christian world. They occupied provinces of the Byzantine Empire in Syria, the Holy Land, and Egypt, and spread westward into North Africa, Spain, and Sicily; and the conquest was not only a military one but was followed in course of time by conversions to Islam on a large scale. Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries there was a Christian counter-attack, successful for a time in the Holy Land, where a Latin kingdom of Jerusalem was created, and more permanently in Spain. The last Muslim kingdom in Spain was brought to an end in 1492, but by that time there was a further Muslim expansion elsewhere, by dynasties drawn from the Turkish peoples: the Seljuks advanced into Anatolia, and later the Ottomans extinguished what was left of the Byzantine Empire and occupied its capital, Constantinople, and expanded into eastern and central Europe. As late as the seventeenth century they were able to occupy the island of Crete and to threaten Vienna.

The relationship between Muslims and European Christians, however, was not simply one of holy war, of crusade and jihad. There was trade across the Mediterranean, and the balance of it

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changed in course of time; from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onward the Italian ports expanded their trade, and, in the fifteenth and sixteenth, ships from the ports of northern Europe began to appear in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. There was also an exchange of ideas, and here the traffic moved mainly from the lands of Islam to those of Christendom: Arabic works of philosophy, science, and medicine were translated into Latin, and until the Sixteenth century the writings of the great medical scientist Ibn Sina were used in European medical schools.

Separated by conflict but held together by ties of different kinds, Christians and Muslims presented a religious and intellectual challenge to each other. What could each religion make of the claims of the other? For Muslim thinkers, the status of Christianity was clear. Jesus was one of the line of authentic prophets which had culminated in Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets,” and his authentic message was essentially the same as that of Muhammad. Christians had misunderstood their faith, however: they thought of their prophet as a god, and believed he had been crucified. The usual Muslim explanation for this was that they had “corrupted” their scriptures, either by tampering with the text or by misunderstanding its meaning. Properly understood, Muslim thinkers maintained, the Christian scriptures did not support Christian claims that Jesus was divine, and a passage of the Qur’an made clear that he had not been crucified but had somehow been taken up into heaven. Again, Christians did not accept the authenticity of the revelation given to Muhammad, but a proper interpretation of the Bible would show that it had foretold the coming of Muhammad.

For Christians, the matter was more difficult. They knew that Muslims believed in one God, who might be regarded, in his nature and operations, as being the God whom Christians worshipped, but they could not easily accept that Muhammad was an authentic prophet. The event to which Old Testament prophecy had pointed, the coming of Christ, had already taken place; what

need was there for further prophets? The teaching of Muhammad, moreover, was a denial of the central doctrines of Christianity: the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and therefore also the Trinity and the Atonement. Could the Qur'an be regarded in any sense as the word of God? To the few Christians who knew anything about it, the Qur'an seemed to contain distorted echoes of biblical stories and themes.

With few exceptions, Christians in Europe who thought about Islam, during the first thousand or so years of the confrontation, did so in a state of ignorance. The Qur'an was indeed available in Latin translation from the twelfth century onward; the first translation was made under the direction of Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny. Some Arabic philosophical works were well known in translation, those which carried on the tradition of Greek thought. There was very limited knowledge, however, of those works of theology, law, and spirituality in which what had been given in the Qur'an was articulated into a system of thought and practice. There were a few exceptions: in the thirteenth century, some of the Dominican houses in Spain were centers of Islamic studies, but even these declined in later centuries. On the Muslim side, rather more was known, and indeed had to be known. Christians continued to live in some Muslim countries, and particularly in Spain, Egypt, and Syria, and many of them lived through the medium of the Arabic language. Knowledge of what they believed and practiced was therefore available, and it was necessary for administrative and political purposes. The extent of the knowledge should not be exaggerated, however: its limits are shown in such works as al-Ghazali's refutation of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ.¹

Looking at Islam with a mixture of fear, bewilderment, and uneasy recognition of a kind of spiritual kinship, Christians could

¹Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-radd al-jamil li ilahiyat 'Isa bi sarih al-inil*, ed. and trans. R. Chidiac under the title *Réfutation excellente de la divinité de Jésus-Christ d'après les Evangiles* (Paris, 1939).

see it in more than one light. Occasionally the spiritual kinship was acknowledged. There is extant, for example, a letter written by Pope Gregory VII to a Muslim prince in Algeria, al-Nasir, in 1076. In it he says, "There is a charity which we owe to each other more than to other peoples, because we recognize and confess one sole God, although in different ways, and we praise and worship Him every day as creator and ruler of the world."² There has been some discussion of this letter among scholars, and it seems that its significance should not be overstated. It has been suggested that there were practical reasons for the warm and friendly tone in which Gregory wrote: the need to protect the shrinking Christian communities of North Africa, the common opposition of the papacy and al-Nasir to another Muslim ruler in North Africa, and perhaps the desire of merchants in Rome to have a share in the growing trade of the port of Bougie (Bijaya) in al-Nasir's domains. In other letters, written to Christians, Gregory wrote of Muslims and Islam in harsher ways. Nevertheless, the terms in which the letter is written show that there was some awareness at the time that Muslims were not pagans, and this is the more surprising because it was written just before the beginning of the greatest episode of hostility, the Crusades.³

A more commonly held view was that which saw Islam as an offshoot or heresy of Christianity. This was the view of the first Christian theologian to consider it seriously, Saint John of Damascus (c. 675–749). He had himself been an official in the administration of the Umayyad caliph in Damascus, and knew Arabic. He includes Islam in a section of his work on Christian heresies: it

*Text in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 148 (Paris, 1853), 450–52.

³ Discussion in C. Courtois, "Grégoire VII et l'Afrique du Nord," *Revue Historique* 195 (1948): 97–122, 193–226; R. Lopez, "La facteur économique dans la politique africaine des Papes," *Revue Historique* 198 (1947): 178–88; J. Henninger, "Sur la contribution des missionnaires à la connaissance de l'Islam, surtout pendant le moyen âge," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 9 (1953): 161–85; B. Z. Keder, *European Approaches towards the Muslims* (Princeton, 1984): 56–57. I owe my understanding of this episode to the kindness of Dr. David Abulafia.

believes in God but denies certain of the essential truths of Christianity, and because of this denial even the truths which it accepts are devoid of meaning.⁴ The most widely held belief, however, was that which lay at the other end of the spectrum: Islam is a false religion, Allah is not God, Muhammad was not a prophet; Islam was invented by men whose motives and character were to be deplored, and propagated by the sword.

II

Whatever European Christians thought of Islam, they could not deny that it was an important factor in human history, and one which needed to be explained. Awareness of the world of Islam increased in early modern times, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and in some ways its nature changed. The military challenge from the Ottoman Empire had ceased to exist by the eighteenth century, as the balance of military strength shifted. Improvements in navigation made possible the exploration of the world by European ships and an expansion of European trade in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and there were the beginnings of European settlement. To the Italian trading communities which had long existed in the ports of the eastern Mediterranean there were added others: Aleppo, one of the main centers of Near Eastern trade, had several communities, including a number of English merchants (it is twice mentioned by Shakespeare, in *Othello* and *Macbeth*).⁵ Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English merchants also settled in some of the Indian ports. A new kind of political relationship began to appear: European states had ambassadors and consuls in the Ottoman domains, although the Ottoman sultan did not have his own permanent embassies in

⁴ St. John of Damascus, "De Haeresibus," in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 94 (Paris, 1860), pp. 764–74; trans. D. J. Sahas under the title *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden, 1972), 132–41.

⁵ *Macbeth*, act 1, sc. 5; *Othello*, act 5, sc. 2.

Europe until the time of the Napoleonic wars. Treaties and alliances were discussed: the French and Ottomans made an agreement against the Hapsburgs, and the British and others tried to establish relations with the Safavid shahs of Iran.

As relations grew closer, intellectual awareness also expanded. The direct importance of Islam to scholars and thinkers diminished: the religious controversies of Europe in the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation revolved around a new set of problems, and the development of European science and medicine made what had been written in Arabic less important. In some ways, however, Islam was still relevant to the religious concerns of the age. Although comparative philology did not yet exist as a scientific discipline, it was generally recognized that Arabic had a close relationship with the languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Aramaic, and study of it might throw light on them; knowledge too of the Near Eastern environment in which the events recorded in the Bible had taken place might help to explain them. Among educated people, travel, commerce, and literature brought some awareness of the phenomenon, majestic and puzzling, of Islamic civilization, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with Arabic as its lingua franca, the most universal language which had ever existed. This awareness was expressed by Dr. Johnson: "There are two objects of curiosity, —the Christian world, and the Mahometan world. All the rest may be considered as barbarous."⁶

How much did such changes affect attitudes toward Islam? A spectrum of possible attitudes still existed. At one extreme, there was total rejection of Islam as a religion. Thus Pascal entitled the seventeenth of his *Pense'es*, "Against Muhammad." Christ is everything, he asserted, which Muhammad is not. Muhammad is without authority, his coming was not foretold, he worked no miracles, he revealed no mysteries: "any man could do what Muhammad has done; no man could do what Jesus has done." Muhammad

⁶ G. Birkbeck Hill, ed., *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, rev. ed., ed. L. F. Powell, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1934), 199.

took the path of human success; Jesus Christ died for humanity.’

Such themes continued to be repeated, but as time went on there might be a significant change of emphasis: there was less denigration of Muhammad as a man, and greater recognition of his human qualities and extraordinary achievements. Thus Joseph White, professor of Arabic at Oxford, took as his subject for the Bampton Lectures in 1784 “a comparison of Islam and Christianity by their origins, evidence and effects.”⁸ He does not accept that the appearance of Islam was in any sense a miraculous event, or that it has played any part in the providential design for mankind. It is a purely natural religion, supported by borrowings from the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Its success too can be explained in natural terms, by the corruption of the Christian church of the times on the one hand, and the personality of the Prophet on the other. Far from being the “monster of ignorance and vice” depicted by Christian authors, Muhammad was, so White claims, “an extraordinary character [of] splendid talents and profound artifice . . . endowed with a greatness of mind which could brave the storms of adversity [by] . . . the sheer force of a bold and fertile genius.”⁹

To explain such a change in emphasis and judgment, it is necessary to look at the growth in knowledge of Islam but also at certain changes toward religion as such. Joseph White and his contemporaries could draw upon two hundred years of European scholarship. The first systematic study of Islam and its history in western Europe goes back to the late sixteenth century. In 1587 regular teaching of Arabic began at the Collège de France in Paris; the first two professors were medical doctors, and that is significant of one of the ways in which knowledge of Arabic was important at the time; the third was a Maronite priest from Leba-

⁷ B. Pascal, *Pensées*, 17.

⁸ J. White, *Sermons preached before the University of Oxford, in the year 1784, at the lecture founded by the Rev. John Bampton*, 2d ed. (London, 1785).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 165ff.

non, and that too is significant in another way, as showing the first collaboration between European and indigenous scholars.¹⁰ Soon afterward, in 1613, a chair of Arabic was created at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, and the first holder of it was a famous scholar, Thomas Erpenius. In England, a chair was created at Cambridge in 1632 and one at Oxford in 1634. From this time there began a serious and sustained study of Arabic sources, from which the human figure of Muhammad emerged more clearly.

To follow this development in England only, it is necessary to begin with the first holder of the chair at Oxford, Edward Pococke (1604–91). He spent two lengthy periods in the Near East, first at Aleppo as chaplain to the English merchants, and then at Istanbul. In both places he collected manuscripts or had them copied for him. One of the works which emerged from his study of them was his *Specimen of the History of the Arabs*, the introduction to which shows the extent of scholarly knowledge in his time: it includes Arabic genealogies, information about the religion of Arabia before Islam, a description of the basic tenets of Islam and a translation of one of the creeds, that of al-Ghazali.¹¹ At the turn of the century, George Sale (c. 1697–1736) made the first accurate English translation of the Qur'an, itself owing much to a recent Latin version, that of Lodovico Marracci. Here too the introduction is important; the "Preliminary Discourse" poses the question of God's purpose in the coming of Muhammad. He was not, so Sale believes, immediately inspired by God, but God used his human inclinations and interests for His own ends: "to be a scourge to the Christian Church for not living answerably to that most holy religion which they had received."¹² This was possible only because of Muhammad's remarkable qualities: his conviction

¹⁰ P. Casanova, *L'enseignement de l'arabe au Collège de France* (Paris, 1910).

¹¹ E. Pococke, *Specimen historiae arabum*, new ed. (Oxford, 1806).

¹² G. Sale, "Preliminary Discourse," *The Koran* (London, 1734), 38.

that he had been sent to restore the true religion, his enthusiasm (in the eighteenth-century sense of strong feelings not fully restrained within the bounds of reason), his piercing and sagacious intelligence, good judgment, cheerful temper, and agreeable and polite manners.

In the same generation Simon Ockley (1678–1720) published *The History of the Saracens*, in which a similar picture of Muhammad appears. He was not an inspired prophet, but a man of remarkable achievements, who not only preserved the knowledge and wisdom of earlier times, but brought about a moral reform. The Arabs restored to Europe “Things of Universal Necessity, the Fear of God, the Regulation of our Appetites, prudent Oeconomy, Decency and Sobriety of Behaviour.”¹³

Along with the increase of knowledge there went a change in ways of looking at religion, and indeed the meaning of the word “religion” itself. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has shown in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, the modern use of the term appears in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In earlier times it had meant simply forms of worship, but now it came to mean any system of beliefs and practices constructed by human beings. If the word is used in this way, then there can be different religions, all of them worthy of rational study and consideration.¹⁴

This awakening of curiosity in the varieties of the religious spirit is clear, for example, in the life of Robert Boyle (1627–91), a well-known “natural philosopher” and one of the founders of the Royal Society. In his autobiography, Boyle describes a spiritual crisis in his early life. During the Grand Tour he visited a Carthusian monastery near Grenoble, and there he was overcome by “such strange and hideous thoughts, and such distracting doubts of some of the fundamentals of Christianity” that he was tempted to kill himself, until “at last it pleased God . . . to restore unto

¹³ S. Ockley, *The History of the Saracens*, 2d ed., vol. 2 (London, 1718), ii.

¹⁴ W. Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London, 1964).

him the withdrawn sense of His favour.”¹⁵ From this crisis he derived a beneficial lesson: “to be seriously inquisitive of the truth of the very fundamentals of Christianity, and to hear what both Turks and Jews, and the chief sects of Christians could alledge for their several opinions.”¹⁶ It was only on the basis of such an inquiry, he thought, that his own beliefs could be firmly grounded. In his will, he provided for a series of lectures, to be delivered annually, in order to prove the Christian religion against “Atheists, Theists, Pagans, Jews and Mahometans.”¹⁷

When Christianity was seen in this light, in its relations with other religions, and when all of them were viewed as systems of beliefs and practices articulated by human beings, more than one conclusion could be drawn. It was possible to regard Christianity as being different, in its origins and beliefs, from all others, but it was also possible to see all of them as the products of human minds and feelings, and Christianity was not necessarily unique, or necessarily the best of them.

In some writers of the eighteenth century, indeed, there was a tendency to use the career and mission of Muhammad as an oblique way of criticizing Christianity, at least in the form in which the churches had taught it. Muhammad could be shown as an example of the excesses of enthusiasm and ambition, and his followers as examples too of human credulity; alternatively, he could be seen as preaching a religion which was more rational, or nearer to a purely natural faith, than Christianity.

This was the view of some of the French thinkers of the eighteenth century, and we can hear an echo of it in Napoleon’s statements about Islam. In the Arabic proclamation issued when he landed in Egypt in 1798, he assured the Egyptians that the French

¹⁵ R. Boyle, “An account of Philaretus, during his minority,” in *Works of the Hon. Robert Boyle*, vol. 1 (London, 1744), 12.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ L. T. More, *The Life and Works of the Hon. Robert Boyle* (London, 1944), 132.

“worship God far more than the Mamluks do, and respect the Prophet and the glorious Qur’an . . . the French are true Muslims.”¹⁸ No doubt there was something in this of political propaganda, but there was also an admiration for the achievements of Muhammad (a subject to which Napoleon returned in later life), and a certain view of religion: there is a God or Supreme Being, whose existence can be apprehended by reason, but whose nature and mode of operation have been distorted by specific religions; these religions can be arranged on a scale, according to the extent to which their teachings approach the truth to which reason can lead us.

Such an idea could be formulated in many ways, ranging from genuine rational conviction to almost complete skepticism or agnosticism. Edward Gibbon lay near to the point of skepticism, but to him Muhammad appeared in as favorable a light as any religious leader could. Chapter 50 of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is devoted to Muhammad and the rise of Islam. It is a work of remarkable learning, based on wide reading in works of European scholarship and also in the works of such travelers as Chardin, Volney, and Niebuhr. Gibbon has an opinion about Muhammad which is clearly formulated, and favorable up to a point. Muhammad, he believes, had “an original and superior genius,” formed in solitude, as it must be: “conversation enriches the understanding, but solitude is the school of genius.” The product of that solitude was the Qur’an, “a glorious testimony to the unity of God.” It expressed the idea of “an infinite and eternal being, without form or place, without issue or similitude, present to our most secret thoughts, existing by the necessity of his own nature, and deriving from himself all moral and intellectual perfection.” This is, Gibbon adds, “a creed too sublime, perhaps, for our present faculties”; for this reason there are dangers in it, and Muhammad was not immune from them:

¹⁸ ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *‘Aja’ib al-athar fi’l-tarajim wa’l-akhbar* (Cairo, A.H. 1322 [1904-1905]), 3:4.

“The unity of God is an idea most congenial to nature and reason; and a slight conversation with the Jews and Christians would teach him to despise and detest the idolatry of Mecca. . . . the energy of a mind incessantly bent on the same object would convert a general obligation into a particular call; the warm suggestions of the understanding would be felt as the inspirations of Heaven . . . how the conscience may slumber in a mixed and middle state between self-illusion and voluntary fraud.” As Muhammad grew more successful, Gibbon thinks, his motives may have changed: “Charity may believe that the original motives of Mahomet were those of pure and genuine benevolence; but . . . the injustice of Mecca and the choice of Medina transformed the citizen into a prince, the humble preacher into the leader of armies. . . . a politician may suspect that he secretly smiled . . . at the enthusiasm of his youth and the credulity of his proselytes.”¹⁹ (We find here what was to become a familiar theme of European scholarship, the difference between the Muhammad of Mecca and of Medina.)

III

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans who thought about Islam could take up two kinds of attitudes toward it (of course, with many variations in both of them). They could see Islam as the enemy and rival of Christianity, using some Christian truths for its own purposes, or else as one of the forms which human reason and feeling have taken in their attempt to know and define the nature of God and the universe. Common to both these attitudes was acceptance of the fact that Muhammad and his followers had played an important part in the history of the world. By this time, moreover, it was more difficult not to take up an attitude of some kind toward Islam, as toward the other religions of the world, because of the changing relations between Europe and

¹⁹ E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chap. 50.

the peoples of Asia and Africa among whom religions other than Christianity were predominant. Trade was expanding as new methods of manufacture were invented and adopted, and new means of communication were developed: the steamship, railway, and telegraph. The expansion of Europe brought back new knowledge of the world outside, and also created new responsibilities: British, French, and Dutch rule was extended over ports and their hinterlands in the countries around the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, and Russian rule expanded southward toward the Black Sea and eastward into Asia.

In this century, therefore, there was a renewal of thought about Islam. It took many forms, which differed to some extent according to the experiences of the various European nations. In Britain, and among British people in the empire, an incentive was given to the idea of opposition between Christianity and Islam by the new religious spirit of Evangelicalism: the idea that salvation lay only in the consciousness of sin and acceptance of the Gospel of Christ, and that one who knows himself to be saved has a duty to confront others with this truth. Such a confrontation was now possible on a larger scale than before, because of the growth of organized missionary activities and because the expanding empire, and the Indian empire in particular, provided a field both of great opportunity and of responsibility.

In general, the attitude of missionaries who had been touched by the Evangelical spirit was one of hostility toward Islam and acceptance of the duty to try to convert Muslims. Thomas Valpy French (1825–91), principal of Saint John's College at Agra and later bishop of Lahore, can serve as an example. Early in his work of mission he came to believe that "Christianity and Mohammedanism are as distinct as earth and heaven, and could not possibly be true together."²⁰ Later in life he resigned his post as

²⁰ H. Birks, *Life and Correspondence of Thomas Valpy French*, vol. 1 (London, 1895), 69.

bishop because he thought it his duty to preach the gospel in Arabia, in the heart of the world of Islam; he died on his way there, at Muscat.

In some instances the confrontation was direct, and we have records of at least two of them. The first was a controversy in writing between Henry Martyn (1781–1812), a famous missionary in India, and two Iranian Shi'i divines, during Martyn's visit to Shiraz in 1811. The main points at issue were questions which had always been central in polemics between Muslims and Christians. Is the Qur'an a miracle? Martyn denied it, and the mullahs expressed the orthodox view that the Qur'an is unique and inimitable and this is a proof of its divine origin. Was the coming of Muhammad foretold in the Bible? Here too the mullahs gave the orthodox view: it was foretold, but the text of the Bible had been corrupted or misinterpreted by the church. Were the moral qualities of Muhammad and his followers such as to permit the belief that Islam was of divine origin? Here the discussion revolved around familiar themes: the plurality of the Prophet's wives, and the spread of Islam by force of arms.²¹

A public controversy of a more direct kind was held in Agra in 1854, between Karl Pfander, a German missionary in the service of the Church Missionary Society, and a Muslim divine, Shaykh Rahmatullah al-Kayranawi. Pfander had been brought up in a tradition of German pietism not dissimilar to Evangelicalism. Encouraged by some Evangelical officials of the East India Company, he followed an active policy of preaching and writing, published a long book on sin and salvation, and was challenged to a public debate by Shaykh Rahmatullah. The main argument revolved around the question of whether the Christian scriptures had been altered so as to conceal the evidence for the future coming of the Prophet Muhammad. The debate was inconclusive, because Pfander withdrew after the second session, but it is clear

²¹ For Martyn, see S. Lee, *Controversial Tracts on Christianity and Moham-medanism* (Cambridge, 1894).

from the reports that he did not get the better of the exchanges; Rahmatullah had some knowledge of the new German science of biblical criticism, which he had derived from an Indian Muslim doctor who knew English well, and he used this to put the question of the authenticity and authority of the Bible in a new light.²²

It was not only the missionaries who were imbued with the new Evangelical spirit, Many of the British officials in India were also touched by it, One of them, William Muir (1819–1905) was present at the debate at Agra. A few years earlier he had written an article, “The Muhammedan Controversy,” which showed the total opposition to Islam which was characteristic of the Evangelicals. Islam, he said, was “the only undisguised and formidable antagonist of Christianity . . . an active and powerful enemy. . . . It is just because Mohammedanism acknowledges the divine original, and has borrowed so many of the weapons of Christianity, that it is so dangerous an adversary.”²³ In later life, after Muir’s Indian career came to an end, he became principal of Edinburgh University and wrote his famous *Life of Mohammed*, which was to remain for many years the standard English book on the subject. It conveys much the same message as the earlier article. Muhammad was a mixture of good and bad qualities, with the bad coming to predominate in his later life. It is a delusion to suppose that it is a kind of Christianity, or can be an evangelical preparation for it: “There is in it just so much truth, truth borrowed from previous Revelations yet cast in another mould, as to divert attention from the need for more.”²⁴

Outside the ranks of Evangelical Christians, it may be that the other range of attitudes was becoming more widespread: those derived from the idea that Islam is, within its limits, an authentic

²² A. Powell, “Mawlana Rahmat Allah Kairanawi and Muslim-Christian Controversy in India in the Mid-19th Century,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1976, pp. 42–63.

²³ W. Muir, *The Mohammedan Controversy and other Articles* (Edinburgh, 1897), 1–63.

²⁴ W. Muir, *The Life of Mohammed*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh, 1912), 522.

expression of the human need to believe in a God, and one which has values of its own. Such an idea was expressed, in a rather confused form, in a work which was to have a great and lasting influence in the English-speaking world: Thomas Carlyle's lecture "The Hero as Prophet" in *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History*, published in 1841. Carlyle accepts Muhammad as a prophet, according to his own definition of prophecy: "a silent great soul: one of those who cannot but be in earnest." He was alive to "the great mystery of existence . . . the unspeakable fact, 'Here am I.'" In some sense he was inspired: "Such light had come, as it could, to illuminate the darkness of this wild Arabian soul. A confused, dazzling splendour as of life and Heaven . . . he called it revelation and the Angel Gabriel; who of us may yet know what to call it?"²⁵

One of those who listened to Carlyle's lectures was F. D. Maurice, a leading theologian of the Church of England, and one who aroused controversy and some bewilderment in his own time and later: John Stuart Mill, who was not in sympathy with his ideas, said of him, "there was more intellectual power wasted in Maurice than in any other of my contemporaries."²⁶ In a letter, Maurice praised the charity of Carlyle's view of Muhammad but disagreed with his idea of religion. Carlyle, he said, "regards the world as without a centre and [Christian doctrine] as only one of the mythical ventures in which certain actions . . . have wrapt themselves up."²⁷

Maurice's own views of other religions were given a few years later in his book, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity*. These were lectures given in the series founded by Robert Boyle. They were delivered in 1845–46, when Maurice

²⁵ T. Carlyle, lecture 2, "The Hero as prophet," in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*.

²⁶ J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* (London, 1873), 153.

²⁷ F. Maurice, *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, vol. 1 (London, 1884), 282.

was professor of literature and history at King's College, London, and soon to become professor of theology there; this was some years before the controversy which was to lead to his dismissal from his chair. In the lectures, Maurice addressed himself to problems raised, as he believed, by the circumstances of his time and place. England was becoming a colonizing country; there was a responsibility for preaching the gospel to non-Christians, and this involved knowing what their religions were and how Christianity stood in relation to them. This in turn raised another question. What is Christianity? Is it simply one among the religions of the world, or does it have a privileged position which marks it out from them, and gives it a truth which they do not possess? Maurice declares himself to be conscious of "a tremendous change in the feelings of men towards religious systems." Disturbing questions are being asked: "Might not particular soils be adapted to particular religions? . . . Might not a better day be at hand, in which all religions alike should be found to have done their work of partial good, of greater evil, and when something much more comprehensive and satisfactory should supersede them?" The great political revolution of the late eighteenth century had given rise to the accusation that religions were maintained in the interests of politicians or priests, and this accusation was made as much against Christianity as against other religions, or even more. It was necessary therefore to ask what religion really is."

For Maurice, the essence of religion was "the faith in men's hearts." He meant by this something specific: faith for him was not simply a human quality, an essential part of the constitution of a human being, it was derived from "the revelation of God to man, not [simply] any pious or religious sentiments which men may have concerning God." This revelation has a content: that God exists and has revealed His Will for human beings, that His

²⁸ F. D. Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity* (London, 1847), 30ff.

Will is a loving will, that it has revealed itself progressively in history, and this progress has been completed in a person, the perfect image of God, “a uniting and reconciling spirit, which raises [men] above the broken forms and shadows of earth.”²⁹

Maurice looks at each of the higher religions in the light of this principle. When he comes to Islam, first of all he considers some false or inadequate explanations of its success. It cannot be explained simply by the force of its arms: where did that force come from, if not from the strength and nature of the faith of Muslims? It was not the result of human credulity, for this could not explain why Islam has survived and flourished so vigorously. It cannot be said that the whole content of Islam was taken from the Old and New Testaments: Muhammad must at least have been inspired by them, they “must have taken possession of him.” The personality of Muhammad, the strength of his conviction and exaltation, cannot by itself be the sole reason; it must also be shown why this personality has had such a great and lasting effect upon mankind, and this is the more difficult to explain because the religion which he preached is one which condemns all worship of human beings.

Is there another explanation? Can the success of Islam be seen as a judgment of God upon guilty nations: upon the Christian peoples of the East who had lost the Christian virtues and were sunk in the worship of images, religious ceremonies, and philosophical theories, and the pagans who had not known Christianity or had known it but rejected it? In putting forward this suggestion Maurice may have been echoing the thought expressed in a book which he had read: Charles Forster’s *Mahometanism Unveiled* (1822), a bizarre work at best (his grandson, the novelist E. M. Forster, went further, and said his books “are worthless”).³⁰ The argument of the book is that Muhammad was the antagonist

²⁹ Ibid., 151.

³⁰ E. M. Forster, *Marianne Thornton* (London, 1956), 145, 163.

of Christ, but his life nevertheless had a providential purpose: by fighting against idolatry, Judaism, and Christian heresies, Islam could “shape the course of things indirectly” toward Christianity, and so was “essential to the recovery and ultimate perfection of the pure belief.”³¹

Maurice thought there was some truth in this theory: Islam had indeed brought back into the world “the sense of a divine almighty Will, to which all human wills should bow,” the assertion of a Being not dependent on ourselves, the ground of man’s being. It shares with Christianity certain essential truths: that there is one God who makes His Will known to mankind, that His Speech is recorded in a Book to which we can safely look as an authority, and that all who accept this truth form a body or community called by God to the work of preaching this truth. Thus Islam has served a useful purpose in the world by calling men back to knowledge of these truths, and in this sense Muhammad can be said to have had a vocation from God. His witness saved the church: “The Middle Ages turn more upon [Muhammad] . . . than I had at all imagined till I came to think more of them. There would have been no belief in Christ if there had not been that broad firm assertion of an absolute God.”³² This “Muhammedan witness” had something lacking in it, however. In Maurice’s view, the God of Islam is sheer Will: not “a great moral being who deigns to raise His creatures out of their degradation, and reveals to them what He is and why He has created them.” Considered in isolation, Will can easily become a dead fate and lead to indifference or despair. For Muhammad, history carries “no hope of a progress,” and the religion which began with him is like all the religions of the world except Christianity: “broken, divided, superstitious schemes for propitiating an unwilling and ungracious Being, because they have not been able to perceive the uniting

³¹ C. Forster, *Mahometanism Unveiled* (London, 1829), 1:108; 2:351.

³² Maurice, *Life*, 239.

point, because they have been obliged to *create* it, somewhere in the natural or the spiritual world.”³⁵

IV

Maurice’s book is a sign of the development of the idea of religions as human attempts to articulate something which comes from outside the human world, “the faith in men’s hearts.” Seen in this perspective, the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet could be regarded as being at worst a distortion of ideas taken from other religions, and at best a valid but limited testimony to the truth. Without going further back, it is possible to trace this way of looking at religion to the thought of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In a late work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant distinguished “true religion” from “ecclesiastical faiths.” “True religion,” he said, contains two elements: the moral law, an intuition made articulate by practical reason, and a certain way of seeing that law as a divine command; the existence of God is seen as the necessary presupposition of the moral imperative. “Ecclesiastical faiths,” for their part, are based on belief in a revealed scripture, and they should be judged by whether or not they conform to “true religion.” Among them, Christianity has a unique position, for it is the faith which most fully expresses “true religion” and holds out to mankind the supreme human exemplar of the moral ideal, but it is possible for other faiths embodied in scriptures to express “true religion,” at least in part.³⁴

Such a line of thought was carried further by a thinker of the next generation, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), and he had something explicit to say about Islam. In *On Religion* (1799),³⁵

³³ Ibid., 230; F. D. Maurice, *Religions*, 10f., 135f.

³⁴ I. Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, in *Werke*, ed. W. Weischedel, vol. 4 (Darmstadt, 1966), 654–879; Eng. trans., *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York, 1934).

³⁵ F. Schleiermacher, *Ueber die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verachtern*, in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, part 1, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1984), 185–326; trans. R. Crouter under the title *On Religion* (Cambridge, 1988).

he suggested that the basis of all religion is human feeling, but perhaps “feeling” is too weak a word to express what he means; one exponent of his thought has defined it as “a mode of objective apprehension . . . a species of an awareness of spiritual things.”³⁶ More specifically, it is the apprehension of being absolutely dependent, or—in other terms—of having a certain relationship with God (whom he also calls the World Spirit). This is a universal feeling, present in all human beings. It is anterior to knowing and doing, but human beings try to articulate it in ideas and express it in actions, and these attempts have given rise to different religious communities, each founded by a “hero of religion,” and each having its own distinctive articulation of religious feeling in theology and practice. Such communities differ from each other in the emphasis which they lay upon one or other aspect of the relationship between God and man, and the fullness with which they express the feeling of dependence which is the ground of all of them.

It is possible therefore to construct a scale of religions. In a later work, he makes a distinction between those which accept the idea of dependence upon a single Supreme Being and those which do not. Among the monotheistic religions, there are three great ones, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, or it might be better to say there are two, since Judaism is in process of extinction. Christianity and Islam are “still contending for the mastery of the human race.”³⁷ In looking at this contest, Schleiermacher writes as a Christian who believes his faith is undoubtedly superior. Through Christ, he believes, the idea of dependence is expressed with a “glorious clarity,” and to it is added the further idea that all that is finite needs a higher mediator to be brought into accord with God. All religions are corrupt, however, even Christianity;

36 H.R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London, 1937), 31ff.

37 F. Schleiermacher, *Der Christliche Glaube*, 2d ed., in *Sämmtliche Werke*, part 1, vol. 3 (Berlin, 1842), 47; Eng. trans., *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh, 1928), 37.

this is unavoidable when the Infinite descends into the sphere of time and submits to the influence of finite minds. No man or community possesses the whole of religion, but all have something of truth in them: "This excludes only the idea . . . that the Christian religion should adopt towards at least most other forms of piety, the attitude of the true towards the false. . . . error never exists in and for itself, but always along with some truth, and we have never fully understood it until we have discovered its connexion with truth."³⁸

Such ideas were a stimulus to examination of those historical factors which had shaped the development of different religions and given them their share of the truth and their limitations. For inmost writers of earlier centuries, and even for many such as Maurice in the nineteenth, Islam meant the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, and the early conquests of the Muslims. There was little sense of a culture, a body of ideas, practices, and institutions which had grown over time and was still living. During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, a different view of it would emerge as the idea developed that all beliefs, cultures, and institutions are shaped by the flow of history. To look at different cultures and societies, and at the religions which had played a major part in forming them, and to place them all within the framework of a general view of the history of mankind, was the purpose of another German thinker of the same generation, J. G. von Herder (1744–1803). In his *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* he stated that the basic units of mankind were peoples or nations, formed within a particular physical environment by a gradually evolving way of life which expressed itself in customs and beliefs. Each of these peoples is distinguished by its language, and everything in its life is connected with everything else: "all the works of God have their stability in themselves, and in their beautiful consistency." These separate peoples cannot be reduced to each other or even, beyond a certain point, compared with each

³⁸ Ibid., 42; Eng. trans., 33.

other. Herder was writing at the beginning of the period of European expansion, and he rejected the impossible attempt of “a united Europe to erect herself into a despot and compel all the nations of the Earth to be happy in her way . . . is not a proud thought of this kind treason against the majesty of Nature?”³⁹ The purpose of history is not that one people should impose itself on others, but rather the attainment of a balance and harmony between them.

In this context, what should be said of Islam or, rather, of the Arabs (for Islam in Herder’s view was an expression of the Arabian spirit) ? The Arabs, he believed, “from the remotest times have fostered sublime conceptions.” They were “for the most part solitary, romantic men.” (This was a time when a certain conception of the Arab of the desert as a noble figure began to appear in European writing, notably in the work of a Dutch traveler, Carsten Niebuhr, who saw the Beduin as having preserved the natural goodness of mankind: “liberty, independence and simplicity.”) In Herder’s view, Muhammad brought to birth what was already latent in Arabia, with the help of such Christian and Jewish ideas as he knew. The movement which he began showed the strengths and weaknesses which are typical of such movements. It was created and upheld by the virtues of the desert, courage and fidelity; it raised men out of their worship of the powers of nature and made them worshipers of the one God, and it raised them also from a savage state to “a middle degree of civilization.” When the virtues of the desert grew weak, the Arabian civilization ceased to grow further, but it left something behind it: the Arabic language, “their noblest legacy,” not the inheritance of the Arabs only, but a bond of intercourse between nations such as had never before existed.⁴⁰ (Herder was writing at a time when Arabic

³⁹ J. G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte a'er Menschheit* (Riga and Leipzig, 1784-91), 2:206; 3:365; Eng. trans., *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (Chicago, 1968), 78, 116.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:151-52; 4:239-67; Eng. trans., 336-54.

was still the lingua franca of a great part of the civilized world.)

A generation later, another attempt to give meaning to the whole of human history was made by G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, given at the University of Berlin in the 1820s, his basic category is not dissimilar to Herder's; it is that of a specific spirit which creates and animates a society and culture. The relations between the different spirits are not seen in the same way, however. For Herder, they are related by tensions and conflicts which may finally be resolved into harmony and balance; for Hegel, all are manifestations or phases of the one universal Spirit, and they are arranged on a temporal scale. All that exists in the world can be seen in a line of historical development, which carries its own meaning and end inside itself. History is “the exhibition of the Spirit in the process of working out that which it is potentially”; the end of the process will be freedom, defined as the full realization of the essence of human beings in art, thought, and political life. The means through which the Spirit realizes itself are the passions and interests of individual human beings. Human history therefore consists of different phases, in each of which the universal Spirit manifests itself in a particular communal or national spirit or will. This spirit is dominant in its age, but it has its limits, and it is by negation of these that a new spirit arises in another people; once this has happened, the role of the national spirit which expressed the previous phase is finished.

Where do the Muslims or Arabs stand in this process? They played an essential part in it, for theirs was the human society in which the Spirit was embodied in one of the phases of its development. Their role was to assert “the principle of pure unity: nothing else exists —nothing can become fixed —the worship of the One remains the only bond by which the whole is capable of unity.” The acceptance and assertion of this principle by Muslims produced men of great moral elevation, having “all the virtues that appertain to magnanimity and valour.” The very strength of the

principle contained its own limitations, however. The triumph of the Arabs was the triumph of enthusiasm, carrying forward the idea of universality, but on that basis nothing is firm. Once the enthusiasm died nothing was left: "Islam has long vanished from the stage of history, and has retreated into oriental ease and repose."⁴¹

V

In such systems of thought Islam played at most a secondary part, but in the next two generations both Islam and the Arabic language were to become directly relevant to certain central concerns of European scholarly thought. A new kind of study developed, that of languages in their relations to each other. It had been obvious for a long time that certain languages were similar to each other: the languages derived from Latin, and Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, however, a new theory was put forward. In 1786 Sir William Jones (1746–94), a distinguished British student of things oriental, then resident in Calcutta as a judge under the East India Company, pointed out that there were similarities of vocabulary and structure between Sanskrit, some European languages, and perhaps Old Persian as well. He may not have been the first to notice this, but his idea was taken up, particularly by German scholars such as Franz Bopp (1791–1876). As the relationships among what came to be called the "Indo-European" or "Aryan" languages were studied, it became clear not only that they were similar, but that there were principles on the basis of which one language, or one form of a language, might have developed out of another, and that a number of similar languages might have a common origin. This theory could be applied not only to the Indo-European languages but to others as well; Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, and others could be regarded as forming the "family" of Semitic languages.

⁴¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 11 (Stuttgart, 1928), 453–59; Eng. trans., *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (London, 1857), 369–74.

Thus there developed the science of comparative philology, now absorbed into linguistics, at least in English-speaking countries, but one of the seminal sciences of the nineteenth century, because it was more than a study of the structure and history of languages. At least in German and French, the term “philology” referred to the study not only of languages but of what has been written in them: the texts which are a legacy of the past, and in particular those which express a collective view of the universe and man’s place in it. Herder had emphasized that humanity is divided into nations, each of which sees itself and the universe through the medium of a specific language; this idea was taken up by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1837) and others and became a commonplace of thought in the age of romanticism.

One important offshoot of the study of comparative philology was the science or pseudoscience of comparative mythology, developed by F. Max Müller (1823–1900) and others. The basis of this was the idea that the most ancient literary products of a people —its folktales and religious writings —would reveal, if studied by strict linguistic analysis, its essential mentality and its inner history: that process by which higher religion and rational thought had developed out of stories and myths. Thus the comparative study of languages, properly conceived and pursued, could be a study of peoples with their specific mentalities, a kind of natural history of mankind. To some philologists, this study appeared as a liberating force: by showing that religious texts were a primitive way of expressing truth through myths, it could free the mind to express them rationally.

This system of ideas was to have a profound and far-reaching effect upon several fields of study. It was one of the impulses for the creation of the science of anthropology: the study of certain societies which still existed but stood at a lower stage of the development through which more advanced societies had passed. It also gave rise to a certain view of cultural history, and one which not all philologists accepted. Such a view was expressed with force

by Ernest Renan (1823–92), one of the seminal figures in the formation of European ideas about Islam.

Renan's autobiography, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*,⁴² conveys a sense of his personality. It shows how he lost his inherited Catholic faith at the seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris but retained a basic seriousness in his search for truth. The method by which this search should be conducted, he believed, was that of philology. He even spoke of the "religion of philology," the faith that a precise study of texts in their historical context could reveal the essential nature of a people, and of humanity: "the union of philology and philosophy, of erudition and thought, should be the nature of intellectual activity in our time."⁴³

His life was devoted to this activity. He wrote about the philology of the Semitic languages, the history of the Jews, and the origins of Christianity, and also published a study of the Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Such studies, he believed, led to an important conclusion: that there is a natural course of development of human communities. They can pass through three stages of cultural growth: the first is that of religious literature and myths, of "mankind projecting itself on to a world of its own imagining," the second that of science, and the third, into which mankind will move in the future, will be that of a synthesis between science and a "religious" sense of oneness with nature.⁴⁴

Different peoples, so Renan believed, have different abilities to move along this path. The nature of a language determines the culture which can be expressed in it, and peoples are therefore capable of producing cultures at various levels. There is a hierarchy of peoples, languages, and cultures. At the lowest level are peoples who have no collective memory, that is to say, no cul-

⁴² E. Renan, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, in *Oeuvres complètes (OC)*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1948), 711–931; Eng. trans., *Recollections of My Youth* (London, 1929).

⁴³ Renan, *L'avenir de la science*, in *(OC)*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1949), 836.

⁴⁴ H. W. Wardman, *Ernest Renan: A Critical Biography* (London, 1964), 46–47.

ture. Above them are the first civilized races, the Chinese and others, who can rise to a certain height and no further. Above them again are the two “great and noble races,” the Semites and Aryans. The higher civilization has grown out of the interaction between them, but they have made unequal contributions to it.⁴⁵

The Semitic spirit has produced monotheism, and Christianity and Islam have conquered the world, but it can produce nothing else —no myths, therefore no higher literature or art —because of “the terrible simplicity of the Semitic spirit, closing the human brain to every subtle idea, to every fine sentiment, to all rational research, in order to confront it with an eternal tautology: God is God.”⁴⁶ It has therefore prevented the growth of science. In a lecture on Islam and science, Renan repeated this thesis in other terms: “Everyone who has been in the Orient or in Africa will have been struck by the kind of iron circle in which the believer’s head is enclosed, making him absolutely closed to science, and incapable of opening himself to anything new.”⁴⁷ It is the Aryan spirit which has created everything else: political life in the real sense, art, literature —the Semitic peoples have nothing of it, apart from some poetry —above all, science and philosophy. In these matters, “we are entirely Greek”; even the so-called Arabic sciences were a continuation of Greek sciences, carried on not by Arabs but by Persians and converted Greeks, that is to say, by Aryans. Christianity too in its developed form is the work of Europeans. The future of humanity therefore lies with the peoples of Europe, but there is a necessary condition of this: the destruction of the Semitic element in civilization, and of the theocratic power of Islam.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques*, in *OC*, vol. 8 (Paris, 1958), 585ff.

⁴⁶ Renan, “De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l’histoire de la civilisation,” in *OC*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1948), 333.

⁴⁷ Renan, “L’Islamisme et la science,” *OC*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1942), 946.

⁴⁸ Renan, “De la part des peuples,” 332–33.

This was a strong attack, and there is a metaphorical element in it: Renan was thinking not only of the world of Islam but of the Roman Catholic church and the spirituality of Saint Sulpice. His theories provoked a strong response. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–97), a Muslim writer and politician who believed in the possibility of a renewal of Islam, wrote a reply to the lecture “Islam and Science,”⁴⁹ and a young Hungarian Jewish scholar, Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), responded to Renan’s theories about myths: in his book *Mythology among the Hebrews*, he argued that the ancient Hebrews had in fact been capable of creating myths, and some of them were embedded in the Scriptures, which could indeed be understood only if they were interpreted in the light of the new disciplines of philology and mythology.⁵⁰

A line of scholarly endeavor closely connected with philology was biblical criticism: that is to say, the study of the texts of the Old and New Testaments by precise linguistic analysis, in order to ascertain when and by whom they were written, how they are related to each other, and what the historical reality is which they reflect, whether directly or indirectly. This line of investigation was to lead to results which were to be important for the study of Islam. As far as the Old Testament was concerned, the conclusions of the “higher criticism” were given definitive expression by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) in his *History of Israel*, first published in 1878. Out of an earlier Mosaic religion, he argued, there had emerged Judaism, an ethical monotheism preached by prophets; law and ritual came later.⁵¹ Similarly, a study of the New

⁴⁹ Djemaleddin el-Afghani, “L’Islamisme et la science,” *Journal des Débats*, 18–19 May 1883, repr. in A. M. Goichon, *La réfutation des matérialistes* (Paris, 1942), 174–89; Eng. trans. in N. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism* (Berkeley, 1968), 181–87.

⁵⁰ I. Goldziher, *Der Mythos bei den Hebräern und seine geschichtliche Entwicklung* (Leipzig, 1876); Eng. trans., R. Martineau, *Mythology among the Hebrews and Its Historical Development* (London, 1977).

⁵¹ J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (Berlin, 1883); Eng. trans., J. S. Black, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh, 1885).

Testament was believed to show that the “historical Jesus” came first, and only later did the doctrines and institutions which are called “Christianity” evolve.

Such theories could be taken to provide a model for the historical development of all religions: first of all there was a holy man or prophet, a “hero of religion,” to use Schleiermacher’s term; only later was a religious system articulated, in doctrines, laws, practices, and institutions. Such ideas had an obvious relevance to the history of Islam. Seen in this light, indeed, Islam might be of particular importance for the student of religion. Muhammad was the most recent in time of the “heroes of religion,” those claiming to be prophets and accepted by their followers as such; he had appeared in a period for which historical documentation was plentiful, and his life, actions, and sayings were fully recorded in the Hadith (the Traditions of the Prophet) and the *Sira* (the traditional biography of him). Thus the methods refined by biblical scholars could be used to throw light upon the origin and development of Islam, and this in its turn might help to explain the way in which other religions more distant in origin and not so fully documented had grown up.

Such concerns can be seen in the work of Wellhausen himself. Together with his studies of Judaism he wrote about early Islamic history. He believed that knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabia and the formation of Islam could help to explain the way in which the Hebrews entered history. The prophet or religious hero came first, and so in his Islamic studies he laid emphasis on the life and personality of Muhammad, founder and leader of a community.⁵² In the end, however, this line of thought was to have a result which had not perhaps been expected. The “full light of history” in which Muhammad appeared to have lived turned out not to be a full light at all. By the end of the nineteenth century, some scholars were casting doubt upon the Hadith as an authentic record of

⁵² J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischer Heidentumes* (Berlin, 1887); *Prolegomena zür ältesten Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin, 1899).

what the Prophet had said and done, although it could still be regarded as valuable in another way.

VI

The growth of knowledge of the world outside Europe, the expansion of intellectual curiosity about all things in earth and heaven, the stimulus given by the speculations of philosophers and the inquiries of philologists and biblical scholars: all these led to the development of a specific tradition of Islamic studies, the slow accumulation of knowledge and understanding based on a study of written texts, and to some extent also on direct observation of a living reality. This scholarly work, beginning in the seventeenth century and carried on through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until today, is perhaps of more lasting importance than the theoretical formulations which gave it an impetus and direction.

It took a long time for Islamic studies to become a separate discipline; in many universities they were an appendage to Hebrew and biblical studies, and in some they still live together in uneasy cohabitation and in danger of being isolated from the mainstream of academic life. These studies were carried on, until recent times, by a small number of individuals. In the universities of Europe, two of the chairs of Arabic created in early modern times were of paramount importance: that of Leiden, where the tradition which had begun with Erpenius was carried on, and that at the Collège de France in Paris, where an unbroken line of teachers included some famous scholars. A further impetus was given to Islamic studies in France by the creation of the *Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes* at the end of the eighteenth century. The French tradition was enriched by Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), in some ways the founder of modern Islamic and Arabic studies.

In a weak tradition, maintained and transmitted by a small number of scholars scattered in different places, personal contacts are of particular importance; the tradition is handed on orally as

much as by writing. The discoveries and ideas of scholars in Leiden and Paris were passed on by a kind of apostolic succession, and scholars formed a chain of witnesses (a *silsila*, to use the Arabic term). The influence of Leiden and Paris was particularly strong in the German-speaking countries, which were to become the center of Islamic studies in Europe, because of a combination of the special knowledge and skills which German students learned from the older Dutch and French traditions and the ideas about religion, history, and language which were being generated in Germany at the time. Perhaps the most important figures in the flowering of German scholarship, not only because of their own work but because of the students whose minds they formed, were H. Fleischer (1801–88), a pupil of Silvestre de Sacy, who taught at Leipzig for many years, and T. Nöldeke (1836–1930), who made an important visit to Leiden in his early years and then taught at Strasbourg.⁵³

The tradition of Islamic studies was weaker and less central in the English universities, perhaps for reasons connected with their decline in the eighteenth century. At Cambridge, the revival of interest began in the later nineteenth century, when W. Wright (1830–89) was appointed professor of Arabic in 1870 after studying at Leiden; with him, Cambridge entered the main European tradition, and he was followed by a number of distinguished scholars, W. Robertson Smith (1846–94), R. A. Nicholson (1868–1945), and E. G. Browne (1862–1926). At Oxford, the line of professors who followed Pococke, the first holder of the chair of Arabic, was undistinguished. A new era of distinction did not begin until the appointment of D. S. Margoliouth (1858–1940) in 1889; he was extremely learned but in his mind there was a streak of fantasy, or perhaps of irony, which led him sometimes to propose untenable theories. It was only with his successor, H. A. R. Gibb (1895–1971), that Oxford entered the mainstream,

⁵³ J. Füick, *Die arabischen Studien in Europa* (Leipzig, 1955)

and it was not until the middle years of the twentieth century that Islamic studies began to acquire a firm institutional basis in Great Britain, because of the foundation of the School of Oriental and African Studies and the recommendations of a succession of official committees.

What was missing in British and other universities was partly replaced by the experience of travel and residence in the world of Islam. A remarkable observer of things Arab and Islamic, E. W. Lane (1801–76), lived for many years in Cairo: his lexicon is still the fullest and most accurate dictionary of the early classical language, and his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, a vivid and detailed description of the lives of the inhabitants of Cairo, gives its readers a sense —missing in much of the scholarly work of the time —of a Muslim urban society and civilization still living and changing.⁵⁴ In the same way, J. von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) spent some years as an official of the Austrian embassy in Istanbul and, after he returned to Vienna, published works on Ottoman history and on Arabic, Turkish, and Persian poetry, which had an influence on Goethe and other German writers of his time.

Officials of the expanding empires —British, French, Dutch, and Russian—had ample opportunities to learn oriental languages and observe the life of the countries where they served, and some of them became scholars. The tradition of the gentleman-scholar was particularly strong in the British Empire in India, where the line which began with Sir William Jones was continued by many officials and army officers. There was a practical reason for this: in the earlier period at least, much of the administration and negotiations with indigenous rulers was carried on through the medium of Persian, the language of high culture in the Moghul Empire and some of its successor-states. There was, also, however, a genuine stirring of intellectual curiosity and the imagination.

⁵⁴ E. W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London, 1836).

As the nineteenth century advanced, the work of individual scholars, scattered and isolated as they were, was made easier by the creation of an international system for the exchange of ideas and information. Scientific societies were established: the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786, the Royal Asiatic Society in London in 1823, the Société Asiatique in Paris in 1822, the Deutsche Morgenlandische Gesellschaft in 1845; each of them published a journal. In 1873 there was held the first of a series of international congresses of orientalists. There was also a network of correspondence between scholars. The need to overcome the loneliness of the isolated researcher explains the advice which one of them, Ignaz Goldziher, gave to a young correspondent: always answer letters, and attend the congresses of orientalists.⁵⁵

VII

The small group of rather isolated scholars had to do too many things, and it is not surprising that they did not do all of them equally well. Their basic tasks were to learn and teach Arabic and the other languages of Islamic culture, and to discover, study, edit, and on occasion translate texts. (Even now, only a small proportion of the extant documents of Islamic civilization has been published, and a smaller number still in satisfactory critical editions.) If the great scholars of the nineteenth century had done nothing except this they would deserve well of their successors. A few of them, however, did try to go further and to insert what they had discovered into a broader framework, and it was natural that they should construct it out of the ideas which were current in their time. On the whole this was a secondary field of study which did not generate its own ideas, or at least did not produce ideas which could fertilize other fields.

⁵⁵ R. Simon, *Ignac Goldziher: His Life and Scholarship as Reflected in His Words and Correspondence* (Budapest and Leiden, 1986), 16.

The most important of the seminal ideas of the nineteenth century, for those who were working in this field, was that of a culture which was developed by the cumulative efforts of human beings over time and had a unique nature which was expressed in all its aspects. Perhaps the first systematic attempt to look at the history of Islam in this perspective was made by Alfred von Kremer (1828-89). An Austrian, he studied at the Oriental Academy in Vienna, where Hammer-Purgstall had taught earlier, and then entered the consular service of the Austrian Empire and served for some thirty years in Alexandria, Cairo, Beirut, and elsewhere. Among other works he wrote a history of civilization under the caliphs, published in two volumes in 1875–77. His guiding ideas were taken from Herder, Hegel, and other German thinkers and were supported by vast knowledge; he was perhaps the first Western historian to have been influenced by the writings of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the great Arab historian and thinker about history, on whom he wrote a book. The basic category of his thought was that of a culture or civilization as the total expression of the spirit of a people. That spirit, he believed, manifested itself in two principal ways: in the state, a social phenomenon of which the rise and decline were governed by laws, and in the religious ideas which molded the life of the family and the community. These two factors were closely linked with each other: the nature and fate of a society and civilization were determined by its leading ideas.⁵⁶

Perhaps the most important figure in the formation of a European scholarly image of Islam, in its development and nature as a religious and cultural system, was Ignaz Goldziher. A Hungarian Jew, brought up mainly in Budapest, he has left us a record of his early life and a diary of his later years, which throw much light on

⁵⁶ A. von Kremer, *Culturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1875–77); trans. S. Khuda Bakhsh under the title *The Orient under the Caliphs* (Calcutta, 1920).

the formation of his mind.⁵⁷ He had a modern secular education at the University of Budapest, and a Hungarian scholar has suggested that he was deeply influenced by the ferment of ideas in the Hungary of the time.⁵⁸ By the “Compromise” of 1867, Hungary had been given virtual independence within the Austrian Empire, which became a dual monarchy. Its first government was in favor of the emancipation of the Jews, and the idea was current of a cultural unity which would transcend differences of race and religion. Because of the patronage of the minister of education, Eötvös, the young Goldziher was given a scholarship to study abroad. He spent some time at Leiden and two years at Leipzig studying with Fleischer, the student of Silvestre de Sacy. It was here that he inserted himself into the main tradition of Islamic studies. Fleischer was his real teacher; when he died, Goldziher tells us, “I felt as if part of my own life was ended. As long as the teacher lived, one thought of oneself as his student.”⁵⁹

Through his studies during these years, Goldziher became aware of modern German thought and scholarship. He read Hegel’s philosophy, works of biblical criticism and Protestant theology, philology, and the penumbra of ideas which surrounded it; this reading set on foot the train of thought which led to his first book, *Mythology among the Hebrews*.

He also had another kind of education, however, a traditional Jewish one. He had a deep knowledge of Hebrew and the Talmud, and the nature and future of Judaism were to remain a central concern; by 1867, he tells us, “Judaism was the pulse-beat of my life.” His Judaism, however, was not that of the traditional scholars. He accepted the ideas of the new science of biblical criticism, as they came to German-speaking Jewish communities through such writings as those of Abraham Geiger (1810–74). Authentic

⁵⁷ I. Goldziher, *Tagebuch* (Leiden, 1978).

⁵⁵ Simon, *Goldziher*, 11–76.

⁵⁹ *Tagebuch*, 116.

Judaism, according to this school of thought, was essentially the monotheism of the prophets; law and ritual came later and were the products of particular times and places. This idea had implications for religious practice, and also for scholarship. Religious texts should be studied in their historical context, and could be used in two different ways: to throw light on the events and persons of which they claimed to record the history, and also —and indeed primarily —to throw light on the age in which they had been produced.

In his early twenties a third influence was added to those of his two educations. He was given the opportunity to go to the Near East, and in 1873–74 he spent several months in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo. Beirut made little impact upon him, and he was not impressed by the American missionaries and their converts, but his weeks in Damascus were of lasting importance in his life. They gave him his first opportunity “to enter the Muslim republic of thought.” He met scholars and divines, and he later described this time as “the loveliest part of my life.”⁶⁰ In Cairo also he met scholars, including the reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and he obtained permission to attend lessons at the Azhar, the great center of traditional Islamic learning; he was probably the first European scholar to do so.

This visit clearly left a permanent mark upon him. It gave him an awareness of Islam as a living community which was never to leave him, although he only returned once more to Egypt for a very short visit. It taught him the importance of jurisprudence and law in the thought-world of Islam. Above all, Islam appeared to him to be that toward which other religions should strive: a pure monotheism, an uncontaminated response to the call of God to the human heart: “the only religion in which superstition and heathen elements were forbidden not by rationalism but by orthodox teach-

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 58. For Goldziher’s diary kept during his visit to the Near East, see R. Patai, *Ignaz Goldziher and His Oriental Diary* (Detroit, 1987).

ing.”⁶¹ In these months, he tells us, “my way of thought was thoroughly turned towards Islam, and so was my sympathy. . . . I was not lying when I said that I believed in the prophetic mission of Muhammad. . . . My religion was henceforth the universal religion of the prophets.”⁶² Islam, as he perceived it during these months, provided a touchstone by which he could judge the other monotheistic religions. He wished to do what he could to call Judaism back to what he believed to be its truth. To judge by his diary, he had a certain aversion to Christianity, at least as he saw it in the Holy Land; but he had a habit of writing bitter things which may not have expressed his real beliefs.

He seems to have had the ambition to write a general comparative book on human cultures but was prevented from doing so by pressure of work. By the time he returned to Budapest after his years of study and travel the liberal atmosphere of Hungary had become clouded; Eötvös was dead and the government had changed. He was not given a substantive post in the university until 1904, and he earned his living as secretary of the reformed Jewish community of Budapest. His diaries are full of complaints about the dull, menial work he had to do, and the way in which the rich Jews who controlled the community treated him. There is a mystery here. He was offered chairs at Prague, Heidelberg, and elsewhere, and was approached about the chair at Cambridge in 1894. He need not have stayed in Budapest, and it is not clear why he did so; it may have been because of family obligations, but it may also have been because of a sense of loyalty to Hungary, and the idea that every man must have his place in the world, and this was his place.

In the end he did not write his general book, but his detailed work on Islam is perhaps more important than that would have been. Such time as he had for scholarship he gave to the precise

⁶¹ *Tagebuch*, 59.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 71.

study of a wide range of Islamic religious and legal texts in their historical context. In what is perhaps the most famous and seminal of his writings, he applied the critical method he had learned in Germany to one of the basic texts of Islam, the Hadith, or Traditions of the Prophet. He looked at it not as a sacred text which had come down unchanged from the time of the Prophet and his Companions, but as a body of writings produced by a process of gradual accumulation over many generations. It is not therefore to be accepted without question as a record of what Muhammad said and did but is primarily of value as throwing light upon the religious and political controversies of the first centuries of Islamic history. This insight has had a profound effect upon all later studies of Islamic theology and law.⁶³

Goldziher's comprehensive view of the way in which Islam had developed as a religious system was given expression in a series of lectures, written in 1907 to be given in the United States but never in fact delivered, and later published: *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*.⁶⁴ They show his attempt to fit the phenomena of Islam into a framework derived from the German speculative thought of the nineteenth century. Its starting point is Schleiermacher's theory of religion: the basis of all religions is the feeling of dependence, but in each of them it takes a special form which determines its character and development. In Islam the form which it takes is that of submission, which is the literal meaning of the word "Islam" itself: man must submit his will to unbounded omnipotence. This was the insight formulated by the Prophet Muhammad; he may have taken his ideas from elsewhere, but he made them into something original and new by the force of passionate conviction. From that moment what we now know

⁶³ Goldziher, "Ueber die Entwicklung des Hadith," in *Muhammedanische Studien*, vol. 2 (Halle, 1890), 1-274; trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern under the title *Muslim Studies*, vol. 2 (London, 1971), 17-251.

⁶⁴ Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam* (Heidelberg, 1910); trans. A. and R. Hamory under the title *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, 1981).

as Islam gradually developed. It was given its direction by the insights of the Prophet but drew into itself elements from the religious systems of the civilizations incorporated into the universal world of Islam: Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and late classical antiquity.

Thus Goldziher saw the development of Islam as being broadly similar to that of other prophetic religions, as viewed by the scholars and theologians of his time: first came the prophet, then the prophetic revelation was fixed in a holy writ, then the theologians tried to explain and defend it and the legal scholars to draw out its practical implications. During this process, however, the lures and hazards of the world lay all around. For Muslims the Word of God, the Qur'an, revealed His Will for mankind, and the elaboration of the shari'a, the "holy law," or system of ideal morality, was therefore an essential and central part of the process by which Islam was articulated into a system, but it had its dangers: it could stifle the desire for holiness which lies at the heart of all religions, (No doubt Goldziher was thinking of Rabbinic Judaism as well as Islam.) Mysticism (Sufism) was a necessary counterbalance to this: a reassertion of the desire and need for holiness, for a personal relationship with God. Goldziher was one of the first scholars to see the importance of Sufism in the ethical system of Islam. He knew, however, that here too the tares of the world could spring up; Sufism had been a channel through which primordial beliefs had come into Islam. Nevertheless they could not destroy the sense of submission and all that flows from it: "A life lived in the spirit of Islam can be an ethically impeccable life, demanding compassion for God's creatures, honesty in one's dealings, love, loyalty, the suppression of selfish impulses."⁶⁵ The spirit of Islam, Goldziher believed, was still alive; his book is not simply a record of something which had existed in the past, it shows a concern for the present and future.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16; Eng. trans., 18.

VIII

In Goldziher's work there is a sense of Islam as a living reality, changing over time but with its changes controlled, at least up to a point, by a vision of what "a life lived in the spirit of Islam" should be: creating and maintaining a balance between the law, the articulation of God's Word into precepts for action, and mysticism, the expression of the desire for holiness; drawing into itself ideas from the older civilizations engulfed in it; sustained by the learned elites of the great Islamic cities; and still living and growing. This is far from the view held a century earlier, of Islam as created by a man, sustained by the enthusiasm of a nomadic people, and ceasing to be of importance in world history once the first impulse had died out.

Rather similar ideas were carried in a different direction by another scholar of his generation, C. Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936), in whom the tradition of the school of Leiden may be said to have reached its peak. After his studies at Leiden there came two significant episodes in his life. The first was a year of residence at Mecca in 1884–85, as a seeker after understanding of Islam. The product of this was his book *Mekka*, a history of the holy city and also a description of life in it. Based as it is on his own observations, it is critical of certain Western stereotypes of Muslim society. The Muslim conception of slavery, for example, is very different from that derived from the practices of European settlers in America; "the Christian world," he declares, "takes towards Islam an attitude of misunderstanding and falsehood."⁶⁶ Similarly, the Muslim family is not what it is commonly supposed to be: segregation of women is less complete, monogamy is more common, women sometimes marry several times. Perhaps most important, as showing the direction of his later work, are his remarks about Islamic law: "It is a mistake to suppose that the

⁶⁶ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1888–89); partial Eng. trans., *Mekka in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden and London, 1931), 19.

so-called Moslem law has ever really dominated culture or has remained in intimate contact with the needs of society.”⁶⁷ It is important not as law but as an ideal system of social morality, an influence on practice and a court of appeal “when times are out of joint.” More important than the strict letter of the law, as an influence on the lives of the people of Mecca, is the teaching of the Sufi brotherhoods in regard to practice, moral discipline, and meditation leading toward a sense of the presence of God. Among the educated, the teaching of the brotherhoods is not regarded as a substitute for religious learning but as a means of giving value to obedience to the law; among the uneducated, it lays emphasis on the performance of religious duties and gives expression to human feelings while keeping control over them.⁶⁸

After Snouck Hurgronje’s sojourn in Mecca he resided for a long period in the Dutch East Indies, from 1889 to 1906, as adviser to the colonial government on Muslim policy. This experience reinforced what he had learned in Mecca, that Islam was a living and changing reality: what Muslims mean by it is constantly changing because of the particular circumstances of times and places. Even the theoretical formulations of lawyers and mystics have changed over time, and this process began very early, when “the sober monotheism” of Muhammad was adapted to “the religious ideals of western Asia and Egypt, both permeated with hellenistic thought.”⁶⁹ If non-Muslims wish to understand Islam, they must study it in its historical reality, without judgments of value about what it ought to be.

The concept of Islam, however it is defined, is not adequate by itself, Hurgronje believes, to explain all the phenomena of what are called “Muslim societies.” They should be seen as “fields of force” resulting from the interaction between a certain norm de-

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 83ff.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 170ff.

⁶⁹ Hurgronje, *Selected Works*, ed. G. H. Bousquet and J. Schacht (Leiden, 1957), 76.

rived from the teaching of Islam and the specific nature of a particular society, created by a long cumulative historical experience within its physical environment.⁷⁰ This idea had practical implications. As adviser to the government, Hurgronje took it for granted that European rule would continue indefinitely, but believed it should be conducted in a way which was compatible with the natural evolution of the Muslim societies of Indonesia: modern education and the social process would lead to changes tending toward the evolution of a secular and rational civilization, and to this Islamic law would have nothing to contribute.⁷¹

The sense of Islam as something more than words in texts, as something living in individual Muslims, was new in European studies. It was expressed more fully, and in a very individual way, by a scholar of the next generation, who acknowledged his debt to previous masters, and to Goldziher in particular. Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was important because of his impact upon one of the two mainstreams of European scholarship, that of Paris, but also for the force and originality with which he posed certain questions to Christian thinkers who looked at Islam. To explain his ideas, it is best to begin where he himself began, in various fragments of autobiography and spiritual confession which are scattered through his writings. After early studies in Paris and visits to North Africa, he had a period of further study in Cairo, and from there went on an archaeological mission to Iraq. According to his own account, in May 1908 he was arrested by the Ottoman authorities, accused of being a spy, imprisoned, and threatened with death. He tried to commit suicide “by sacred horror of myself,” became aware of unseen presences interceding for him, and had some kind of vision of God —the “Visitation of the Stranger.” This was followed by a sense of pardon and release: “sudden recollection, my eyes closed before an inner fire, which judges me and burns my

⁷⁰ J. Waardenburg, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'occident* (Paris, 1960), 97.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 245ff.

heart, certainty of a pure Presence, unspeakable, creative, suspending my condemnation at the prayers of invisible beings, visitors to my prison, whose names strike my thought.”⁷² For the first time he was able to pray, and his first prayer was in Arabic. He was released and brought back to health by the intercession of a family of Arab Muslim scholars in Baghdad.

Massignon’s narrative of these events raises questions of more than one kind. First of all, what really happened on that day in May 1908? It is impossible to say for certain, but doubts have been expressed about his version. In the circumstances of the Ottoman Empire at that time, a French citizen wandering in the countryside might well have been arrested by the local authorities but would scarcely have been condemned to death. The French consular records of the time mention only an attack of fever, caused possibly by sunstroke.⁷³ What seems likely is that Massignon had some kind of breakdown of health, leading to a moment of disordered consciousness, which precipitated a moral and spiritual crisis, in which he turned away from what he regarded as the moral confusion of his earlier life (“by sacred horror of myself”). It is less important to ask what happened, however, than to look for the meaning which he himself gave to the crisis. It produced or reinforced in him a certain view of history, and a certain view of Islam.

Massignon stood in conscious opposition to the kind of historical approach which was common in the nineteenth century: the view, that is to say, which saw history as having a meaning inside itself, moving by its own inner dynamism toward a goal which it could achieve in this world, and one which thought of great collectivities — nations or races or classes — as the carriers of this movement. For Massignon, the meaning of history was to be

⁷²L. Massignon, “La visitation de l’étranger,” in *Parole Donnée* (Paris, 1962), 71.

⁷³G. Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981), 57. D. Massignon, “Le Voyage en Mésopotamie et la Conversion de Louis Massignon en 1908,” *Islamochristiana* 14 (1988), 127–99.

found rather in the working of the grace of God in individual souls, crossing all barriers between human communities—even religious communities—and its end was a goal which lay beyond the limits of the perishable world. The process revealed itself above all in the lives of certain individuals who had been touched by grace in some special way and had responded to it fully, by being witnesses to the presence of God and, if need be, by martyrdom. Such witnesses could offer their sufferings for those of others. There is here an influence from the French Catholic thought of the later nineteenth century. By some thinkers the Christian idea of vicarious suffering was developed into a doctrine of “substitution,” of suffering offered not for all mankind but for specific purposes, and not only for the sufferings of others but for their sins. Massignon may have learned this idea from the novelist J. K. Huysmans (1848–1907), whom he had known in his early youth.”

In Massignon’s view, there is a perpetual line of such substitutes, and their influence can extend beyond their deaths. The thought may have been in his mind that he had it in him to become one of this chain of witnesses, by prayer, intercession, or even martyrdom. He did not speak with pride of a special vocation, however, rather with a sense of unworthiness. He sometimes wrote of himself as having been an “outlaw,” and those who met him were conscious of some struggle inside him between conflicting forces.

He also had a certain, very individual view of Islam. His theological formulations could arouse a certain suspicion among Christians, as they might be taken to imply that Islam was an alternative path of salvation. He was a Catholic, however, and in later life became a priest of the Greek Catholic church, and his basic position lies within the spectrum of possible Christian attitudes. He believed that Islam was a genuine expression of monotheistic faith,

⁷⁴ R. Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution* (London, 1966), 149ff.

claiming descent from Abraham by way of Ishmael, and that it had a positive spiritual mission: to act as a reproach to the idolaters who did not confess that there was one God.⁷⁵ Muslims could give Christians an example of faith; this was another familiar theme in the writings of some Catholics of the time, such as Charles de Foucauld and Ernest Psichari, the grandson of Renan. Because of this, Christians, he thought, had a duty which they owed to Muslims: the Stranger who visited Massignon at the moment of crisis was an image of God, but also of the human exile, the wanderer knocking at the door to be let in. In Massignon's mind, hospitality was a cardinal virtue, because it implied loyalty and courage. In later life this was to lead him into active opposition to French policy in the period of colonial revolt: in Madagascar, Morocco, and, above all, Algeria. In his earlier years he had had connections, like most of his generation, with the imperial mission of France, but later he came to see imperial rule as an "abuse of hospitality," an expression of "our secular rage to understand, to conquer, to possess."⁷⁶ Beyond the sphere of political action, he believed it was the calling of Christians to bring Muslims to the fulness of truth through prayer and intercession, and by offering their lives and sufferings in substitution for them. The Christian could perform this role in a community of prayer with Muslims. This explains Massignon's concern for those places where Christians and Muslims could join in prayer: Jerusalem, the tomb of Abraham at Hebron, and a shrine in Brittany sacred to the "seven sleepers of Ephesus," known in Christian tradition and also mentioned in the Qur'an.

Holding such beliefs, it was natural that Massignon should have a special concern for one stream of Muslim spirituality, that of the Sufis who tried not only to obey the will of God as revealed

⁷⁵ L. Massignon, "Les trois prieres d'Abraham," in *Opere Minora*, vol. 3 (Beirut, 1963), 804–16.

⁷⁶ L. Massignon, "Toute une vie avec un frere parti au desert: Foucauld," in *Parole Donnée*, 71.

in the Book but to draw nearer to Him by turning away from the things of the world, and by spiritual discipline. Much of his work as a scholar was given to the study of mysticism. In a sense, his was orthodox work, within the philological tradition of the nineteenth century: the discovery and editing of texts, the analysis of them with care for the precise meaning of words; he wrote on the development of the technical vocabulary of Sufism and also of Islamic philosophy.⁷⁷ He was concerned to show how Sufism had grown, not by importation from Eastern Christianity or Hinduism, but by an internal development, as some Muslims took the teaching of the Qur'an seriously, meditated on it, and tried to draw out its implications for the spiritual life. He had a sense of the supreme importance of the Qur'an in the inner life of Muslims, as possessing a "verbal repertory" containing a history of the universe, a collection of maxims for action, and a manual of moral self-examination and concentration of the soul on God.

Massignon's most famous work is his study of al-Hallaj (d. 922), a mystic, poet, and theologian who was accused of casting doubt upon the need for strict observance of Muslim duties: he is said to have asserted that one could make the Pilgrimage in one's own room instead of going to Mecca, and that the Ka'ba, the sacred edifice which lay at the heart of the Pilgrimage, should be destroyed so that it could be rebuilt in wisdom. Beyond that, there was a suspicion that he was teaching that, at the moment of mystical union, the human personality of the mystic could be absorbed into that of God. A famous saying was attributed to him, although it is not certain that he ever said it: *ana al-Haqq*, "I am the Truth," or "I am God." This could be taken to imply a pure monism which would be incompatible with the idea of the Transcendence of God. There may also have been political reasons for his arrest; he was tried, condemned, and executed in Baghdad.

⁷⁷ Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, new ed. (Paris, 1954) ; *Muhadarat fi tarikh al-istilahat al-falsafiya al-'arabiya* (Cairo, 1983).

The study of al-Hallaj was Massignon's doctoral dissertation, virtually finished by 1914 and published in 1921; he continued to work on the subject for the rest of his life, and a revised version was published after his death." It is a work of great erudition and original thought, using the fragmentary sources to construct a narrative of al-Hallaj's life and show the stages in the development of the vocation of a mystic, through penitence, renunciation, and purification to some kind of experience of union with God. It shows also the relationship of his sayings and writings with the earlier development of Islamic theology, law, and mysticism. This is placed within a description of the milieu of 'Abbasid Baghdad, where al-Hallaj lived; by a careful accumulation of detail, a medieval city of which almost no trace remains is brought to life its streets and buildings, its people, the food they ate, the ways in which they earned their living, studied, worshipped, and were buried.

In conformity with his idea of the chain of witnesses or substitutes, exercising an influence after their deaths and handing their mission on to others, Massignon sees the life of al-Hallaj as prolonged beyond his execution. In a remarkable survey of the spiritual life of Muslim communities, he shows how the fame of al-Hallaj survived, in discussion among the learned, and in popular devotion expressed in art, poetry, legends, and visions; the figure of al-Hallaj is gradually transformed in the process, and from being an "outlaw" he is reincorporated into the community.

Some doubts have been expressed about Massignon's work. Running through it is a theme common to the French Catholic writing of his youth: the belief in secret societies, in vast conspiracies aiming to seize power or overturn the social order. Some of his interpretations of the sources have not been accepted by

⁷⁸ L. Massignon, *La passion al-Hallaj martyr mystique de l'Islam*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1921); new ed., *La passion de Husayn ibn Mansur Hallaj*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1975); trans. H. Mason under the title *The Passion of al-Hallaj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, 4 vols. (Princeton, 1982).

other scholars: the existence of trade guilds and their links with esoteric religious movements, and the connection between certain Islamic sects and movements of social protest. More fundamental to his work is his treatment of the figure of al-Hallaj. Massignon has shown that al-Hallaj is a remarkable figure in the history of Muslim spirituality, and that by following the Sufi path he reached an unusual degree of understanding of the operations of divine grace. There is a warning, however, in his own words: "I have added to the historical facts the further meditations which they have suggested."⁷⁹ There seems to be an attempt to fit al-Hallaj into a Christian pattern; he is made to appear as if he regarded his own death as an act of vicarious suffering, even seeking martyrdom because "there is no more pressing business for the Muslims than my execution," wishing "to die accursed for the salvation of all."⁸⁰

IX

By the originality of his ideas and the force of his personality, Massignon had a deep influence on Islamic studies in France, and indeed on French views of Islam; he was perhaps the only Islamic scholar who was a central figure in the intellectual life of his time. His work was a sign of a change in the Christian approach to Islam, and even perhaps one of the causes of it. In the last two generations there have been attempts by Christian thinkers and scholars to define what has always been the puzzling phenomenon of Islam, so close in some ways, so distant in others: a God who seems to be the God of Abraham, who speaks to mankind and makes His Will known, and holds out the prospect of a final Day of Judgment, but who speaks through a Book which Muslims do, and Christians do not, accept as literally the Word of God. These attempts have been made largely by scholars in France, or at least

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, new ed., 1:32; Eng. trans., 1:lxviii.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:336; Eng. trans., 1:289.

writing in French, for some of them are Christians from the Arab countries but of French intellectual formation.

Thus G. C. Anawati and Louis Gardet have written works on Islamic theology and mysticism. As Christian theologians they have tried to define the status of Islamic mysticism, Is it “natural” or “supernatural”? For them it lies in a middle state between the two: it tends toward the supernatural, that is to say, the experience of divine love in the soul, given by supernatural Grace, but is limited by the essential Islamic idea of the inaccessibility of God, the veil which lies between God and man, whose true worship is obedience to His Word. Sufism therefore is marked by “spiritual states which are capable of more than one interpretation.”⁸¹ J. Abdel-Jalil, a Moroccan Muslim by birth but a convert to Christianity and a Franciscan friar, studied those lines of Islamic thought and spirituality which, if prolonged, might lead a Muslim to Christianity; in *Marie et l’Islam*, he showed the special status given to the Virgin Mary in the Qur’an.⁸² This sense of Islam as a religion formed by acceptance of the one God, but tending toward completion in something other than itself, was shown also in the formulations of the Vatican Council of 1962–65, the first considered attempt by the Catholic church to define its attitude toward Islam: “The Church looks with esteem upon the Muslims, who worship the one living God, merciful and all-powerful, creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men.”⁸³ In this formula there is an echo of the terminology of the Qur’an itself.

Similar voices have been raised in the Protestant churches, for example by Kenneth Cragg, a bishop of the Anglican church,⁸⁴ and the World Council of Churches has made a sustained attempt

⁸¹ G. C. Anawati and L. Gardet, *Mystique musulmane* (Paris, 1961), 95–96,

⁸² J. Abdel-Jalil, *Aspects intérieurs de l’Islam* (Paris, 1949); *Marie et l’Islam* (Paris, 1950).

⁸³ *Concile oecumenique Vatican II: Documents conciliaires* (Paris, 1965), 215.

⁸⁴ K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford, 1956); *Sandals at the Mosque* (Oxford, 1959); *The Event of the Qur’an* (London, 1971).

to organize dialogue between Christians and Muslims. This line of thought is crossed, however, by another one, which also has deep roots in Christian theology. There has always been a strand of thought which has emphasized the uniqueness of the revelation of Christ: God cannot be known by human efforts, only by His own self-revelation, which has been perfected in the person of Jesus Christ and is recorded in the Bible; all other religious teachers, and the books in which their teaching is enshrined, can express no more than human strivings for something which cannot be attained by human effort. All that man can create for himself are idols; thus Karl Barth stated bluntly, "The God of Muhammad is an idol like all other idols."⁸⁵ In the same way, Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch missionary and theologian, said that Islam is a man-made religion, not the true faith derived from God's unique revelation of Himself: "Man wants God, but somehow he wants Him in his own way. . . . Nowhere do we find a repudiation of every possible man-made spiritual world."⁸⁶ There is a significant difference of tone, however, between Kraemer's voice and similar voices in the past. Kraemer was an Islamic scholar with a deep knowledge of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia, and a person of moral and intellectual sensibility; in his work there is no derogation of Muhammad and his followers, and he gives full weight to the human achievements of Islamic civilization.

X

As a result of work such as that of Goldziher, Hurgronje, and Massignon, there has taken place a shift of scholarly emphasis in Islamic studies in Europe. The central tradition of those studies has continued: the exploration of the ways in which what was given to Muslims by or through Muhammad was articulated into

⁸⁵ Quoted in G. Parrinder, *Comparative Religion* (London, 1962), 48.

⁸⁶ H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London, 1956), 334.

systems of theology, law, and practice, an exploration carried on by the method elaborated by philologists, that of the careful study of written texts. Side by side with it, however, there has developed something else: a growing interest in what is often called “popular Islam,” and in particular the Sufi brotherhoods, which from at least the time of Goldziher have come to be recognized as the channels through which the mainstream of Muslim spirituality has flowed. There are various ways of studying it, Islamic scholars have done so through the texts in which the mystic’s path toward direct experience of God, and the ideas of God and man implied by it, have been expounded; social anthropologists have begun to study the penumbra of popular beliefs and practices which have grown up around the brotherhoods, the cult of saints, the practice of pilgrimage to their shrines, the belief in the validity of their intercession, and in invocations and visions, They have also studied the social role of shrines and their guardians as points around which communities and, in some circumstances, political movements can crystallize, and of brotherhoods as providing the link between different regions or social groups, or between men and women,

Work done on these lines during the past generation has posed a question: once we go beyond the normative definitions of theologians and lawyers, what do we mean by “Islamic society”? In view of the great variety of customs and institutions, of artistic forms and collective mentalities in the “world of Islam,” which stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Morocco to the Philippines, is there a sense in which they can all be called “Islamic”? This is a question to which a number of social anthropologists have addressed themselves. Clifford Geertz, in his *Islam Observed*, made use of material from Java and Morocco to answer the question, In what senses can two societies, standing at opposite ends of the world in which Islam is the main inherited religion, be called Muslim societies? What is the “family resemblance” which makes

them both “Islamic” ? ⁸⁷ Michael Gilsenan, in *Recognizing Islam*, suggests that “Islam,” when seen in its social context, is not a single unitary object which by itself determines the behavior and customs of a society; it is a word which can be used to refer to certain concepts, symbols, and rituals which have helped to mold the collective consciousness of various societies, but have also been molded by them. Islam is “a word that identifies varying relations of practice, representation, symbol, concept and world-view within the same society and between different societies. There are patterns in these relations, and they have changed in very important ways over time.” ⁸⁸

However carefully the word “Islam” is defined, it may still be asked whether it can be used in any sense as a category of explanation for the history of the societies most of whose inhabitants are Muslims. Few writers would now assert this as categorically as some might have done a generation or two ago, because writers of a different kind are now thinking about the history of those societies. There was an age, not long since ended, and even now not wholly ended, when virtually the only scholars who wrote about the history and society of the “Muslim world” were those whose primary task was to study and teach the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages and the texts written in them. They brought to their writing about broader subjects the categories which were familiar to them. In the last generation, however, the field of study has been entered by scholars trained in different disciplines. Some scholars whose minds have been formed by historiography or the social sciences have begun to turn their attention to the “world of Islam,” and there is also a new concern with “world history” and “comparative history,” with processes and movements which extend beyond the “world of Islam” to the whole world, or at least to large parts of it. The change is a slow one, however;

⁸⁷ C. Geertz, *Islam Observed* (New Haven, 1968).

⁸⁸ M. Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam* (London, 1982), 19.

in most universities, in the English-speaking world at least, history is still taught with the main emphasis upon that Western civilization which is regarded as having moved from ancient Greece westward to the countries along the Atlantic coast, and then to have covered the whole world in its modern form. In a good universal history used widely in teaching, out of 900 pages or so on history since 600 A.D. only 50 or so are devoted to the world of Islam (but they are sensitive and well informed).⁸⁹

In some countries, however, and notably in France and the United States, historians and social scientists are bringing to the subject their own categories of interpretation, drawn from the historical or sociological culture of the age: in particular, Marxist or post-Marxist categories, or those refined by historians associated with the French periodical *Annales*, or — in recent years — concepts derived from modern literary theory. To take a few obvious examples: Fernand Braudel, in *Le Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, tried to explain the nature and development of the whole world lying around the Mediterranean Sea, and thus introduced a concept at once broader and narrower than that of the “Muslim world.”⁹⁰ In the same way, in a book edited by Julian Pitt-Rivers, *Mediterranean Countrymen*, a number of anthropologists showed themselves to be concerned more with similarities than with differences between countries where Christianity, in its Catholic or Orthodox form, or Islam was the inherited religion; their interest lay in the values of honor and shame by which peasant societies live.⁹¹

The category of “Islam” scarcely enters into one of the seminal works of Middle Eastern history written in the present generation: André Raymond's *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au 18^e siècle*.

⁸⁹ J. M. Roberts, *The Hutchinson History of the World* (London, 1976).

⁹⁰ F. Braudel, *Le Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 2d ed. (Paris, 1966); Eng. trans., *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (London, 1972–73).

⁹¹ J. Pitt-Rivers, ed., *Mediterranean Countrymen* (Paris, 1963).

The principal factors of explanation are the administrative and fiscal system of the Ottoman Empire and its local deputies in Egypt, and the system of industrial production in its relation to international trade; "Islam" enters into the analysis only as a subsidiary factor, insofar as Islamic law affects inheritance and the distribution of property.⁹² Maxime Rodinson, in *Islam et Capitalisme*, examines the common view that there is something in the doctrines and laws and customary behavior of Muslim societies which has prevented the development of a modern capitalist economy. The book is a product of the debate begun by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic*, and Rodinson attempts to show that, if capitalism developed first in countries where Christianity and not Islam was the dominant religion, the explanation cannot be found in the nature of either religion.⁹³ An international colloquium, "The Islamic City," held in 1965, considered the idea that Muslim cities had characteristics, both of physical formation and of social structure, which are derived from the teaching and laws of Islam; it came to the conclusion that the concept of the "Islamic city" was less useful as a category of explanation than, for example, those of the medieval or preindustrial or Near Eastern or North African city.⁹⁴

Such a change in emphasis can go too far, however. Those in particular who are concerned with the earliest period of what is normally called Islamic history can scarcely ignore the rise of a new religion, its spread in countries of ancient civilization, its articulation in theology and law through the medium of the Arabic language, and the foundation of an empire claiming authority in its name; even in later periods, there was a sense in which Muslim countries tended to live in comparative isolation from others. The

⁹² A. Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au 18ème siècle*, 2 vols. (Damascus, 1973–74).

⁹³ M. Rodinson, *Islam et capitalisme* (Paris, 1960); Eng. trans., *Islam and Capitalism* (London, 1973).

⁹⁴ A. Hourani and S. M. Stern, eds., *The Islamic City* (Oxford, 1970).

most ambitious attempt to combine explanations in terms of Islam with other kinds of historical explanation, and to place the world of Islam also in the context of universal history, is that made by Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam*.⁹⁵ The subtitle of the book is *Conscience and History in a World Society*, and this is significant of Hodgson's concern for the relations between the individual and the collectivity, and also his awareness of the place of the Islamic world within a broader unity: the Oikoumene, the whole world of cities and settled agriculture stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He sees the history of Islam also within a broader temporal framework, as a continuation of an older cultural tradition, that of the Fertile Crescent, Iran, and Egypt, stretching back to Babylonia and ancient Egypt, but now expressing itself in a new language, Arabic, and in intellectual and artistic response to a new Holy Book.

Within this broad context of space and time, Hodgson puts forward a certain view of the historical process, in terms of the interaction of three forces: the gradual development of cultural resources and traditions within the limits of a certain physical environment, the growth and persistence of a collective solidarity, and the subtle working of individual thought and conscience which, in some circumstances, can give a new direction to cultural traditions and collective solidarity. The implications of this view of history are far-reaching. Hodgson broke with the generally accepted idea of Islamic history as consisting of three centuries or so of achievement, with the Arabic language as its medium and the Fertile Crescent as its center, followed by a long period of stagnation or decline. He saw the climax of Islamic civilization as coming much later in date and farther east in space: in the early modern period, and in the region of Persian high culture, stretching from central Asia through Iran into northern India. This view has implications for world history also: Hodgson broke away from the familiar idea (expressed, for example, in the thought of

⁹⁵ M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1974)

Hegel) of history as being a westward march. Until the eighteenth century, he maintains, it is Muslim civilization which dominates the world of cities and settled agriculture, with its languages of high culture, its law providing a framework of shared expectations within which commercial and other kinds of intercourse could take place, its literature and art giving symbolic expression to a vision of this world and the next. It was only in the eighteenth century, he suggests, that the power and cultural independence of the Muslim world began to be seriously challenged, as a result of a mutation of human society which first appeared on the far western fringes of the civilized world.

XI

In these discussions other voices are now beginning to be heard. In Europe and America, research and thought about Islamic culture and history are now carried on in the presence of those about whom Western scholars and thinkers are writing. This is true in more senses than one: we are all conscious of a living, changing world in which Islam is the dominant religion, not just something which existed in the past and is now —to use Hegel's terms — sunk in "oriental ease and repose." Research and thought, moreover, are now being carried on in collaboration and dialogue. The international community of Islamic studies is more of an open community. We may compare a conference held sixty years ago with those held today. At the seventeenth international congress of orientalists, held in Oxford in 1927, scarcely more than a dozen out of some 750 subscribing members were Muslims, and they played a small part in the proceedings;⁹⁶ in present-day conferences of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, a large proportion of the members are from Muslim countries, and they include some of the most active and prominent of them.

⁹⁶ *Proceedings of the 17th International Congress of Orientalists, Oxford, 1927* (Oxford, 1928).

Most kinds of study are neutral, in the sense that they can be pursued by the same methods and understood in terms of the same categories by those who have different cultural formation: the editing of texts, the exploration of government archives, the history of economic change or of art. In some fields, indeed, the balance is shifting between scholars in Europe and America and those in the Muslim world itself: all specialists in Ottoman history, for example, have felt the impact of the work of Halil Inalcik and other Turkish historians. There are likely to be differences of approach, however, in regard to more sensitive matters: the interpretation of a religious tradition and the culture intimately bound up with it. In recent years, two kinds of criticism of Islamic, or more generally of “oriental” studies have been expressed vigorously.

One of them comes from devout adherents of the faith of Islam, for whom the Qur’an is, in the literal sense, the Word of God revealed through the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, and who find it impossible to accept the kind of scholarly analysis which would reduce the Qur’an to a product of the mind of Muhammad or would depict the person of Muhammad in a way which would cast doubt on the claim that he had been chosen by God to be a messenger of His Word. Such reservations should be treated with respect by those who do not share them; they express a faith by which men and women have lived and died, and a way of thought and life which has shaped their personalities, both individual and collective. Some measure of the depth of these reservations has been given in an analogy suggested by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. For Muslims, he points out, the Qur’an is not simply a record of God’s revelation, it is that revelation itself: “If one is drawing parallels in terms of the structure of the two religions, what corresponds in the Christian scheme to the Qur’an is not the Bible but the person of Christ —it is Christ who is for Christians the revelation of (from) God. And what corresponds in the Islamic scheme to the Bible (the record of revelation) is the

Tradition (*hadith*) . . . the counterpart to Biblical criticism is *hadith* criticism, which has begun. To look for historical criticism of the Qur'an is rather like looking for a psychoanalysis of Jesus."⁹⁷

If such doubts and hesitations are to be resolved, it cannot be done from outside but only by way of the debate between "modernists" and "traditionalists" which has continued in every Muslim society for the last century or so. The terms of the debate have been well stated recently by the late Fazlur Rahman, a distinguished Pakistani scholar at the University of Chicago, in *Islam and Modernity*. The main work on the history of Islam, he points out, has been done by Western scholars, but the task should now be that of Muslims themselves. It is essential, he believes, to preserve the Qur'an as the basis of faith, understanding, and moral behavior, but it should be seen as a book of guidance for mankind (*huda li'l-nas*). Legal writers have gone wrong in taking particular statements of the Qur'an in isolation, and drawing from them, by strict analogy, laws and rules for all time; it is necessary to look at the Qur'an as a unity in the light of modern scholarship, discerning its "leading intentions," and drawing from them specific injunctions appropriate to the circumstances of particular times and places. Similarly, it is necessary to look at the Hadith in a critical way; this "should not only remove a big mental block but should promote fresh thinking about Islam."⁹⁸ There is therefore a need for a new kind of Muslim education, in order to form scholars who can look at Qur'an, Hadith, and law in the light of reason.

There is another range of criticism which comes from among scholars themselves, and not only from those whose inherited culture is that of Islam. The critique of "orientalism" which has become current in recent days is partly an expression of the con-

⁹⁷ W. Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, 1957), 18 n. 13.

⁹⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago, 1982), 147.

flict of different generations, partly of different intellectual formations. There appear to be three main lines of attack. It is said, first of all, that Western scholarship has tended to be “essentialist”: that is to say, to explain all the phenomena of Muslim societies and culture in terms of the concept of a single, unchanging nature of Islam and what it is to be a Muslim. There was some truth in this during an earlier period of Islamic scholarship, and echoes of it are still to be heard in popular writing and the mass media, but it has not been the dominant attitude of those in the central tradition of scholarship at least since the time of Snouck Hurgronje. Most of them would accept a formulation such as his: that Islam, as articulated in laws, rituals, and institutions, has provided a norm which affects societies where it has been the dominant religion, but the nature of any particular society can be explained only in terms of the interaction between this norm and the specific traditions and situation of that society, and even the norm itself changes in different times and places.

It is suggested, secondly, that Western scholarship has been politically motivated: in the period of European power —and now in that of another kind of Western ascendancy —it has been used to justify domination over Muslim societies, by creating an image of Muslim societies (or oriental societies in general) as stagnant and unchanging, backward, incapable of ruling themselves, or hostile; fear of the “revolt of Islam” haunted the mind of Europe during the imperial age, and has now come back to haunt it once more. Again, there is some truth in this accusation, in regard to a certain period, but the attitude to which it points was not necessarily an ignoble one, nor universal. It was natural that British, French, and Dutch scholars should feel some responsibility for the way in which their governments exercised power; no doubt some of them did accept those broad divisions of mankind, between East and West, Christianity and Islam, advanced and backward, which could be taken to justify Western domination, and this has been prolonged into the present age by the elaboration of such broad

distinctions as that between “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries, Not all “orientalists” did accept such distinctions or their implications, however. Some were strong opponents of the imperial policies of their countries: E. G. Browne in England was a supporter of the constitutional revolution in Iran, Louis Massignon of the Algerian movement for independence; others, such as Hurgronje, used what influence they had in favor of a more sensitive and understanding attitude toward those whom their nations ruled. What became the central tradition of Islamic studies in the nineteenth century, that expressed in German, was not so deeply marked by such attitudes, since neither Germany nor Austria had direct rule over Muslim countries in Asia or Africa; here too, however, certain distinctions of this kind were implied in such ideas about world history as those of Hegel.

The third line of criticism is that Western thought and scholarship have created a self-perpetuating body of received truths which have authority in intellectual and academic life but bear little relation to the reality of the object which is studied. There is undoubtedly some truth in this. Perhaps it is inevitable that scholars and thinkers should work in this way. In trying to understand a subject, we have to bring to it certain categories of explanation, which serve at least as principles of selection and emphasis; it is inevitable that these should be drawn from our own intellectual tradition, and they tend to perpetuate themselves. There is no other way of working effectively, but what may perhaps be said is that the categories which many of those who have worked on in the study of Islam have used are not those of the most vital modern thought, and are not likely to produce results which will be of great interest to those outside the ranks of specialists. The basic categories are still, to a great extent, those formulated by Goldziher, drawn from the speculative thought and philological scholarship of the nineteenth century. Compared with Chinese or South Asian history, that of most of the Muslim countries is still an underdeveloped field of study. This is so partly because serious

studies of Muslim history and societies, formed by the specific discourse of these subjects, are comparatively new, and there are few specialists in the field; partly also because thinkers and scholars working within those societies have not — with some exceptions — been able to impose the authority of their own categories of explanation.

This may be changing now, as more scholars of a new generation enter the field and make use of categories drawn from new bodies of thought. It is clear, however, that we should not expect to see emerging the same kind of consensus as existed in the past. There will be differences of approach between various lines of scholars, and there may well be also a difference of emphasis between those who look at the world of Islam from inside and those who look at it in terms of an inherited Western culture. For example, the concern with Islam as an intermediate stage between classical civilization and that of Europe since the Renaissance is likely to be deeper among Western scholars than among those in Muslim countries. When the German scholar C. H. Becker said, “Without Alexander the Great, no Islamic civilization,”⁹⁹ he was striking a note which might have a deeper resonance in Western minds than in those who have inherited the tradition of Islamic culture, and for whom it represents not a bridge from one thing to another, but something original, and a culmination.

Western scholars may be more concerned with origins than with development. In the study of Hadith, for example, the best European work, from Goldziher onward, has been devoted to the way in which the body of traditions grew up, its origins, and the development and formation of a recognized corpus of traditions over the centuries. There is another way of looking at the subject which may have more significance for Muslim scholars: the role of Hadith in Muslim thought and society. What are the different meanings which have been attached to it at different times? Which particular traditions have been used, and for what purposes?

⁹⁹ C. H. Becker, *Islamstudien*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1924), 16.

When the Mamluk rulers of Egypt heard the French had landed in Egypt in 1798, they sent to the Azhar to instruct the scholars to read the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari, the leading Sunni collection of Hadith.¹⁰⁰ Why did they do this? Which hadiths were read? What effect did the reading have on the mobilization of the people of Cairo in face of the invasion? Such questions may have a deeper resonance for someone who shares the collective consciousness out of which those acts and ideas arose than for someone who does not.

Such divergences of emphasis and opinion are inevitable in a developed field of study shared by those of different intellectual formations. They need not lead to conflict, if we remember the “charity which we owe to each other.”

¹⁰⁰ Al-Jabarti, *‘Ajd’ib*, 3:6.