

Chapter 5

Competing approaches

Although many Western historians of Islam are not Muslims, it would be difficult to determine this from their writings on the first centuries of Islamic history. This is in stark contrast to historians of Judaism and Christianity, who tend to adopt an outsider's approach to their subject when writing in academic contexts (despite often being themselves Jews and Christians). Why the difference? Before turning to answers, it is worth underlining the question. The traditional accounts of Islam's rise tell us that in a remote and isolated region of Arabia (the Hijaz), in a pagan town unaccustomed to monotheism (Mecca), an illiterate man (Muhammad) began to recite verses full of references to Biblical characters and established monotheistic ideas. If we accept this basic outline – and most do – how are we to explain Muhammad's acquaintance with these ideas? To traditionally minded Muslims, the answer is clear: God, via an angel, revealed the verses to him. In fact, it would be hard to be a believing Muslim in the traditional sense without accepting this version of events. Equally, however, Wansborough might argue that it would be hard to accept the broad outlines of the story without being a Muslim (or at least without accepting God's hand in these events), for which reason he argued that Islam and the Quran developed later and elsewhere, where Jewish and Christian ideas were prevalent. *Hagarism* attempted to recreate the circumstances of this subsequent religious development. As noted above, almost

everyone agrees that both Wansborough and *Hagarism* are wrong on points of detail (though criticism of *Hagarism* focuses almost exclusively on the first part of the book; few reviewers seem aware that the second and third parts contain salient points about the development of Islamic civilization in its Near Eastern context that might repay further investigation). Although neither Wansborough nor *Hagarism* have offered entirely persuasive answers to the questions about the rise of Islam, why have the questions themselves been largely ignored?

For many scholars, these books are to be judged on the basis of their conclusions, and if the conclusions are wrong then everything associated with these works is also wrong. To sceptics, it is the methodology that matters: the answers proposed may be wrong but the questions still need to be answered (all the more so if previous answers have been deemed unsatisfactory). There is evidence to suggest that there are considerations at play that go beyond usual academic argumentation and debate. We should not be surprised, perhaps, that ‘Hagarism’ never caught on as a term for ‘Islam’, but why was ‘Mohammedanism’ abandoned in the second half of the 20th century? Until then, it was a perfectly acceptable word, consistent with ‘Zoroastrianism’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Confucianism’, and the Persian term *musavi* (‘Moses-ian’) with reference to Jews. While this may sound pernickety and of little significance, the issue cuts through to larger questions of Islamic exceptionalism. Whereas historians of other religions start with historical models and read primary sources in their light, many historians of Islam start with Muslim sources and proceed to tidy them up – removing patently incredible materials (references to miracles, round numbers, and the like) and taking the remaining material at face value. Why are Islam, and Islamic history particularly, exempt from established rules of historical enquiry?

One answer is that both Islam and the study of Islamic history are relatively young. Islam’s youth compared to Judaism and Christianity famously led Ernst Renan (d. 1892) to state that

Muhammad ‘was born in the full light of history’, a statement with which most scholars (including pre-modern Muslim ones) would take issue, and which is contradicted by the evidence of the previous chapter. Islamic history’s youth is a plausible explanation for the tendency to credit traditional accounts unquestioningly: thus, a critical edition of al-Tabari’s massive (and, for early Islamic history, indispensable) *History* was first published in the late 19th century; and a full translation of the work was completed in the late twentieth. Much of the work on Islamic history conducted in the late 19th and 20th centuries involved finding, editing, and deciphering primary sources, and producing basic analyses of their contents. Those few scholars, such as Julius Wellhausen (d. 1918), who were able at this early stage to analyse Islamic history critically, came to Islamic Studies from Biblical or Near Eastern Studies more generally, and their work on early Islamic history still tended to be far more conservative than their work on other religious cultures of the Near East.

Another answer is that accounts of early Islam such as those preserved in al-Tabari’s *History* are very difficult to ignore, replete as they are with impressively detailed descriptions of the people and events that interest scholars and students. Disregarding ready-made answers to pivotal questions is particularly challenging in the absence of viable alternatives to traditional narratives. Understandably, most scholars would prefer to have an imperfect version of history than none at all. And once the traditional narrative is adopted in classrooms, a scholastic status quo sets in: the students who learn this traditional version of Islamic history become teachers themselves and perpetuate the narrative and methodology.

A third answer is that societal and political pressures have discouraged both Muslim and – for different reasons – Western historians from questioning traditional accounts of, and sources for, the rise and early development of Islam. Muslim historians who raise doubts about their tradition are sometimes seen by their

coreligionists as more reprehensible than are Westerners who do so. After all, ever since early Muslims accused Jews and Christians of intentionally distorting God's scripture, such anti-Islamic shenanigans have been expected of non-Muslim scholars. But *Muslim* scholars, it is thought, really should know better. Hence, when Suliman Bashear (d. 1991) argued that Islam developed gradually, just as other religions did, his students at the University of Nablus (Palestine) threw him out of a second-storey window. And for suggesting that the Quran is a literary text and must be read as one, the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was declared an apostate and his marriage was accordingly annulled (he and his wife fled Egypt). Some seventy years earlier, in 1926, Taha Hussein (d. 1973) – a leading Egyptian intellectual and education minister – argued that much of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry is inauthentic, for which he too was branded an apostate (even though the idea is of only tangential relevance to the Islamic tradition). Such instances of scholastic intolerance are, of course, extremely rare, but the mere existence of a few well-publicized cases of the sort can have an intimidating effect on those within the Muslim world who might otherwise be inclined to adopt an outsider's approach to the study of Tradition.

Western scholars who study Islamic history, especially since World War II, have also been conscious of Muslim sensibilities. This is partly to do with recent academic trends, originating in the social sciences, which stress the importance of understanding 'the experience of the believer' above all else. And it is partly to do with attempts by recent scholars to redress the wrongs committed by past generations of Orientalists, which brings us to Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

Edward Said and *Orientalism*

In the early 1940s, Sati' al-Husri (d. 1967), a Syrian intellectual and leading proponent of Arab Nationalism, argued that Western books on 'Arab' history are 'biased and [used] as tools of the

imperialists who have always attempted by all means available to suppress or distort historical consciousness in order to perpetuate their rule'. A related argument was put forward in *Orientalism*, a hugely influential work that helped establish post-colonial studies. Although the book is primarily about the Orient as reflected in literary works, it also zeroes-in on the careers of specific Orientalists (from c. 1800 onwards), and its three main points are about the field of Orientalism itself. The first point is that Orientalism has tended to be 'essentialist', assuming as it does that Arabs (and Muslims more generally, though Said is mainly concerned with Near Easterners) have an essential, unchanging nature that can be identified, described, and controlled politically. The second point is that Orientalism, especially as practised by British and French scholars, has been politically motivated. If the 'nature' of Arab or Muslim societies can be shown to be inferior to those of the West, then Western political domination of Arabs and Muslims can be justified. The final point is that these flawed impressions about the inferior essence of 'Orientals', and the need to consider the East only as it relates to the West, have been enshrined in a self-perpetuating and flawed field of study.

Although much of what Said argued was old news in both Western and Arab/Muslim intellectual circles, his work brought these issues to the attention of a much broader readership, comprised mostly of intellectuals from other fields. The publication of the book in 1978 also contributed to its popularity: this was a dynamic period in the fields of literary theory that focused on culture's role in dominating or subjugating politically weak elements of society (post-colonial and feminist theory being particularly prominent in this context). *Orientalism* was critically acclaimed in the field of Cultural Studies; amongst Orientalists themselves, however, it was predictably controversial.

Orientalism's critics, many of whom are leading scholars of Islamic history, have highlighted a number of flaws in the work, which challenge both its details and central theses. It was

pointed out, for example, that in the 19th century, at the height of European colonial domination of the Muslim world, the field of Orientalism was dominated not by British or French scholars, but by German-speakers from countries that had no direct rule over Muslims anywhere. It was also noted that many British and French Orientalists at the time were unsupportive of their countries' policies. Thus, E. G. Browne (d. 1926), professor of Persian at the University of Cambridge, was openly critical of British attitudes and policies towards Muslims; for his efforts and achievements, a street in Tehran was named in his honour (where a statue of his likeness can still be seen). Another objection to *Orientalism* is that it ignores the many vital contributions that Orientalists have made to the field of Islamic Studies: producing critical editions of manuscripts, to name but one example, is a task that serves Muslims too and is not readily susceptible to political biases. Still, Western scholars working on Muslim societies could hardly ignore *Orientalism*, and even the book's detractors accept that its influence on the field of Islamic Studies has been significant: in recent decades, Islamic Studies has been guided by a conscious effort to empathize with Muslim societies – past and present – as well as a reticence to present historical arguments that might offend Muslims. The questions and ideas raised in Wansborough's works and *Hagarism* could not be expected to take root in such barren scholastic ground.

That Westerners studying Muslim societies should be compassionate and sensitive towards those peoples whom they study is surely laudable (and obvious). And yet, an unexpected consequence of *Orientalism*'s influence is that conscious attempts to 'be nice' can stifle open and serious academic debate, thereby preventing Islamic Studies from attaining the professional standing that other branches of Near Eastern Studies enjoy. This amounts to a condescending approach to a religio-historical tradition that deserves to be treated with the same respect that is afforded to comparable traditions. A scholar of Biblical history cannot give an academic paper on the historicity of baby Moses

in a basket on the Nile River and expect to be taken seriously by colleagues in the audience. In most cases, however, a scholar of Islamic history can talk about the most traditional details of Muhammad's biography and receive warm smiles and polite applause. Treating Islamic Studies with an exceptionally soft touch, implies (even if not consciously) that Islam should not be subjected to the same rigorous analysis that other traditions have undergone, lest it does not prove sufficiently robust to withstand the scrutiny. Ironically, while this approach to the Muslim tradition is 'nice', its patronizing assumptions are closely related to the sort of Orientalism that Said criticized, though such an uncritical approach is normally adopted by fans of Said's arguments.

Marshall Hodgson and *The Venture of Islam*

Islamic History

There *are* ways of being 'nice' while maintaining professional academic standards. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the work of Marshall Hodgson (d. 1968). The two books for which Hodgson is known are *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* and *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, both of which were published posthumously, on the basis of research conducted in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. *The Venture of Islam* is a three-volume comprehensive account of all periods and regions of Islamic history, considered within the wider context of world history. As such, the work is a forceful argument against Islamic exceptionalism – the rise and development of Islam and Islamic civilization are woven into a tapestry of global dimensions and are seen to conform to the trends of history rather than bucking them. This bird's-eye view of history led Hodgson to a number of original conclusions about both Islamic history and civilization, and about the methodology by which historians should study them. Although his work is a magisterial summary of the entire Orientalist tradition, in many ways it is also an attempt to identify and rectify the tradition's weaknesses. Whereas *Orientalism* was a

critique of the tradition from the outside, *The Venture of Islam* is a critique from within.

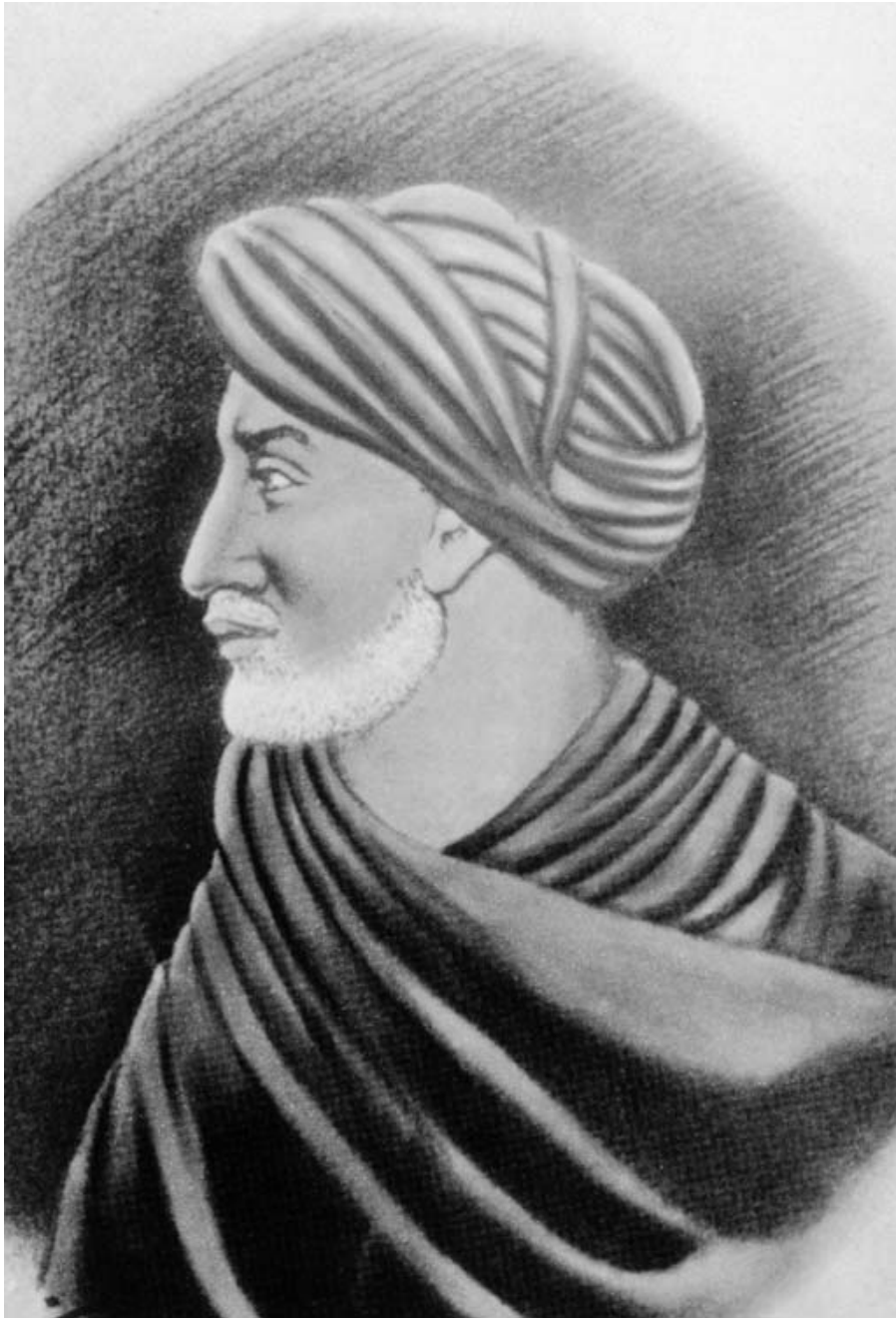
There are many ways in which Hodgson anticipated Said's criticisms (and it is curious that *Orientalism* makes no reference to Hodgson's work). For instance, Hodgson repeatedly rejected essentialist approaches to Islam, stating that 'every generation makes its own decisions'. Moreover, he was so disturbed by Eurocentric approaches to Islamic history that he set about purging the field of notions and terminology borrowed from European history. For this purpose, he coined a series of neologisms to replace what he thought were culturally loaded, or otherwise imperfect, phrases that tainted the study of Muslim societies. The 'Middle East', a term that puts Europe at the centre of the world, thus became the 'Nile-to-Oxus region' and the Industrial Revolution became 'The Great Western Transmutation'. Yes, his solutions could be clunky and his categorizations abstruse ('idographic' and 'nomothetic'; 'typicalizer' and 'exceptionalizer'; 'admonitionist' and 'revisionist'; 'agrarianate' and 'technicalistic'; amongst others), but – as the work's subtitle implies – conscience and accuracy (rather than elegance) were the guiding forces in Hodgson's approach to Islamic history. And although computer spell-checks reject all of his neologisms, scholars have been more tolerant of some of them, such as 'Islamicate' with reference not to Islam as a religion but to 'the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims'.

Competing approaches

For his sensitive approach to the study of Muslim societies, and his effort to situate Islamic history within the big picture of world history, Albert Hourani (d. 1993) concluded that, 'Marshall Hodgson has given us a framework of understanding which may be no less valuable than that of his great ancestor Ibn Khaldun.'



14. Marshall Hodgson



15. Ibn Khaldun

al-Tabari and Ibn Khaldun

How did Muslim historians themselves view Islamic history? A short comparison of the lives and works of al-Tabari (838–923) and Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) – arguably, the two greatest Muslim historians – presents us with two very different answers to this question. In many ways, the two approached Islamic history from opposite ends: al-Tabari was an easterner – an Iranian from Amul, south of the Caspian Sea; whereas Ibn Khaldun was a westerner – an Andalusian Arab born in what is now Tunisia. The former lived and worked during the high-point of Arabo-Islamic civilization; the latter during one of its low-points (his family fled the *Reconquista* to North Africa). And whereas al-Tabari was consciously detached from governmental circles and independent of political influence, Ibn Khaldun spent much of his adult life immersed in self-serving schemes and political machinations, which brought him into contact with such figures as the Castilian King Pedro ('the Cruel') and Timur.

It should not be surprising, then, that the different circumstances that shaped their respective historical works had an impact on their approaches to history. Expectedly, al-Tabari's work has much fuller accounts of eastern provinces than of western ones, and the reverse is true for Ibn Khaldun's writings. Moreover, as a Persian, al-Tabari exerted considerable efforts towards the reconciliation of ancient Persian and Judeo-Christian accounts of pre-Islamic history; Ibn Khaldun, for his part, was unconcerned about these things.

Less expectedly, perhaps, their perspectives on history's course, as well as its causes and effects, were radically different. Had he carried business cards, al-Tabari's would probably have said *faqih* ('jurist'), *'alim*, or something of the sort, rather than 'historian'. Indeed, in his day al-Tabari was best known as a leading religious scholar, is even said to have created his own school of Islamic thought (the 'Jariri *madhhab*'), and he is just as famous amongst

Muslims for his voluminous exegesis (*tafsir*) on the Quran as he is for his *History*. His view of Islamic history was thus heavily conditioned by religious concerns. To him, God created the world and, after c. 7,000 years (he explains the calculation in the introduction to his work), He will bring it to an end. History is in God's hands and its course is progressing inexorably towards the End of Times (an idea with both Iranian and Semitic pedigrees).

Ibn Khaldun, by contrast, saw history as the product of certain identifiable, dynamic processes, such as the interaction between barbarians imbued with 'tribal' cohesion (*'asabiyya*) and the settled civilizations that they bordered. Ibn Khaldun's theory of history dictates that the barbarians will occasionally unite to overrun neighbouring civilizations and become civilized themselves, only to be conquered by a new batch of barbarians as the process is repeated indefinitely. Thus, unlike al-Tabari's linear, teleological, God-driven narrative, Ibn Khaldun saw history as cyclical and subject to rules and patterns. This is the approach that modern historians and sociologists adopt and, to the extent that Ibn Khaldun created it, he may be regarded as the founder of these academic disciplines (though there is no evidence that their eventual founders were indebted to Ibn Khaldun). Arnold J. Toynbee called the *Muqaddima* (the theoretical introduction to Ibn Khaldun's historical work in which these observations are found), 'a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place'. Ronald Reagan was also a confirmed admirer.

Contrasting approaches to Islamic history are not limited to modern Western scholarship: traditionally, Shiites and Sunnis have viewed the unfolding of history from very different perspectives; and in recent times, 'Islamist' and 'Modernist' (or 'Reformist') interpretations of history have been promoted by their Muslim proponents. For most Sunnis (at least since the 9th century), history is no less than the implementation of God's plans

on earth: the course that it has taken is thus incontrovertible. To Shiites, Islamic history has been punctuated by a series of disastrous mistakes: 'Ali should have succeeded the Prophet, but he was passed over (his six-year tenure as caliph was too little and too late); then he was martyred, as was his son Hussein; the Abbasid Revolution was meant to restore Shiism to power, but the movement's leaders changed their mind at the last minute; then the caliph al-Ma'mun sought to appoint a Shiite imam as his successor, but the latter died mysteriously (most if not all of the Twelver's imams were either imprisoned, murdered, or both); the Shiite Buyids managed to achieve power in Baghdad, but then chose to keep the Abbasid caliph on the throne; the Fatimids and Safavids did implement Shiite rule, but quickly abandoned most of their revolutionary promises; and in most parts of the Muslim (and Western) world, it is the Sunni narrative of Islamic history that has dominated. Persian nostalgia about past imperial glories combine in modern Iran with the Shiite sense of persecution to create a potent feeling of historical injustice.

Even within Sunni circles, competing approaches to Islamic history have been adopted over the centuries. The traditional Sunni approach holds that God is behind events and it is up to us to respond to the realities created in the 600–800 period, not to create new ones. Beginning in the 18th century, groups of what might now be called 'Islamists' and, from the 19th century, 'Modernists', have sponsored mutually exclusive readings of (early) Islamic history. To the Islamists, Islam's waters have been muddied over the centuries by the accumulation of unwanted accretions such as those associated with popular religious beliefs and practices. In their view, Muslims must return to their earliest sources (i.e. the Quran and *hadith*) and follow only the precepts found in them. Modernists agree with the Islamists regarding the general problem, but disagree with their literalist solution since, in their view, it puts too much emphasis on the details of history and not enough on the general 'lessons' conveyed by the Quran, Muhammad, his Companions, and their successors. The

Modernists object to the Islamists' focus on the trees rather than the wood; the latter stress that these trees were created by God and it is He who told us to focus on them.

Confusingly, both the Islamists and the Modernists are known as 'Salafis' ('those who follow [the Muslim] ancestors'). What unites them is a concern for the story of early Islamic history and an unbending conviction that it is relevant to modern Muslims. Oddly, what Salafis – particularly of the Islamist sort – have in common with Said's Orientalists is the belief that there is an original or essential Islam, which Orientalists wish to describe (and control) and which Islamists wish to reinstate. But why should things that happened over a thousand years ago be of any practical importance for people living in the 21st century? This is the question that will be addressed in the next chapter.