The Study of Islam in American Scholarship:

the Persistence of Orientalist Paradigms

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(Draft version; please do not quote)
Despite miscellaneous differences, the American academy accepted most of the European paradigms for the study of Islam. These paradigms emerged over the course of centuries of encounters between Europe and the Muslim world, but they gained systematic articulation in the nineteenth century with the rise of the field of Oriental Studies. Patterned after Classical Studies, Oriental Studies was not defined by a specific disciplinary approach but largely by its field of study, the languages and cultures of the Orient, that is, of Asia and North Africa. The fundamental assumption of this field was that knowledge of the Orient can be acquired from the study of its languages and through a philological examination of a limited number of “authoritative” texts, often stumbled upon by accident and considered authoritative simply because they were available to their readers. Over time, the field of Oriental Studies was divided by region and assigned different names, including the overlapping fields of Semitic Studies, Near Eastern Languages and civilizations, Islamic studies, and Middle East Studies.

This paper will not provide a comprehensive history of Orientalism. Rather, I will outline some key developments in the emergence of a scholarly tradition in the U.S. which is focused on the study of Islam. I will also outline some of the main paradigms of this field of study and some critiques and revisions of these paradigms. However, due to its formative influence on the American tradition, a word on European Orientalism is in order.
The earliest forms of knowledge about Islam that were produced in Europe were triggered by hostile encounters between Europeans and Muslims.\(^1\) Driven by a desire to know and define the Muslim enemy, a small but influential body of literature was generated in Europe. In this early period, Islam was often identified as a heresy, and the desire to delineate the nature of this Islamic heresy was part of a larger European thirst for orthodoxy and ideological conformity, or rather a European fixation on heresy, Islamic or otherwise.

These rudimentary forms of knowledge gave way over time to more systematic thinking about Islam. Gradually, haphazard impressions cohered into paradigms, and as of the seventeenth century, one can speak of a relatively consistent field of study which, more than anything else, asserted various notions of incompatibility between Europe and the Muslim/Ottoman world. In the course of explaining this incompatibility, Europeans who studied Islam produced numerous distortions but they also invoked and used Arabic/Islamic materials which were available to them. As such, this European discourse on Islam was saturated with ideological distortions but it also provided a wealth of accurate information hitherto not available to

\(^{1}\) There are several good detailed surveys of the history of the study of Islam in Europe; the classic works are by the British historian Norman Daniels, especially *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image; The Arabs and Medieval Europe*; and *Islam, Europe and Empire*. Another classic is by the British scholar Richard Southern, originally delivered as a series of lectures and later published as *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*. A recent and very useful survey of this literature and other issues related to the theme of this paper is Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East. The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge, 2004).
Europeans. However, what is most notable about the scholarship on Islam in this period is the effort to theorize the difference and to interpret much of the newly available information as a sign of this fundamental difference between Europe and the Muslim world.\(^2\) The increase in the production of knowledge on Islam and the peculiar tilts of this knowledge took place in the context of an unprecedented European imperial enterprise, and the attendant European competition with the Ottoman empire.

One of the themes of this scholarly tradition which continues to inform thinking about Islam even in the twenty first century, is the explanation of the rise of Europe in terms of inherent cultural features that are unique to European society since antiquity. The threat of Islam and the Ottoman empire was also central in shaping views and attitudes towards Islam in European scholarship; yet even after this “threat” subsided, the formative conceptions in the field of Islamic studies continued to shape later understandings of Islam and to provide frameworks within which the new data was interpreted. The organized field of Oriental studies, within which ideas about Islam were generated, adopted a philological approach; whatever its shortcomings, philology familiarized European scholars with many diverse texts and a wealth of information that derive from them. Yet this new information was processed within set interpretive frameworks largely shaped by the early hostile encounters between Europe and the Muslim world.

\(^2\) Lockman, 45.
Philology, however, had two contradictory effects on the field. The primacy of philological approaches meant that there was no disciplinary control over the field of Islamic studies, but it also meant that the discourse on Islam had to make reference to real text which, to some extent at least, reflect aspects of the culture that produced them. Therefore, it was possible through an exclusive philological approach to distort, but also to unseat some of the constructions of Islam which had no foundation other than the fertile imaginations of their authors. Even scholars who were driven by ideological agendas, occasionally stumbled upon anomalous evidence which challenged their assumption and required a reformulation or even revision of their paradigms.

As a result, Orientalists, the recognized experts on Islam, shared common approaches to, as well as paradigms about, the subject matter of their field, but they also came in many shades. A typical example is Ignaz Goldziher’s critique of Ernest Renan (1823-92). Goldziher (1850-1921), was one of leading Orientalists of his time, but so was Renan, though the latter was not an Orientalist by training. Renan wrote a widely publicized essay in which he argued that the “Semetic mind” is incapable of philosophical and scientific thinking. Predictably, the piece was denounced by Muslims. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), one of the leading Muslim thinkers of the nineteenth century, wrote a widely circulated rebuttal of Renan’s thesis. Afghani, however, was not alone; Goldziher too, wrote a critique of Renan’s thesis in which he criticized the content of Renan’s argument and questioned his qualifications to make such judgments in the first place. Yet it would be

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3 Lawrence Conrad, “Ignaz Goldziher on Ernest Renan: From Orientalist Philology to the Study of Islam”
erroneous to suggest, as many have, that Goldziher was any less an Orientalist, or philologist for that matter, than Renan. As we will see later, Goldziher adopted an interpretive framework which reinforced the major paradigms of Orientalism and, in fact, was instrumental in explaining away significant anomalies that challenged these paradigms. Above all, he sought to identify the essential characteristics of a timeless Islam that is indebted in every respect to the earlier Jewish and Christian traditions but remains, nonetheless, fundamentally different from the rightful European heirs of these traditions.

To sum up, then, Orientalism came in different shades, and its fundamental problem was not in assigning authority to texts, but in the selective reading of these texts and the interpretive frameworks which guided these readings. Moreover, the problem in Orientalism was not in noting cultural differences but in essentializing them, and then proceeding to explain these assumed differences. It should also be noted here that the use of a “historical” approach is not, by necessity, the anti-dote to Orientalism. Goldziher claimed to use such an approach in his critique of hadith, one of the two main scriptural sources in Islam;4 his historical critique, however, was not significantly different in its conclusions from those of John Wansborough who adopted what he called a “literary criticism” of the Islamic scriptures.5

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5 John Wansborough, *Qur’anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural interpretation*; and *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*.
Nor is it sufficient to seek to identify a Muslim discursive tradition when, in the minds of the seeker, this tradition is nothing but a fetish.

The study of Islam in the U.S.

While German Orientalism provided the research tools, it was the British Orientalist tradition that left the most lasting imprints on the American field of Islamic studies, so much so that even today one can only speak of an Anglo-American tradition rather than just an American one. The field received a major impetus in the 1950s with the rise of area studies, but a number of other factors shaped its paradigms. In the late nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, the small field of Islamic studies was mostly intertwined with Semitic or Biblical studies and with missionary activities and interests in general. The leading experts on Islamic studies in the early twentieth century were missionaries who, although much more sympathetic to and informed of their subject of study than the medieval Christian polemicists, were on the whole in pursuit of similar objectives, namely to search in Islam for a truncated versions of Christianity.

Samuel Zwemer, a famous missionary and founder of the Hartford Theological Seminary, authored more than a dozen books on Islam. In a book entitled A Moslem Seeker after God: Showing Islam at its Best in the Life and Teaching of al-Ghazali, Mystic and Theologian of the Eleventh Century, Zwemer writes: “There is a real sense in which al-Ghazali may be used as a schoolmaster to lead Moslems to Christ… By striving to understand al-Ghazali we may at least better fit ourselves to help those who,
like him, are earnest seekers after God amid the twilight shadows of Islam.”
This is the extent of sympathy which marks this strand of thinking which allows Muslims a possibility of redemption through conversion to Christianity, from other strands in Orientalism, still alive today in the writings of people like Bernard Lewis, which basically argue that Muslims are hopeless shall never be redeemed.  

The more reputable, and the first real expert on Islam in American academia was Duncan Macdonald (1863-1943), also a professor at the Hartford Theological Seminary. Macdonald’s works are widely quoted, and he is often hailed as a landmark in the sympathetic study of Islam, and the father of the field of Islamic studies in America. Throughout his writings, Macdonald was driven by a fairly transparent agenda of essentializing the difference between the oriental and the occidental minds. He often prefaced his pronouncements by saying “the Oriental” thinks or behaves or believes… In one such pronouncement he says:

> It is not really faith that is in question here, but knowledge; it is not the attitude to God, but the attitude to law. The essential difference in the oriental mind is not credulity as to the unseen things, but inability to construct a system as to seen things … The difference in the

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oriental is not essentially religiosity, but the lack of the sense of law. For him, there is no immovable order of nature.⁷

The issue for this “sympathetic” scholar of Islam was the inability of the Muslim (not Muslims) to comprehend based on observation, and thus the inability to discern, through rational means, a system of laws that governs the natural order or one that governs the social; in short, the inability of the Muslim mind to comprehend complexity. This idea has a long pedigree in Oriental studies, and was often explained in terms of the prevalence of atomism in Muslim theology. The idea was later developed by Hamilton Gibb, by far the most influential figure in Anglo-American Orientalism. As we will see below, Gibb took Macdonald’s axiom for granted and then proceeded to explain the reasons why Muslim societies behaved in accordance with Macdonald’s dictum.

The focus on Islamic borrowings from, and occasional similarities to the Jewish or Christian traditions was used by the early American experts on Islam to underscore the possibilities of conversion by capitalizing on these redeeming fragments of Christian truth in the Muslim tradition.⁸ Though this is a religious notion of conversion, it is strikingly similar to an earlier Enlightenment/Orientalist notion of converting Muslims to rationality, by unearthing the residues of rationality in the Muslim tradition. Again, a key

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⁸ The first journal in the U.S. for the study of the contemporary Muslim world was published by the Hartford Seminary in 1911. The title of the journal conveys the interest in modern developments in Islam in the interest of missionary activities therein: The Moslem World: A Quarterly Review of Current Events, Literature, and Thought Among Mohammedans, and the Progress of Christian Missions in Moslem Lands.
figure here is Goldziher. In his classic, *Introduction to Islamic theology and Law*, Goldziher maintains that

The most important stages in its [Islam’s] history were characterized by the assimilation of foreign influences. The dogmatic development of Islam took place under the sign of Hellenistic thought; in its legal system the influence of Roman law is unmistakable; the organization of the Islamic state… shows the adoption of Persian political ideas; Islamic mysticism made use of Neoplatonic and Hindu habits of thought. In each of these areas Islam demonstrates its ability to absorb and assimilate foreign elements so thoroughly that their foreign character can be detected only by the exact analysis of critical research… Thus It was with borrowed blocks that Muhammad built his eschatological message. He made use of Old Testament history (mostly in haggadic form), citing from it admonitory examples of the fate of ancient peoples who opposed and scoffed at the warners sent to them… The Christian elements of the Qur’an reached Muhammad mostly through the channel of apocryphal traditions and through heresies scattered in the eastern Church… If any part of Muhammad’s religious achievement may be called original, it is the part of his prophecy directed against the status quo.⁹

This line of argument has numerous examples in American Orientalism (and I would argue in contemporary studies of Islamism). A notable exception is

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Marshall Hodgson, himself a committed Christian, who criticizes scholars who bring their “pre-commitments” and value judgments to their scholarship and implicitly suggest that Islam is good to the extent that it carries within it traces of Christianity, but also that Islam remains a truncated version of the Christian truth, and that Muslims cannot grasp the whole or essential truth of Christianity.\(^\text{10}\)

In the early decades of the twentieth century, most programs of Oriental studies were focused on the study of the ancient Near East, and although they provided a broader disciplinary base for the field, they had less interest in Arabic and in Islam per se. In 1919, the Egyptologist Henry Breasted founded the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. The declared objective of Breasted was to transform the field from a philological discipline to a historical one.\(^\text{11}\) This and other programs of ancient Near Eastern studies had some influence on the study of Islam; however, the first program that was fully dedicated to the study of the Islamic Near East came out of a department of Biblical and Semitic Studies, and not one which focused on the ancient Near East. This program was established at Princeton University in 1927, and was headed by Philip Hitti (1886-1979), a Lebanese Christian historian from the American University of Beirut. At Princeton, Hitti was hired as an assistant professor of Semitics, and he built the first program of Arabic and Islamic studies, and


ran a series of programs sponsored by the Arabic-Islamic Committee of the
American Council of Learned Societies.

Of all experts on Islam in the twentieth century, the single most influential
scholar was Sir Hamilton Gibb (1895-1971), a Scottish historian born in
Egypt. Gibb studied Semitic languages at Edinburgh University; he taught at
SOAS then Oxford, and in 1955 he moved to Harvard. Already for some
years before moving to Harvard, Gibb was quite active in defining the
agenda for the field of Islamic Studies in the U.S. In the 1930s, Gibb and
Harold Bowen were commissioned by the London based Royal institute for
International Affairs to study the Western impact on the Middle East; after
some time they published two volumes of a projected series of books on the
nature of Islamic society.12 These two volumes provided the blue print for
the development of Middle Eastern Studies in the U.S. and for the Social
Science Research Council (SSRC) programs on the Middle East.13 In 1945,
Gibb presented a series of lectures at the University of Chicago which were
his a work as a response to the challenge posed by Macdonald, and
attempted to explain the reasons for the “lack of a sense of law” in Islam. In
this vein, Gibb charts out the history of the defeat of rational thought in early
Islam, and talks about the “obscurantism of Muslim theologians,” and “the
atomism of Muslim imagination”.

12 Hamilton Gibb and Harold Bowen, Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact
of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East, part 1, 1950, and part 2, 1957.

13 Mitchell’s essay provides a good account of the development of area studies in the U.S.
Gibb’s move to Harvard, where he directed the Center for Middle East Studies, reflects the increasing role of American academia in the field of Islamic studies. In turn, this increased interest in Middle Studies coincided with the growth of area studies in the U.S. Already during the second World War, and to a greater extent immediately after the war, American policy makers had identified the need for experts both for intelligence gathering and to work in the foreign service, at a time when the U.S. was expanding its global involvement and projecting its role as a superpower. A number of language programs were put together during the war years, and area studies programs were created thereafter to provide badly needed expertise in the languages and cultures of different regions including the Middle East. To meet this need, and also to take advantage of funding opportunities, initially provided by Foundations and later directly by the government, Universities rushed to create centers for area studies. These area studies centers were seen as a way through which universities served the nation.

In 1951, the SSRC created the Near and Middle East committee to develop social science research on the ME. At that time, five universities, including Columbia, Princeton, and Michigan, had already established centers for ME studies, and several more were established in following years. In 1955, an SSRC and ACLS joint committee on the Near and Middle East expanded its mandate to include the development of humanities research in addition to the social sciences. In 1955 Harvard invited Gibb to head its center, and in 1958 UCLA established a center headed by the Austrian Orientalist Gustave von Grunebaum (1909-1972) who was already teaching at the University of Chicago. The German scholar, Frantz Rosenthal, who had immigrated in the
1940s was hired by Yale in 1956, and another German Orientalist, Joseph Schacht (1902-1969), was hired by Columbia. In the 1960s other centers for ME studies were established at UPenn, SUNY, Indiana, Chicago, Utah, and Washington/Seattle. Further impetus to the development of area studies was gained in 1958 when the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed by congress. This law overcame the initial opposition by southern States to federal aid for fear that this aid would be used to enforce racial integration at schools. The law provided large scale government funding of higher education, and Title VI of this act provided funding for languages and area studies.

Area studies, then, gave the largest impetus to Middle East and Islamic studies in the U.S. The declared objective of the various area studies initiatives was to apply the methodologies of the social sciences to develop a better understanding of the various cultures and regions of the world; but when universities tried to find experts on the Middle East, none were to be found in the U.S., and even in Europe, which had a tradition of studying the Middle East and the Muslim world, no social science experts were to be found. As a result, the different area studies programs were headed by European Orientalists, all trained in philology and the languages of the Orient, and not in the disciplines of the social sciences.

Despite the pronounced desire to apply the methods of the social sciences, the newly established centers of Middle East Studies failed to fulfill this objective. Instead, these centers conflated the earlier American missionary tilt with traditional Orientalism. The contribution of the Orientalists to area studies, it was argued, is to explain events and historical developments in the
Middle East by reference to the fixed cultural traits of Islamic societies. Again, the central paradigm here, despite all talk about the social sciences, is that the Islamic world formed an unchanging cultural unity, and that historical changes can always be explained by reference to the fixed traits of this culture. Gibb and Bowen’s book summed up these essential cultural traits which, they argued, are responsible for the steady decline of Islamic societies. As a corollary of this thesis, Gibb and Bowen assumed that the encounter with West, and by extension colonialism, had positive effects on Muslim societies.

The social science research agenda was subverted by the great European Orientalists; Gibb pioneered the idea of wedding area studies and Orientalism and argued for the need to have Orientalists and social scientists work together, but the wedding he proposed was lopsided, and the interpretive paradigms for the study of Islam were none other than the essentialist paradigms long established and used in traditional Orientalism.14 To his credit, towards the end of his career, Gibb recognized some of the problems in the traditional Orientalist approach that treats Islam as an a-historical monolith. Yet just as Gibb was beginning to recognize this fundamental flaw in Orientalist paradigms, the banner of crude and ossified Anglo-American Orientalism was passed to Bernard Lewis who continues to exercise great influence in policy circles, although his intellectual influence in the academic field is minimal.

14 Lockman, 130
In 1967/8, with funding from the Ford Foundation, an initiative by the SSRC Near and Middle East Committee resulted in the establishment of MESA, the Middle East Studies Association, to serve as an organized forum for experts in the field. The committee was chaired by a Princeton sociologist, Morroe Berger, who served as the first president of MESA. Right about the same time, modernization theories were making a headway in area studies and international studies programs. Generally, modernization theorists asserted the waning of Islam as a potent social force in contemporary Middle Eastern society. In contrast to Orientalists constructs, modernization theorists allowed for the possibility of change in the Middle East. In fact, according to them, the march of history towards modernization was inevitable. However, despite seeming differences from the Orientalist essentializations of Islam, this was not change within Islamic culture, but from Islam to something else. In other words, the new generation of social scientists deployed the same old Orientalist idea of a static traditional Muslim society, an idea best expressed in the words of Lord Cromer (1841-1917), consul general and effective ruler of Egypt from 1883 to 1907, who says: “Islam cannot be reformed, that is to say, reformed Islam is Islam no more.”

Once again, Orientalist paradigms were reinforced, and the application of the methodologies of the social sciences did not replace the Orientalist approach, but produced instead a new Orientalism, now speaking with the authority of area studies and the social sciences. In fact, there were even calls to restore the sense of unity of approach which was lost in the division

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of labor among disciplines and fields. Quite explicitly, therefore, the drive to synthesize, to see the field of Islamic studies as a whole, underlies the study of Islam as it developed in various programs of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. Even when such programs were called Middle East studies programs, as opposed to Islamic studies programs, the essential character of Islam provided the primary prism through which the historical experiences of Muslims were viewed and analyzed.

To be sure, there were numerous critiques of Orientalism and modernization theories by new generations of scholars. However, despite repeated disclaimers by scholars who study Islam, the field of Islamic studies emerges largely in the attempt to identify the Islamic essence which would enable one to see the Middle East as a whole. Accordingly, if there is one dominant trait of Middle Eastern societies, a trait that is handy in explaining individual and collective actions over time and space, it is Islam, however defined. Through much of its development, the study of Islam in the U.S. was concerned with establishing the utter otherness of Islam, whether defined in political, religious, cultural or ethnic and racial terms.

The point I am trying to make here is that the serious critical efforts of a significant number of scholars has convincingly illustrated the epistemological weaknesses of Orientalism, but much as these critiques help to unseat some of the dominant Orientalist paradigms, in my view, they

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16 Both Mitchell and Lockman provide a overviews of these critical efforts, including the studies by the MERIP and the Middle Eastern Review groups. Of course, the most systematic critique of Orientalist epistemology is Edard Said’s *Orientalism.*
have yet to cause a paradigm shift in the field. To illustrate I will go over some of the themes addressed in the study of Islamic history in the classical period.

The main theme in most of the overarching accounts of Islamic history is decline. The inevitable decline of Muslim societies is usually explained by underscoring what is missing in Muslim societies, polities, and even mentalities. The point of reference against which these absences are measured is Europe, and what is taken to be the essential traits that supposedly contributed to its eventual ascendancy. So, for example, against the backdrop of the European values of freedom, rationality, and progress, Muslim societies are characterized by despotism, obscurantism, and oral depravity. At a slightly more complex level, a number of studies by almost all the major experts on Islam in American academia, attempt to outline what was missing in areas of Muslim life. Gibb, as we have seen, addressed the absence of reasons and a sense of law. In a series of studies on the “Islamic city,” Von Grunebaum, and many others argued that, in contrast to the European model, the Muslim city lacked a corporate body and hence was not capable of self governance. Rosenthal addressed the theme of absences in more than one area; in reference to literature and art, for example, he argued that, owing to their functional nature, and because they did not conform to the model of art for art’s sake, the literary and artistic productions of Muslim societies do not constitute real art or literature.  

17 There is a significant body of literature on the “Islamic city”. For a critique of the whole idea of an Islamic city see Janet Abu Lughod…

Schacht argued that Islamic law lacked rational foundations, that its numerous legal concepts are “broad and lacking in positive content,” and that these concepts did not derive “from the concrete realities of legal life but from abstract thought.”

The discussions of the science in general accounts of Islamic history are particularly telling. Given the massive amount of contributions in the various fields of science, many general historical accounts attempt to dismiss and explain away these contributions as isolated or even un-scientific. Meyerhof explains away the discovery of the lesser circulation of the blood by the thirteenth century physician Ibn al-Nafis by arguing that it is a happy guess which lacks the conceptual foundation that would make it science. For a long time, historians of Islamic astronomy argued that the reforms of the Ptolemaic planetary theory were motivated by philosophical considerations, and thus do not qualify as real scientific reforms.

Despite the epistemological criticisms leveled against these leading scholars in the field of Islamic studies, in almost all cases, the narratives which they have generated have yet to be replaced with alternative narratives; again, a paradigm shift has yet to occur. To be sure, the examples noted above belong to the genre of Oriental studies which does not respect disciplinary boundaries and focuses on culture; in other words, it could be argued that the


20 Max Meyerhof, *Studies in Medieval Arabic Medicine Theory and Practice*.

21 For example, Oscar Aboe, and Edward Kennedy.
Orientalist authors of these views were not real historians and that there studies are not proper historical works. But the historiography of the classical Islamic period has its equal share of problems. Some of the main themes addressed in this historiography include:

1. The problem of Muhammad: research in this area attempts to explain Muhammad’s successes, as well as the sudden and momentous Islamic expansions under his immediate successors, in terms of factors external to the Islamic movement itself. Diverse explanations are offered, but despite the differences, most tend to explain away Muslim agency or simply dismiss it altogether, with the exception of the occasional reference to Muslim “zeal” and the war-like character of the Bedouin Arabs.  

2. The sectarian milieu: one of the main tropes invoked frequently in historical writings about the classical period of Islam is the tribal and sectarian strife and the sectarian milieu of the formative period of Islam. In this regard, it is noteworthy that subcultures have attracted much more scholarly attention than the “mainstream” cultures of classical Muslim societies.

3. The reason / tradition dichotomy: this paradigm which informs all sorts of scholarship on Islam is mostly traced through intellectual developments in the high Abbasid period. Even in reference to the fourth and fifth Islamic

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22 As, for example, in Montgomery Watt’s notion of the new Islamic super-tribe. *Islamic Political Thought*. For an excellent account and critique of the historiography of early Islam see Fred Donner, *The Early Muslim Conquests*.

23 For example, Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: a Radical Sect in Islam*. 
centuries, the scholarly literature continues to talk about pockets of rationality, reflecting the residues of inherited foreign cultural influences, that come under increasing pressure from the mature Islamic theological tradition.

4. The disintegration of the central authority of the Abbasids, and the rise of the model of slave polity. This model, it is argued, results from the failure of Muslim societies to construct a viable Islamic model of governance. As a result, slaves filled the vacuum and took over control of the state, and constructed a political model that lasted through the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. This theme has a long pedigree in Orientalist literature; among others, Gibb suggests that the gap between the ethnically alienated rulers and the ruled masses is one of the essential structural problem in Muslim societies that contributed to its inevitable decline. Gibb also argues, together with many other experts on Islam, that Muslim societies lacked coherence and formed a mosaic, a random mix of tribes and sects and ethnic groups, which were held together only by their adherence to Islam, and by the coercive power of the state.

5. In the 1970s and 80s, the three main historians of medieval Muslim societies were all students of Gibb. These are Roy Mottahedeh, Ira Lapidus, and Richard Bulliet. All three did their primary research on medieval Islamic social and political order. Lapidus argues that the urban centers of Islam were populated by various vocational, ethnic or religious groups that were

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24 See Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses*. On the Mamluk period, see the many works of David Ayalon.
not connected horizontally to each other, but through vertical links to the alien/slave rulers of these cities. In other words, the fragmented society was held together not by organic links between its constitutive social groups, but artificially through the coercive force of the state. Mottahedeh examines a different dynastic order but arrives at similar results; he argues that the primary role of dynasties was to inspire awe and fear amongst subjects in order to hold society together; left to its means, Mottahedeh argued, society would implode. Once again, the focus here is on the failure of society to cohere and provide an Islamic model of self governance.

Both Lapidus and Mottahedeh set out to provide correctives to Gibb’s paradigms, but ended up adopting his primary thesis which asserts the lack of organic social bonds amongst the various sectors of society. The only real departure from this paradigm is provided by Richard Bulliet in his *Patricians of Nishapur*. In contrast to the first two approaches, Bulliet demonstrates the dialectical relationship between the social and the political order, the long duration of urban models of self-governance, and delineates the standards that governed the relationship between external dynastic states and local social orders.

As in the case of Goldziher’s critique of Renan, many modern critiques of Orientlist historiography operate within its very interpretive framework. Yet even in the case of radical critiques of Orientalism, some questions remain

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25 Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*.

26 Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Muslim Society*.
unresolved. To start with, the problem in the Orientalist distinction between the Islamic world and the West is that it is based on essentialist notions of civilization or culture which stand outside history. This does not undermine all notions of distinction, especially if these were based on comparing and contrasting singular historical processes and the histories of specific states, empires or societies. Hodgson tried to salvage a notion of civilizational distinction which is dynamic and rooted in historical experience, but his work, despite it numerous insights, is largely outdated.

A related question is whether Islam is a viable unit of historical study. Most radical critics of Orientalism assume that it is not, although many of these critics often invoke Orientalist ideas when dealing with the past. Perhaps one of the weaknesses in the critique of Orientalism is the failure of this critique to provide alternative knowledge about the classical period of Islamic history, a knowledge that does not essentialize, but is germane for understanding the present. The insight of Jacob Neusner in connection to another field of study may shed light on one of the dilemmas of the field of Islamic studies. In relating to a religious textual tradition, Neusner notes that philology is needed for understanding the words of a religious text, and history is needed to understand the contexts of this text. However, Neusner adds, philology and history do not exhaust the understanding of a religious text or, one may add, a religious tradition. In addition to words and contexts, a religious text is “a statement of religion.”  

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