Methodologies

The term “Islamic studies,” currently used in scientific and professional journals, academic departments, and institutions, encompasses a vast field of research with Islam as its common bond. References to Islam, whether in the sense of culture, civilization, or religious tradition, have become even more frequent since the appearance of a plethora of literature in European languages treating the notion of political (“fundamentalist”) Islam. The literature speaks of Islamic banks, Islamic economics, Islamic political order, Islamic democracy, Islamic human rights, and so on. A cursory glance at catalogs of published works in the past three decades reveals countless titles containing the word “Islam” and its corresponding adjective “Islamic,” indicating the subject matter of what has become part of “Islamic studies” in academia.

This interest in the phenomenon of “political Islam” is not entirely recent. Since the nineteenth century, Islamic studies, also called Near Eastern studies, have been a component of a broader academic field known as Oriental studies. The period from 1821 to 1850 saw the creation of the Royal Asiatic Society in England, the Société Asiatique in France, the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft in Germany, and the American Oriental Society in the United States, all of which served a practical purpose from the perspective of the colonial powers. On the one hand, these societies conducted ethnographic research and were therefore a source of information for the colonizers; on the other, they studied cultural and scholarly texts written by Eastern thinkers. This led to the publication by E. M. Quatremere of Ibn Khaldûn’s Muqaddimah and, subsequently, to its first translation into French by Baron de Sane. The histories of al-Tabârî and al-Masʿûdî and several other Arabic texts were also edited and translated for publication. The predominance of philological and historical approaches, particularly in German circles, is evident in Theodore Nöldeke’s study on the history of the Qur’ân, Ignácz Goldziher’s work on the prophetic tradition (hadith), or D. S. Margoliouth’s study of Muslim historiography.

Traditional Orientalist Islamic scholarship had defined Islam as a corpus of beliefs and abstract norms that determine the various spheres that characterize a culture. A History of Islamic Societies (1988) by Ira M. Lapidus and several works by Bernard Lewis—notably The Islamic World (1989) and The Political Language of Islam (1988)—have been widely translated into all the European languages, thereby promulgating a certain vision and usage of the term “Islam.” One need only contemplate the titles chosen by Gustave von Grunebaum—Modern Islam, Medieval Islam, and Classical Islam—to engage in academic discourse on Islamic civilization and culture. The latter two works reflect the creation of a “scientific” discipline wholeheartedly accepted by Orientalist scholars of Islam: a study of Islam based on Muslim law, Islamic political systems (caliphal states, imams, sultanesates, emirates, and so on), and so-called “Islamic” architecture and art (which in fact reflect either a certain continuity with earlier pre-Islamic styles or a foreign, non-Islamic influence, as demonstrated by Oleg Grabar’s works on the subject).

The fact is that in this treatment of Islam, Orientalist scholarship has exercised little or no intellectual caution in overgeneralization of the data concerning Islam. Such generalizations seem particularly unwarranted given that most monographs focus on a single culture or a single aspect, text, era, or author. The term “Islamic philosophy” used by several historians (Henry Corbin, Majid Fakhry) has not elicited the kind of theoretical debate provoked by its counterpart “Christian philosophy,” a notion rejected by Emile Brehier in the 1930s when E. Gilson attempted to introduce it. The aforementioned titles related to Islam have no equivalents bearing the words “Christianity” or the adjective “Christian.”

The academic discourse on “Islamic studies” has still to proffer explanation as to how so many diverse fields, theories, cultural spheres, disciplines, and concepts came to be associated with a single word, “Islam,” and why the discussion remains so one-dimensional where Islam is concerned. In contrast, the study of Western society is characterized by careful scrutiny, attention to precise detail, meticulous distinctions, and theory-building. Indeed, the study of Western cultures continues to develop along such lines and to move in a different direction altogether from the unfortunate approach adopted in the area of “Islam” and the so-called “Arab world.”

The standard explanation that has emerged in the recent debates about this monolithic approach based on philological studies consists of reciting dogma or sacred Islamic texts. The discipline of Islamic studies faithfully and objectively reflects the myriad and sometimes confusing perspectives, levels, and views of reality expressed in the fundamental Islamic texts, including the scripture and prophetic tradition.
Where Islam as a religious tradition is concerned, however, the philological method has a drawback that continues to be either minimized or denied by its advocates among the Orientalists. In fact, philology rejects all legends, mythologies, and apocryphal materials in favor of authentic, verifiable facts, duly dated and easily situated in real space. Even after anthropologists had established the value of myths as a rich source of historical-psychological information, Orientalists continued to view and write history in a linear, factual way along strictly chronological lines, dividing historical periods according to successive political dynasties. Numerous ethnologists conduct fieldwork in Islamic countries, yet scholars of Islamic studies have so far neglected to engage in dialogue with them.

Louis Massignon's brilliant dissertation on al-Hallâj, the Muslim mystic, in many respects heralded the methodological and epistemological changes that gradually began to occur in the 1960s. Along with Goldziher, Massignon contributed to the recognition of Islam as a well-established religion based on sacred texts and, therefore, comparable to the two other monotheistic religions. Unfortunately, their work did not succeed in preventing widespread confusion concerning the definition of the word "Islam" used to refer to the religion, culture, society, political systems, and their intellectual production.

A further case in point is provided by the ways in which Orientalist scholarship ignores the reality of the Muslim community by confining itself to the written texts and the comparison of Islamic civilization and political culture with that of Christendom. It regards Islam as an object of study, a topic of scientific discourse, making no attempt to participate in the living Islamic tradition. Hence, in the study of Islamic law, Orientalism treats its historical development as an explanation for the "facts" of Islam. However, law is more fruitfully understood as a practice than as a fact. Law is an endeavor engaged in by fellow humans, not by aliens. Understanding a practice requires participation, if only the virtual participation of the sympathetic intellectual who suspends judgment and listens to another's argument. To understand Islamic law, one must be given some sense of what it means to think like a Muslim who is engaged in implementing the shari‘ah. The Orientalist tradition is unwilling to do this; it rests secure in its own explanatory apparatus. This security often leads to substantive errors, often owing to the Orientalists' refusal to recognize the presence of cultural elements that are underrated by their own political schema. Religion figures surprisingly seldom, and usually as a mask for power politics, in the accounts of Islamic law offered by Orientalists. The adoption of a rigorously external view of law creates a false sense of precision, as seen, for example, in the works of Joseph Schacht.

Chapter 9 of the Qur‘ân, for instance, lays the groundwork for city legislature, the social class system, and the rights of the individual vis-à-vis the state as well as the Muslim community. Muslims constitute a dominant, elite "citizenship." These norms and classification systems were subsequently standardized and became part of the Islamic legal tradition: the social and political realms were divided into the spheres of "Islam" and "war" (dâr al-islâm and dâr al-harb). Unlike Christian Europe where the religious and political spheres became distinct domains, in the Islamic world the interdependency of the two was never severed. There is evidence today of a strong resurgence and dissemination of those early generalizations and misconceptions about the "Arab world." This amounts to denying the very essence of Islam by continually comparing its features to those that characterize Christian and European history, not only in theory but also in practice.

The implicit and explicit tenets underlying the notion of "Islamic studies" that follows will discuss the cognitive dimension of the social sciences, and, insofar as possible, analyze the extent to which scholars of Islamic studies have—or have not—relied on such an approach. Furthermore, it will make a case for certain methodological approaches that are considered to be inseparable from epistemological theories that would make it possible to integrate Islam and Muslim cultures into a global critical theory of knowledge and values.

A recently published monumental study by Josef Van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam (Berlin, 1991–1992; volumes published to date), dispels many misconceptions that have proliferated regarding philological and historical methodology pursued by Orientalist scholarship, when contrasted with that used in the social sciences, particularly since the introduction of linguistics and semiotics. Van Ess's work represents the finest example of the German philological tradition associated with a historical approach. He has greatly enriched our investigations of historical sociology. The very title of his work reveals this clearly: theology is not treated abstractly or prescriptively in isolation but rather is historicized and sociologized; that is,
it is placed in its historical context and studied over the course of two critical centuries. Moreover, theology is considered in its sociological context, so far as the author seeks to enumerate the distinctive traits of the schools that proliferated during the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries (AH/CE) in Syria, Iraq, Iran, the Hejaz, southern Arabia, and Egypt. Van Ess’s approach differs from previous methods, which focused on a description of each sect’s tenets or an abstract list of sects, such as that found in Henri Laoust’s *Les schismes dans l’islam* (2d ed., Paris, 1977).

Van Ess demonstrates with unparalleled scholarship that the westernization (or, to use his term, the “standardization”) of Islamic thought and the appearance of organized religious institutions date back only to the founding of Baghdad and the creation of the ‘Abbāsid state. This historic fact has important methodological implications for the study of Islamic thought and the redefining of the loosely used term “Islam.”

The philological approach taken by Van Ess remains vital to our ongoing examination of the overwhelming amount of “Islamic” resources available to us. Numerous texts have yet to appear in critical editions or to be read using methods drawn from philology and the social sciences jointly. In that respect, the Orientalists have already provided us with a valuable model for the critical study of ancient texts and the application of historical reading—a linear, narrative, descriptive reading of the texts rather than a deconstructionist approach. Until the 1950s, Orientalist scholars could only imitate their counterparts studying Western societies and cultures. Philological criticism and a historical approach to Christian texts during the nineteenth century were extended to the Qur’ān, the hadith, and the books of fiqh by researchers including Theodor Nöldeke, Ignác Goldziher and Joseph Schacht. But, whereas in Europe theologians adopted a historical approach in order to revitalize Christian theology (as did Rudolph Bultmann, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Jacques Maritain, or Marie-Dominique Chenu), Orientalists continued to rely on the damaging conclusions of philological critics where Islam was concerned. The latter limited themselves to denouncing conservative Muslims who refused to follow the lead of their Christian counterparts. Consequently, the field of “Islamic studies” was left in ruins, deserted on the one hand by Islamic researchers unable to make sense of foreign religious beliefs, and on the other by Muslims who, after 1945, adopted the ideology of the wars of liberation from colonial rule and the subsequent struggle to forge a national identity.

The present state of Islamic studies, then, suffers from the limitations of Western scientific reasoning when applied to foreign cultures or concepts outside the realm of Christian Europe and secular Western civilization. So-called scientific reason has been, first and foremost, hegemonic in nature; it has always imposed its classifications, categories, definitions, distinctions, concepts, and theories on others without fear of denunciation or refutation, except perhaps on polemical or ideological grounds. This has been possible because, to this day, the Muslim world that has been the object of all this “scientific” research has yet to come up with its own conceptual view of its history, culture, and religion—one that would challenge the hegemonic perspective and force it to acknowledge an alternative interpretation. A French scholar writing on Goethe, Kant, Cervantes, or Dante consults German, Spanish, and Italian scholarly works in an effort to be thorough; when it comes to Islamic authors, texts or cultures, however, previous research published in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish is considered negligible, with some exceptions. To make matters worse, scholars of Islamic studies constitute a closed group; they read and critique one another’s work without incurring the risk of being judged by researchers in other disciplines whose techniques they should be using to analyze Islam. In other words, the key factor in a successful multidisciplinary approach is the researcher’s educational background as well as his/her willingness and efforts to seek the opinions of colleagues known for their innovative perspectives.

The above remarks obviously do not apply to research in linguistics, literary studies, archeology, or economic and social history, since these domains do not necessarily condition, or are only indirectly affected by, religion. This brings us to a crucial issue rarely addressed by Islamic scholars: the epistemological status and cognitive aims of the social sciences applied to the study of Islam as a religion.

**Status of the Social Sciences.** Introduced a number of years ago in France, the term “science of man and society” carries global, all-encompassing connotations: it underscores the crucial notion that humanity is both the object and agent of scientific investigation. The fields of political science, economics, and law have over time become somewhat autonomous and independent from
more obviously subjective domains, such as psychology, intellectual history, literature and the arts, philosophy, and theology. Indeed, because of their subjective nature, the philosophy and anthropology of law, the philosophical and psychological ramifications of production and trade, and the role of the sacred, symbolic, mythical and religious in political affairs have been viewed as speculative and have become fragmented to the point of being intellectually mutilated and mutilating.

Several recent books have clearly shown a relationship between the development of the social sciences and political science as fields and the increased, urgent demands of industrial nations. Logical reasoning based on empirical, operational, and productive knowledge—economically speaking—has acquired a status and dominance comparable to theological-legal reason in the Middle Ages or to Enlightenment reason with its indisputable ties to classical, philosophical reason.

This change with regard to the aims of knowledge has forced thinkers to adopt ways of looking at the world, articulating their ideas and dealing with political and economic realities that have resulted in a new form of intellectual approach that renders all talk and defense of the concepts of truth, law, and worth insignificant and lacking in credibility. Such an intellectual approach generalized through scholarship and teaching generated a hegemonic rise of reason interiorized by scholars as well as average people on the receiving end of such information. As long as Marxism and liberalism succeeded in convincing us that the ultimate stakes in their ideological struggle involved individuals’ rights to seek the truth freely and to create laws based on “universal” values, we could accept placing practical concerns ahead of critical thinking. Since the downfall of Marxism, political and social scientists have proven unable to fill the void left by fifty years of illusions and ideological fever. Political economics, which reigned supreme for so long, can barely handle the contradictions and conflicts that characterized the period from 1960 to 1970, when so-called “underdeveloped” countries attempted to forge ahead by destroying their agricultural industries and traditional solidarities in order to embrace the industrialization they saw as the key to their salvation.

Modern-day political experts who speak of the “threat” to “Western values” posed by Muslim “religious fanatics” only occasionally mention in passing the “economic mistakes” made by “scientific experts.” Their analyses never call into question the underlying hegemonic way of thinking that continues to set priorities based on scientific reasoning and to promote research methods, agendas, and programs grounded in the social sciences.

The single party nation-states that monopolize power in developing countries have reinforced this hegemonic reason at all levels of function while at the same time imposing a nationalistic ideology that exalts national identities and denounces Western “imperialism” or “neocolonialism.” Thus they perpetuate political, economic, and social conditions studied by researchers but far removed from the real problems affecting their countries. As a result, Islam, which is claimed by the believers to be a model “superior” to the one imposed by the West for acting in history, has become a “collective fantasia” (fantasm in French), unrealistic and preoccupied with a romanticized past. This “collective fantasia” has replaced Islam in its religious, traditional meaning and function. It is the new historical force generated through struggles for liberation and national emancipation since the nineteenth century. As a new historical force, it has to be considered, analyzed, and interpreted by means of tools and methodologies of social psychology and cultural anthropology, and no longer through the vocabulary of traditional historiography and the language of Muslim orthodoxy. Neither Western Islamicists and political scientists nor Muslim scholars and intellectuals have made this shift from the ideological framework related to Islam to the problematics provided and required by social scientists.

In contemporary Muslim societies ethnology and anthropology are still rejected on the grounds that they continue to depend on colonial strategies. This is, of course, in itself a pure ideological posture imposed by the single party nation-states. In fact, ethnology, anthropology, and sociology as well as philosophy are seen as dangerous sciences because they may reactivate local identities that would be obstructive to the political will to bring about national unification. These fields are strictly controlled in order to limit their subversive effects on religious orthodoxy and, by extension on the state’s legitimacy. Consequently, critical study of the religious phenomenon as a whole is excluded in contemporary Muslim societies and the fundamental tendencies inherent in each religious tradition had the possibility to develop and to relegate any scientific approach to Islam out of the approaches required by the new methodologies, increasingly elaborated especially in cultural an-
thropology, linguistics, semiotics, and critiques of discourse.

By contrast, apologetic historiography, which reinforces nationalist dreams, glorifies past grandeur in epic style (al-turāth), and emphasizes Islam’s “universal” values, has produced a plethora of widely disseminated literature. Some researchers have resisted this trend, but they are few in number and their work has not been substantial enough to counteract the destructive effects of the state’s official ideology or the widespread and irresistible lure of fundamentalism.

It is necessary to analyze thoroughly this contrast between the current status and goals of the social sciences in the West and their precarious position and timid initiatives in Islamic contexts, where they are carefully watched. Such an analysis would enable us to realize the extent to which Islam, as a religion, as a tradition of thought, system of beliefs and nonbeliefs, and source of hope for millions of faithful followers has been the object of individual and collective imaginaire (this concept in French social sciences has taken an expanding import in the last fifty years), ideological manipulations, and descriptivist accounts by outside observers. The Islamic world has not benefited intellectually or spiritually from the kind of debates over theological and philosophical issues, controversies concerning laws and their interpretation, rich mystical experiences, and historical studies that have characterized past eras. Islam has been intellectually and spiritually disinherit ed ever since the Ṣafavid and Ottoman dynasties reduced the ‘ulamā’ to the status of servile guardians of an orthodoxy divorced from the disputatio (mudārakah) among the different schools of thought.

Changes in the past thirty years have had even more dramatic effects than those engendered by bringing the religion under the state control since the classical age under the Umayyads and even more under the Ṣafavids and the Ottomans. Whereas areas of ignorance continue to spread in the so-called politically “liberated” nations, the science of “man and society” in the West pursues its task of arbitrary division of the world and fragmentation of the reality, disseminating and imposing postures of mind, models of knowledge, ways of acting and creating strategies of domination, types of articulation of meanings and so on which have led ultimately to the “We/Us” mentality aptly described by James Clifford as the “mankind of Western social science.” This “We” exercises total intellectual and scientific sovereignty over all other cultures and countries by means of market economy “laws,” universally accepted and adopted by all political regimes, along with their implicit philosophies, and rarely contested.

This far-reaching and unprecedented phenomenon has affected more lives and has had more widespread and serious consequences for the philosophical and juridical status of the human person as well as for the orientation of human destiny than did colonialism during most of the nineteenth century through 1960. Postcolonial countries can no longer express resentment or level moral accusations against the former colonial powers; their own elite classes have amply demonstrated their own moral and political weaknesses vis-à-vis their fellow citizens whom they claimed to have liberated from servitude by casting out the foreign dominators. Those intellectuals who persist in denouncing Western neocolonialism while neglecting to examine critically the past and recent history of their respective countries display an irresponsible attitude and ignore the irrefutable lessons of modern science and progress, which extend beyond the history of the West’s domination of oppressed societies.

If moral protest is no longer an appropriate reaction, neither is Orientalist criticism—even less so. The fact remains that hegemonic reason, which reigns supreme thanks to the triumph of modern technology and the reinforcement of its “legitimacy” by means of market economy laws that supersede the social sciences, must be made to reconcile its claims for reaching universality with the humiliations inflicted on the human conditions and degradation visible wherever long-oppressed minorities strive to acquire their legitimate, inalienable rights to freedom and dignity.

Islamic studies as currently carried out in the West remains the victim of hegemonic reason. While rectifying the excesses of colonial rule, hegemonic reason continues to place “Islam” in an epistemological framework inherited from the Enlightenment—this despite the fact that the latter has been declared obsolete by all the creators, thinkers, and innovators of the postmodern condition. All of the recent literature on supposed Islamic fundamentalist, radical, or integrivist groups only serves to reinforce the narrow epistemological confines imposed on Islam and the Muslim world since the nineteenth century.

In what follows we will examine the ways in which an intellectual, scientific approach based on recent developments in the cognitive sciences may be applied to the study of Islam and the Muslim world.
A Global Theory of Knowledge. By this phrase I mean a critical knowledge, continuously reconsidered in light of not only the new information provided in each discipline, but also the changing postures of reason facing its own procedures, postulates, and statements. This situation is well illustrated by the objections addressed by postmodernists to the reason of enlightenments. It is a fact that a majority of scholars in Islamic studies do not pay enough attention to these shifts in the postures of reason. Needless to say, this kind of epistemological issue represents what I call the unthinkable and the unthought for contemporary Islamic thought. That is why all social scientists and political scientists who just transfer into European languages the various discourses articulated by Muslims in the present context of their societies, contribute themselves to consolidating and spreading the unthinkable and the unthought in the scientific discourse of Islam beyond Muslim discourse itself.

Let us consider, for example, the following vocabulary currently used by scientists dealing with religions: faith, belief, sacredness, rites, myth, narration, symbol, parable, metaphor, time, profane, secular (laic in French), spiritual, spirituality, divine, God, gods, revelation, interpretation, imagination, imaginary, marvelous, nature, culture, orthodoxy, heterodoxy, sects, truth, violence, and so on. Each one of these words has been worked out in several contexts by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and others. How are they used in the scientific literature on Islam in its classical and contemporary periods? How far, how often, are they applied as crossdisciplinary concepts to deconstruct—make explicit the implicit postulates—of all types, all levels of Muslim discourses? Ernest Gellner has done this when he deals with reason in European context (cf. his recent work Reason and Culture: New Perspectives on the Past, Oxford, 1992); when he writes on Muslim society (see his book Muslim Society, Cambridge, 1981), however, he just uses uncritically, unelaborated old categories.

In my two books Lectures du Coran (2d ed., Tunis, 1991) and Critique de la raison islamique (Paris, 1984), I have listed a number of issues that should receive priority in a strategic program aiming at a new critical, deconstructive articulation of a scientific discourse on Islam and “Muslim” societies (inasmuch as one can speak of “Muslim” societies). Some of these issues are as follows:

1. The Qur’anic phenomenon and the historical experience of Medina
2. Jāhiliyyah, ‘ilm, and islām as anthropological paradigms
3. The generations of saḥābah and tabī‘ūn (the companions of the Prophet and the succeeding generations) as symbolic figures of mythical memory
4. Living tradition, ethnographic traditions, and traditionalization as an ideological strategy
5. Authority, power, and the search for legitimacy
6. Violence, sacredness, and truth in religious discourses and collective practice
7. Oblivion, elimination, and repression as dimensions of cultural and intellectual history
8. Orthodoxy as an ideological process
9. From the societies of the Book-book to the secularized societies
10. The concept of hegemonic reason

Many other examples may be given of yet unexplored topics and fields in Islamic studies. In each subject mentioned above, it is easy to perceive the necessity to use historical approaches, sociological inquiries (sociology of the failure of Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn Ḥazm, and others in intellectual history), anthropological problematic, linguistic analysis, and so forth.

This multidisciplinary elaboration of a comprehensive, analytical, critical presentation of Islam and societies influenced by Islamic principles is not imposed only by a speculative, theoretical discussion; it is much more required by the actual forces at work in the history of every society. This means that “Muslim” societies should no longer be approached and cloaked by our ethnographic view. Ethnography insists on local particularities to single out each ethno-cultural group or community from all others; anthropology, on the contrary, considers global structures and mechanisms, universal forces such as violence, sacredness, sacrifice, authority, power, time and narration, historicity, and so on to reach encompassing explanations. This distinction is not strictly respected with the same lucidity displayed, for example, in the works of Clifford Geertz.

All these observations may be systematized in the following diagram:

(1) State → Writing → Learned Culture → Orthodoxy
     ↓        ↓        ↓        ↓
(2) Segmentary → Orality → Popular/Populist → Heterodoxies

  Societies → Culture
To comment fully on this diagram would require an entire book, but some illustrations can be found in my work *Rethinking Islam* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994). I shall add here a few brief remarks.

Traditional historiography has imposed in all known societies a narration starting from an origin, developing a linear evolution until the present time of each historian. This vision is related to a centralizing political power (the state, more or less complex according to the period considered); the social group able to *write* and to read produces a learned culture, structures a type of knowledge with established, controlled, reproduced rules, norms and principles that become the orthodox way to write, to think, to believe, to behave. The arrows horizontally linking the four forces operating in a dialectic interaction express the historical evolution, the sociological mechanisms at work in the leading, dominating level of society; this is the level currently described and studied by historians using *written* documents that speak on the social aspects more or less dependent on the state (some can be opposed to it), but separated, indifferent, and more often *hostile* to all the social agents belonging to the second level. In this second level there are also four forces linked horizontally by the same dialectic interaction, but opposed vertically to the forces of the upper level. The lower level is studied by ethnographers who are obliged to live with tribes, clans, peasants, and bedouins, to learn the local dialects, to collect oral memories, and so forth.

The conceptualization, the description, the knowledge concerning the lower level are decided, fixed, articulated, and evaluated with selections, eliminations, fragmentations, marginalizations, and minimizations by those who write, read, and teach orthodox norms on the upper level. How do we speak of or interpret the so-called *popular* or, as termed in the last thirty years in Third World societies, *populist* culture? Who uses the words magic, superstitions, paganism, polytheism, heterodoxies, sects to refer to *wrong* beliefs, underdeveloped cultures, anarchy, rebellion (*bilād al-sība* versus *bilād al-makhtān* in Morocco in the nineteenth century, for example) as opposed to political order, logocentrist writing, reason, high culture, civilization, and so forth.

(Jack Goody has written the well-known book *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge, 1977; translated into French with the more suggestive title *La raison graphique*, Paris, 1979; he has also recently published *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, Cambridge, 1987. I point exactly to this anthropological opposition when I work out the concept of the societies of the Book-book.) We see clearly here how our modern scholarship reflects, perpetuates, and supports very old, deep, universal divisions that are political and ideological divisions hidden with cultural, intellectual, and ethical vocabulary.

In European societies these oppositions have evolved since the eighteenth century (and even the sixteenth century in some respects) toward a generalization of the upper forces and mechanisms to the global social space; illiteracy is almost eradicated; democracy, the rule of law, and human rights are guaranteed to each citizen; but the anthropological tensions have been at work during centuries and are still at work in many respects today. In Third World societies—including, of course, all "Muslim" societies—the tensions shown by the diagram are more devastating than ever since the emergence of the phenomenon of the single-party nation-state. The political will to eradicate illiteracy in a short time has been so brutal and inspired by ideological goals that oral culture lost its centuries-old social, psychological, and ethical functions. Populist culture is the result of this destructive policy imposed by nationalist "elites" to deliver "masses" of peasants, highlanders, and bedouins from their "ignorance."

The above investigative framework is particularly useful in that it incorporates and links political and social history, intellectual and cultural history, religious history, and, of course, languages, including the various forms used by different social groups. Removed from a strictly theological perspective, religion is studied in its historical, sociological, and anthropological context, thereby setting the stage for a theory of religion as a sociohistoric, universal phenomenon. In this perspective, Islam is but one example among others that can be studied via the social sciences as part of a global theory of knowledge. Such an approach contrasts starkly with the view promulgated by Islamologists and political scientists who have focused instead on its irrefutable specificity as a hieratic force, a kind of monster that has survived for centuries and controlled the fate of nations that have embraced Islam. Rather than focusing exclusively on "Islam," the above framework enables us to analyze the forces that drive the protagonists at all levels of society: social classes and groups, the elite versus the less privileged, as well as intragroup conflicts that arise in both the social and political domains.

At the same time, the scholar is freed from the narrow ideological bonds inherent in opting either to examine
society globally on the basis of literature produced and edited by an elite group (arrow 1) or to limit one's research to an exhaustive study of a specific ethnocultural group isolated from the larger sociohistorical process (ethnographic monographs, included in arrow 2). Unfortunately, historical/anthropological studies that attempt to address the weaknesses and dangers inherent in either of these two approaches (particularly when the two are totally distinct) are all too rare.

The study of Islam as a purely religious phenomenon results in major gaps and neglected areas, which are all the more unforgivable for being nonexistent in the study of Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, it seems inconceivable that Islam should be relegated to a separate historical, doctrinal, and sociological status in relation to Christianity and Judaism, given the close links among them. Whether one examines the deeply rooted continuities or the contrasts between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, a semiological and anthropological perspective would allow us to test the theoretical validity of two constructs that underlie the study of religions.

The first is the mimetic rivalry and competition for the exploitation and control of an original symbolic capital that appeals to diverse sociocultural groups. This occurred in the Near East from ancient Iran to ancient Egypt, where the notions of monotheism, revelation, prophetism, immortality, the heavenly book (as Geo Widengren called it), light and darkness, and good and evil gradually came to constitute a single mindset and way of conceptualizing true knowledge and ultimate truth. At the same time, they provided a set of tools for constructing belief systems which were used by competing forces to justify their power and guarantee support.

Second, this analytical and theoretical framework, the concept of a new cultural code departure, will enable us to explain the emergence and social construction of differentiated systems of beliefs and how beliefs called Judaism, Christianity, and Islam fragmented themselves through history into “sects” or derived religions. And yet, when one considers the founding of a religion from a historical or anthropological viewpoint, it is apparent that the same constructs merely have different cultural and semiological representations; the outwardly diverse ideologies and mythologies disguise the fact that the underlying symbolic systems stem from the same creative process, especially in the context of large empires. The acts of building a mosque on the site of an ancient temple, of designating Friday as a day for collective prayer, of facing Mecca rather than Jerusalem, of fasting for an entire month as opposed to a few days, of changing the mythical figures of Isaac, Ishmael, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, of discussing God’s existence, of redefining the revelations are all forms of encoding—ritual, cultural, ethical, judicial, and political levels of human existence to transform each religion into the unique “true religion” (din al-haqq as the Qur’an says and Hegel will say in a pure philosophical context).

The ill-defined Muslim opposition that views the application of social sciences to the interpretation of religions as reductionist should not stop scientific research on Islam, in the same way that the study of Christianity proceeded in spite of Christian theologians’ objections and refusal to accept the conclusions of researchers. For that matter, the very act of rejection should itself be studied from a sociological, historical, and psychological viewpoint: the ways in which this refusal is manifested, the underlying concepts, and the personal and collective motives behind it. Only then will we comprehend that open or closed postures of the mind are the result of behaviors and representations imposed by social agents; this means that Islam, as all other religions, is not the determinant factor, but is itself shaped, transformed, and obliged to fulfill functions corresponding to the needs of social agents.

Islam continues to be excluded from the fields of sociology, social psychology, discourse analysis, and cultural anthropology; since Ibn Rushd, Islam has been ignored by philosophers in their discussions on truth and its theory and practice. How does philosophy affect religious interpretations and discourses? Conversely, how can a cognitively based study of religion stimulate philosophical inquiry? Any Muslim scholar daring to venture down this path succeeds only in earning the condensation of “serious” fellow scholars or in becoming totally isolated by refusing to accept the predominant orthodox view of Islam to which the majority subscribe. By contrast, even the most minor text written by fundamentalist militants becomes the basis for a doctoral thesis or a highly successful book.

The preceding observations have shown that Islamic studies have a long way to go before they are fully integrated into the Western tradition of academic and cultural research. Meanwhile, they continue to be restricted to Asian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, or Near Eastern Studies departments where a handful of aspiring or recognized experts jealously guard their territory, refusing to collaborate on a wider academic level with other departments for fear that their ideas might be
scrutinized and judged by true social scientists. Islamic studies should be recognized as a field integrated within departments of history, sociology, psychology, linguistics, philosophy, anthropology and religion. For Islam and Islamic thought are an integral part of Mediterranean cultural history, politics and economics, and, by extension, Europe and modern Western civilization, including North America. Orientalist scholars serving on university faculties have perpetuated an ideological perspective dating back to the nineteenth century, and in some respects even to the Middle Ages (particularly where the history of religions and theology are concerned). This has been done in order to protect individual privileges that are gradually diminishing. These views are in no way reflective of the polemical unjustified criticism of "Orientalism."

It is pertinent to state that universities and researchers in the West insist on viewing Islamic studies in the same intellectual and scientific light as "postmodern" theories of knowledge. The reason appears to be that there is a structural link between the growth of social sciences and the needs of democratic, industrialized nations. From a political and economic standpoint, Islamic countries neither favor nor encourage a scholarly/empirical approach to Islamic studies because of the inherently fundamentalist nature of the political system. It remains to be seen whether research on Islam will be limited to narratives and descriptive studies, or whether it will adapt to the demands imposed on it by intellectual modernity in spite of the fundamentalist opposition based precisely on the fact that this type of modernity is for them unthinkable. Such demands already exist but are neither encouraged nor satisfied because of the strict official ideology supported by the collective imaginaire that narrowly defines intellectual and scientific pursuits.

Yet another reason why it is crucial to alter the existing intellectual perspective on Islam and Islamic cultures is that Orientalist writings on Islam continue to reflect philosophical principles taken exclusively from the reason of Enlightenment, despite the fact that these tenets have been deemed outdated by social scientists since the 1960s. It seems that contemporary Western philosophy and civilization only acknowledge two ways of looking at and thinking about the world: the effects of the "postmodern condition" on the one hand, and on the other, the use of criteria, definitions, and values inherited from the Enlightenment tradition to analyze all other cultures and societies. It is time to put an end to this state of affairs, reminiscent of the establishment by France in Algeria of one electoral system for French citizens and another for Algerian "natives."

Methodological and epistemological issues are directly, albeit not always visibly, tied to the world's great ideologies. Social psychology has revealed that all knowledge is linked to a policy of refusal or integration of new knowledge that, in the former case, undermines and, in the latter, reinforces or confirms existing ideological views. Several verses of chapter 9 of the Qur'an (5:29) explicitly state what Muslims should reject or integrate. Equivalent Christian and Jewish sacred texts have fulfilled a similar function since the Middle Ages. With the advent of the Age of Reason, universal values were proclaimed, reinforced by Kant's transcendental reason and Hegel's philosophical spirit, all leading to the supremacy of liberal socialism and, for seventy years, communism. Since the downfall of communism with its aberrant tenets, history has ceased in the sense that there is no single logic or worldview in a position to contradict, rival or supersede liberal philosophy.

Very few fellow Islamists intend to incorporate the scientific method evident in their writings on Islam and the Muslim world into a larger philosophical and autobiographical framework. Under such circumstances, it seems reasonable to conclude that Islamic studies will most likely remain the domain of erudite scholars, experts, essayists, narrators, journalists, hurried observers, political scientists, and academics more concerned with their careers than with improving and enhancing our knowledge—unless, of course, a group of particularly gifted and fortunate researchers and thinkers succeeds in changing the rules of the academic game and in breaking the pious molds used to reproduce existing knowledge and current intellectual theories. [See also Historiography; Orientalism; and Social Sciences.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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