POLITICS OF SCRIPTURE:
DISCUSSIONS OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE QUR'ĀN

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My thesis analyzes the political nature of contemporary Qur'ān scholarship. Based on both Western and Arab treatments of the Qur'ān I demonstrate that scriptural discussions are used to negotiate societal and political concerns. In particular, I examine how the historical-critical approach to the Qur'ān—developed and canonized in a Western academic context—is debated by Muslim thinkers, principally in Lebanon. I argue that the methodological discussions about the Qur'ān disclose strong convictions about society and religion. To work out the politics of scripture is meant to prepare the groundwork for a research dialogue—a rapprochement—between western and Islamic qur'ānic studies.

Proponents of historical-critical method often consider it universally applicable—as a remedy for the partialities of tradition and a vehicle of “progress.” They interpret any opposition in binary categories: modern-premodern, outsider-insider, or objective-subjective. Regarding the Qur'ān as a political object, however, sheds new light on these discussions. In order to understand the sometimes strong reactions to historicizing the Qur'ān my thesis examines how modernity, history and the “progress” and reform of Muslim societies are linked by its proponents. Taking critique of historicizing hermeneutics seriously challenges particular structures of authoritative
knowledge on which the construction and professionalization of the western hermeneutical tradition rest.

I demonstrate that to read the Qurʾān as literature or as a historical document does not merely hinge on method or the ontological status of the Qurʾān, but equally on conceptions of human nature. Dissonances concerning epistemology and human ontology lead to different views of the Qurʾān as well as to differing sensibilities vis-à-vis historical critique. Contemporary Qurʾān hermeneutics have political dimensions; not only because they refer to a text that is authoritative for a religious community, but also because they convey visions as to how one imagines the polis, and what makes humans truly human. Qurʾānic hermeneutics convey different visions of society and negotiate how religious subjectivities are conceptualized. The struggle for different hermeneutics can also be understood as a conflict over the monopoly of interpretation and redraw the lines of what is considered legitimate interpretation in both western and Islamic Qurʾānic studies.
Writing this dissertation has been an exciting and humbling journey. Its completion (however incomplete it still is) would not have been possible without the help and support of many people, to whom neither this acknowledgement nor the thesis can possibly do justice. Acknowledging their help, support, and influence is meant to highlight their strengths and entails recognizing my own imperfections.

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Writing on Qur'ān hermeneutics in Lebanon at a time when ISIS crossed the border from Syria, and when the whole region seemed to slide into chaos, the feeling of being concerned with a meaningless endeavor imposed itself forcefully, as per Bertolt Brecht, “What times are these, in which a conversation about trees is almost a crime because it entails our silence about so many wrongdoings?” The Lebanese authors examined in this thesis defied such cynicism and demonstrate that intellectually challenging and rigorous work can be produced despite (or maybe
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times obscure academic thoughts. I will always remain grateful. Raised by a father who was a stern adherent of the historical-critical approach to scripture, for a long time, this seemed to me the only fair and proper way to approach any “sacred book,” whether the Bible, the Qurʾān, or other writings claimed to be scripture, a view that only reluctantly changed – in American academia of all places. I sometimes wonder what my father would have said about my project. He would have probably smiled, but only after a lengthy discussion.

Thank you,
Rahel Fischbach
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Introduction

What's all The Fuss About this Naṣṣ?

In 2004, a newly published Arabic translation of Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorān* (*History of the Qur'ān*) was released at the Beirut Book Fair.¹ The work, published originally in 1860, investigates the chronology of the Qur'ān by elaborating on the original Islamic classification of Meccan and Medinan sūras with the help of structural and formal criteria.² The translation into Arabic (*Tārīkh al-Qur'ān*), undertaken by Georges Tamer, was presented within the framework of a well attended panel discussion organized by the German Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation (KAS).³ The diverse audience included Moroccan, Saudi, Sunni, Druze, and Shi'ite scholars and elicited an engaged debate. The publishers ran out of publications before the Book Fair had even ended. Apparently, Nöldeke's work met with great interest.⁴

Shortly after the translation had been presented at the Book Fair, on January 11, 2005, the head of the Office for Affairs of Censorship and Information in the Department of the Lebanese General Security (*al-Amn al-‘Āmm*) received an official letter from the Dār al-Fatwā that urged them to ban the book and to take the necessary legal steps to enforce its censorship. In his letter to the General Security, Director for Religious Affairs, Amīn al-Kurdi, gave as main reason for the censorship that the book could lead to sectarian strife. He also criticized the book as defaming the Qur'ān, the Prophet, and the wives of the Prophet. Grand-*muftī* al-Qabbānī issued a *fatwā* (legal ruling) in which he condemned the book. The *Amn al-‘Āmm* investigated the matter and obtained information about the translator, a German and Lebanese citizen and professor of

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3. The KAS is close to the CDU (Christian Democratic Party), one of the biggest parties in Germany.
Islamic Studies. Consequently, the book was banned from all book stores and the German embassy was rebuked for helping in its distribution. The KAS stopped their original project to circulate the work in other Arab countries and was hesitant to give out the publishing rights, presumably fearing political consequences. Meanwhile, the book took on a life of its own, especially on the black market. After the work was officially banned in Lebanon, several publishing houses yet publicized it in and out of the country as well as on the internet. Due to its translation into Arabic, Nöldeke’s work has become widely read among Arab Muslim intellectuals, evoking both negative and positive responses.

The question arises: how and why could a book published originally in 1860 cause such stir – in short, what's all the fuss about this *naṣṣ* (text)? And why would Georges Tamer spend one year of his life translating a book that by now seems outdated? The fate of the Arabic Nöldeke translation is indicative of a greater unease and sensitivity when it comes to the Qur'an, and especially to its relation with history. The title itself, *History of the Qur'an*, posed a problem for some of its critics since they denied that the Qur'an had a history. Beyond reservations about Nöldeke’s allegedly political explosiveness, the Grand-*muftī* objected to Tamer's Christian background that had made the *Tārīkh al-Qur'an* scandalous. However, other books published

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6 The second edition was published in 2007 by al-Jamāl [Beirut, Köln], corrected with a new preface; thereafter editions were also published by “Antoine” in Beirut and “Ibn Sinā” in Paris.
9 See letter in Appendix, document I. Rahel Fischbach, Interview with ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf Sinno December 5, 2012.
within the past few decades by Muslim scholars on similar questions have been censored too. We will come back to the Nöldeke translation in a later chapter. For now, let us surmise that the incident points to a politicization of the Qurʾān that assumes centrality in discussions over modernity, progress, and reform.

Tamer had intended to prompt a dialogue over approaches to the Qurʾān in Lebanon. He is not alone in suggesting such a dialogue or, in Andrew Rippin's words, a viable “research partnership” between western academic and Islamic Qurʾānic studies. Angelika Neuwirth has most emphatically called for a unification of the perceptions of the Qurʾān in “East and West” and for a “cooperation of the different knowledge traditions.” She notes that Qurʾānic studies are carried out in European universities in almost complete isolation from those in the Islamic world and vice versa. They follow different hermeneutical principles, which leads to differing views as to what the Qurʾān means. Neuwirth calls this disconnect between “two eminent research traditions” a “scandal” since it closes possibly fruitful avenues to knowledge production.

The appeal for such a research partnership seems imperative in a time when the field of western Qurʾānic studies has seen a resurgence and perhaps unprecedented flourishing, and when demands are increasingly being made on Muslims to historicize the Qurʾān. The reception of western historical-critical studies of the Qurʾān by non-academic Muslims is an important aspect of such an envisioned research partnership. Yet, as several scholars have noted, and as the Nöldeke episode in Lebanon affirms, “Contemporary Muslims who wish to initiate a scholarly

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discussion about the introduction of applying western hermeneutics to the Qur'ānic text do not have it easy.” Not only are many books that represent historicizing approaches to the Qur'ān banned and their authors either rejected or condemned, one also encounters a silence when it comes to the history of the Qur'ān. Not many scholars in the Muslim world apply historical-critical or literary methods in the western sense to the Qur'ān. The question why this is not the case requires more than a pet answer.

The resistance to historicizing approaches is often seen as the stubborn clinging to a pre-modern (read “religious”) view of scripture. This view is not only problematic but should be understood as a myth western academia and the media tell themselves in order to legitimize their own scholarly practice and a worldview that ascribes to a disenchanted epistemology. “Modern” in that context excludes other ways of being in the world, predicated not on history but on other forms of making sense of the past. I argue that the political nature of Qur'ānic studies is crucial in order to understand debates over the history of the Qur'ān among Muslims. The Qur'ān has become what I will subsequently call a politicum – a politically contested space.13

That the Qur'ān has been instrumentalized by Islamic political movements and regimes has long been recognized. That the Qur'ān has been politicized in a more subtle form within the framework of western scholarly debates on the “correct” application of hermeneutics is often overlooked. Moreover, the call for reform by means of historicizing the Qur'ān has been adopted by various politicians, lobbyists, and intellectuals and has even gained momentum in international politics. To understand the resistance historical-critical approaches to the Qur'ān face among Muslim scholars, one must understand this broader context of politicizing the Qur'ān,

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12 The quote derives from Wielandt, “Wurzeln,” 257. Others who have similarly indicated such difficulties are
13 I recall that Neuwirth also uses the term politicum, if I am not mistaken.
that is, the politics of scripture. Examining the political nature of contemporary hermeneutical, methodological, and historical discussions about the Qurʾān helps to understand the nuances of the arguments brought forth by proponents and critics of historical-critical approaches to the Qurʾān and is the aim of this thesis.

In particular, I inquire how historicizing approaches to the Qurʾān are perceived, discussed, and contested in an Arab milieu, with a special focus on Lebanon, although the discussion transcends national boundaries. Scrutinizing both western academic and Arab-Muslim treatment of the Qurʾān demonstrates that scriptural discussions are used to negotiate far-reaching societal concerns, both ethical and political. To work out the politics of Qurʾān hermeneutics is not a self-serving exercise; rather, I believe, it is the key for answering to the desideratum raised by Rippin, Tamer, and Neuwirth, that is, the prospect of a research partnership between Euro-American and Islamic Qurʾānic studies (ʿulūm al-qurʾān).

The field has long worked under the pretense of being a neutral and disinterested scholarly undertaking that concerns the historically curious but not necessarily the Muslim faithful. For Rippin, Euro-American scholarship of the Qurʾān approaches religion (and its core texts) from the perspective of history – in Bruce Lincoln's words, “a discourse that speaks of things temporal and terrestrial in a human and fallible voice, while staking its claim to authority on rigorous critical practice.”\(^\text{14}\) To some, a cooperation or even only a conversation between inner-Muslim and historical-critical scholarship of the Qurʾān is inconceivable since they move within diametrically opposed frameworks of reasoning, assumption, and worldview.\(^\text{15}\) In addition, in the past decades, mutual distrust between these knowledge traditions has grown, partly by


reason of the polemical style and intent of some academic endeavors.

In that context, Rippin underlines the difference between polemics and “true scholarship.” The former seeks to undermine Islamic core truths, sometimes by means of historical-critical scholarship, while the latter (“true scholarship”) refrains from such truth claims. In Rippin's view, many Muslim apologetic responses to western scholarship occur because they mistake polemics for historical research of the Qur'ān. In other words, those Muslims fail to differentiate between “the underlying ethos and approach of balanced academic works” proper and polemics that have, unfortunately, also been pursued “in the guise of scholarship.”16 Working out the politics of scripture, on the other hand, elucidates that the line between scholarship and politics is often blurry. To enter into an earnest research partnership requires a self-critical examination of Euro-American Qur'ān scholarship in order to understand the objections against it.

Politics of scripture refers to the assumption that Qur'ān scholarship, and generally any public treatment of the Qur'ān, in the contemporary context is political. The immediate relation between the new interest in and research of the Qur'ān and current political events is apparent. It will become equally apparent that the application of the historical-critical method to the Qur’ān is not neutral. The historical-critical approach arose in the West to tackle questions mainly posed by the study of the Bible. In the nineteenth century, historical-critical methods also became the predominant approach in western qur'ānic studies. Historical-critical scholarship has always been about the quest for “historical facts with or without religious variables,”17 and was closely linked to the secularization (and Enlightenment) project in Europe.18 The new centrality of “history” changed western understandings of scripture and religion(s) forever and played a pivotal role in

16 Rippin, “Reception,” 3.
18 Wilfred Cantwell Smith has made this argument in What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 12-15, 84.
refiguring “the West” and other “cultures” and “civilizations.” More than that, debates over historicizing approaches to scripture(s), I argue, are intrinsically linked to the concept of a secular modernity. Understanding this link in depth helps us view the debates about hermeneutical discussions about the Qurʾān in a new light. The choice of a particular approach to the Qurʾān is linked to certain visions of society and religion. Both proponents and contesters of the historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān employ political rationalities in their hermeneutical discussions.

The trajectory of Qurʾān scholarship is undoubtedly different in the West than in the Muslim world. Meanwhile, both intellectual traditions have equally established their own rules of operation, functioning, and producing knowledge, even though the legacy of traditional Islamic studies is much older. Yet in western Qurʾānic studies the scholar is also bound to a certain operation and vocabulary of the field, since referring to and relying on authorities in the field is a marker of the disciplines in modern universities. The underlying question in my thesis is whether a rapprochement between these knowledge traditions is possible; is it feasible? If so, under which conditions, and is it even desirable? Obviously, I do not claim to provide the final answers to these questions. Rather, my thesis sets out to merely lay some of the groundwork for working out the promises and pitfalls of such an envisioned rapprochement.

The purpose of the current thesis is threefold: first, to consider the theoretical implications of reading “the Qurʾān as literary or historical text,” a task often tied to subjecting the Qurʾān to forms of literary or historical critique. I contend that western Qurʾān scholarship has to become aware of its own legacy in order to produce academically responsible scholarship. The second purpose is to acquaint the reader with current debates over Qurʾān interpretations in Lebanon, hitherto unexplored in western academia. Examining the debate in Lebanon clarifies the reasons for the dissonance between proponents and contesters of historical-critical approaches to the
Qur‘ān. Third, working out the politics of scripture helps to understand the connection between epistemology and particular visions of society and religion.

It is worth pausing for a moment to remember that from the earliest times of Islam on, Muslim commentators, in their quest for the meaning of the Qur‘ān, used methods that point to the attempt to recover the historical and cultural situation in which the text emerged, such as ‘ilm al-qirā‘āt (science of variant readings, as a parallel to text criticism), asbāb al-nuzūl (occasions of revelation, proposals for the Sitz im Leben of each verse), nāsikh wa mansūkhuhu (abrogation – a recognition of historical development in the Qur‘ān’s thought) and appealing to “pre-Islamic poetry” in order to understand the meaning of particular words and usages.

While all these aforementioned disciplines are already part of the Muslim tradition, most scholars do not make the connection between the methods used in historical critique and tafsīr (exegesis). Those who make the connection usually do so in order to argue in favor of applying historical critique to the Qur‘ān.19 To account for the omission or instrumentalization of this question helps to tease out the specifics of historical-critical approaches. I will, on the one hand, draw on people who reject the historical-critical approach or view it critically. On the other, I will also present scholars who use western methods to approach the Qur‘ān in order to discern why and under which circumstances some Muslim intellectuals find them useful and even necessary, while others regard them as despicable. Teasing out the link between certain epistemologies and political assumptions elucidates the inherently political nature of Qur‘ān scholarship.

Politics of Scripture

Since politics of scripture is the core topic of this thesis, let us delineate its definition and implications. The term refers to the supposition that anyone who approaches, interprets or analyzes the Qur'an in modern times, in any public form, participates in a political debate; in fact, undertakes a political act. This statement may seem radical to some given that many scholars in the field of Qur'anic and Islamic studies still work on the basis of the conviction of pursuing a merely objective and neutral project. Politics of scripture challenges this ethos of neutrality. The political nature of Qur'anic interpretation was already emphatically stated in the 1990s by Ḥassan Ḥanafī, who argued that any interpretation of the Qur'an in the contemporary context is political. He referred mainly to Muslim interpreters who were concerned with societal reform. In contrast to traditional Muslim exegetical endeavors, Ḥanafī argued, “The purpose of modern reformers is not only to understand meaning but also to change reality.”

One may plead that “changing reality” by means of Qur'anic studies is a Muslim undertaking, while western Qur'anic studies developed within an academic setting that at least strove for a value-free analysis, detached from politics. Yet, according to most modern and postmodern hermeneutical theories, Ḥanafī is right to insist, “There is no interpreter without a commitment to something. The absence of commitment is the commitment to do nothing.” In fact, many so-called pragmatist philosophers, such as Jeffrey Stout, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Fish, subscribe to the belief that people use texts for their own purposes rather than finding a kind of meaning in them (since they hold that texts do not have any meaning in themselves). For them, methods of interpretation are “ways of dignifying and developing [one's] interests.”

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21 Ḥanafī, “Method,” 204.
22 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in the Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary*
One does not have to agree with the convictions of the pragmatists. Ḥanafī’s contention that “theory is [...] an epistemological cover-up,” and that “each interpretation expresses the socio-political commitment of the interpreter” may be challenged on empirical grounds. But one should acknowledge the potential for different interpretations and conceptualizations of texts and take seriously the situatedness of the interpreter. Indeed, various scholars have alluded to the political implications of the debates over Qur’ānic interpretation and its link to current societal debates. Yet, the politics of scripture expressed in hermeneutical, methodological, and historical discussions about the Qurʾān have not been thoroughly examined, a task to which my thesis seeks to contribute on the basis of specific case studies.

Politics may immediately evoke the image of politicians, campaigns, government, and diplomacy. This is not, however, how I will mainly use the term. Etymologically, the term politics derives from the Greek term politikos, meaning “of, for, or relating to citizens.” In its most general definition, politics is the practice and theory of influencing other people on a civic or individual level. In short, it is the practice of persuasion undertaken with the help of rhetoric. True, the political includes “politics per se.” However, as James DiCenso contends, the political “extends further to designate cultural systems of meaning by which societies and communities orient themselves in establishing their overall priorities and values.”

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Knowledge (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 103. In Mark C. Taylor’s view, any act of interpretation is a process of abusing and victimizing the text. See Taylor, “Text as Victim,” in Deconstruction and Theology, ed. Thomas Alziet et. al. (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 65. In Stanley Fish’s view, interpretations do not conform to the text, rather the text comes to cohere with the interpretation. See Fish, Is there a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 16-17.


not simply rest on a government or particular organization of society but entail non-governmental cultural forces that shape a given population. As Timothy Mitchell claims, modern politics aim at individuals and “came to embrace the practices of ‘political policy’ – the policing and inspection […] of the body, mind, and character of the individual subject.”

Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, human rights, equality before the law, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, social justice, capitalism, popular sovereignty, scientific rationality, etc. are all predicated on a particular view of the individual, that is, on a “universal and secular vision of the human.” Consequently, any social practice that has the ability to produce and to remedy individual character and subjectivity is political, too. How one defines religion and the authority of scripture – in our case the Qur’ān – “shapes people's identities, ethical values, and priorities and informs how they understand their world and their relations to one another.” In other words, qur’ānic studies convey particular visions of society, the individual, and ethics – all of which shape politics.

It is a truism that no interpretation takes place in a vacuum. The question of how one approaches the Qur’ān is shaped in each scholar’s mind by her worldview and by what Talal Asad calls the scholar’s “narrative relation to Islam.” Following Hans-Georg Gadamer's elaborations on hermeneutics, one could say, how one analyzes, assesses and evaluates, even feels about the tradition constitutes one’s pre-understanding (Vorverständnis) which will inevitably frame one’s approach to and grasping of the subject matter. The reader approaches the text from a cultural-historical standpoint, or a “horizon.” Any author confronting the vast body of

27 DiCenso, Kant, 5.
material linked to “Islam” must necessarily come up with various kinds of textual and narrative procedures to allow herself to sort out the material.29 This gathering is an act of authorial self-positioning by which a scholar indicates the discourse in which she situates herself; that is to say, the approach and rhetoric she chooses, the underlying structure to organize the material, the patterns she finds therein, the scholarly vocabulary she selects to develop her questions and analysis, and the texts she references. Yet, to call this simply “hermeneutics of scripture” misses the political dimension that any interpretation of scripture entails. To put this plainly, “political acts” do things and have implications whether or not they are meant to have a political effect. The intention in that case does not matter.

The concepts of religion and scripture are neither neutral nor merely descriptive. Contrary to a widely held opinion that religion is essentially apolitical and private, its use as an analytical category in public and academic discourse has de facto been highly political.30 The same, I argue, is true for the interpretation of scripture. One could argue that Qur'ān hermeneutics have always been political and were used to achieve political ends. An example for such an assumption is Vanessa De Gifis' recent work that examines how the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn strengthened his Caliphate by means of certain forms of referencing the Qur'ān and interpreting it in his favor.31

However, post-Enlightenment epistemologies (empiricism, historicism, and positivism) that evacuate the transcendent from “sacred texts” add a new political dimension to the debate, which makes Qur'ān hermeneutics more complex. The interpreter has to face both these new

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epistemologies and a conceptualization of religion that, inherited from the Christian West, is always thought of together with its “Siamese twin” secularism.\textsuperscript{32} Because religion has come to be seen as a particular realm of human life, as opposed to the so-called secular spheres, any discussion about religion's place in society necessarily also addresses this allegedly other human sphere called the secular.

Tomoko Masuzawa contends that the mutation of the concept of religion is embedded in a range of social and political practices that are part of a wider field of power and knowledge. The formation of religion cohered with shifting power relations within and among states and redefined the moral subject – a process usually referred to as secularization that produced the separate concepts of politics, religion, and economics. In construing the West, the discourse on religion has been crucial ever since.\textsuperscript{33} Shifts in how scripture was being interpreted and understood ontologically, categorically, and epistemologically have played a pivotal role in these reconfigurations.\textsuperscript{34}

Politics is, here, then understood not simply in the sense that the interpreter wants to reach a specific political goal through her interpretation. I refrain from assigning motives or intentions to any author examined in this work, unless clearly articulated by those authors. Discerning such intentions or motives is notoriously difficult, and I am insufficiently equipped to provide a “theory of motivation.”\textsuperscript{35} However, we are dealing with authors, and their historical, personal, and social circumstances and experiences are often reflected in their work, sometimes decidedly

\textsuperscript{32} Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith’s The Meaning and End of Religion,” \textit{History of Religions} 40.3 (2001): 221.

\textsuperscript{33} Masuzawa, \textit{Invention}, 16.

\textsuperscript{34} For the changes of mentality and discourse that were necessary to speak anew of scripture, see Talal Asad, \textit{Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Scott W. Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, \textit{Politicing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture, 1300-1700} (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2013).

\textsuperscript{35} See, for example, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, \textit{Intention} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).
so. Moreover, one can examine what politics a text conveys without conflating the text with the person of the author. Scriptural interpretations are explicitly or implicitly political in that they constitute a voice in a broader discourse, and, more importantly, in that they influence or even dominate that discourse.

As we will see, whether in western Qur'an scholarship or Qur'anic studies undertaken by Muslims since the late nineteenth century onward, the question of the reform of Muslim societies became intertwined with the reform of Qur'an hermeneutics. The application of historical critique to the Qur'an has become a demand of those who opt for a secular reform of Muslim societies and “Islam” more generally.36 The questions of (a proper or improper) historical consciousness that are fought on the back of debates over Qur'an hermeneutics induce reflection to grander questions of life worlds; or, in other words, they express and negotiate alternative ways of being in the world and of organizing social and political life. The normative assumptions of historical-critical Qur'an scholarship are reformist and activist, not indifferent. Once the politics of Qur'an scholarship are recognized, one can perceive the obstacles and opportunities for novel interpretations of the Qur'an in a new light.

Politics of scripture manifest themselves differently in the various texts. Either the texts themselves refer directly to politics or a political situation (e.g., religious pluralism), or they negotiate implicitly societal issues that touch upon politics. Claiming the Qur'an as scripture or as “text” in and of itself has a political bearing because through such signification one ascribes to it

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social and communal functions. Attributing significance to a specific scripture also means to a certain extent exerting control over it, or at least trying to control it. The following levels of politics of scripture can be distinguished: first, a work can be explicitly political, in that it addresses politics or claims to have a political agenda. Second, works can convey political meaning, for example, by strengthening claims of an Islamic orthodoxy or heterodoxy or by reconfiguring entire religious sensibilities. Third, a work can be politicized by others, outside of academia, when certain theories or information are used for political reasons. This last point can include the utilization of academic work for education, state or military purposes, or the media.

Oftentimes, the label political is used to dismiss a work, especially when it is written in a field that is seen as non-political. For the approach of this work, it is important to note that I do not consider “political” a negative attribute; I consider it simply a fact that will be demonstrated in this thesis. At the same time, while I hold that the politics of Qurʾān scholarship are inevitable, it is necessary to elucidate how those politics function within the academy and beyond to be able to reflect critically on them and eventually undo some methodological and epistemological myths (or beliefs) operative in western Qurʾānic studies.

Reading the Qurʾān as Text

To give a brief example of the inevitable political nature of Qurʾān scholarship, let us consider a claim increasingly raised in contemporary discussions over Qurʾān hermeneutics that is also central to this thesis, namely the demand to read “the Qurʾān as text,” the title of a well-

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37 Jeffrey Guhin and Jonathan Wytzten demonstrate how “accurate” knowledge, even knowledge that aims at a non-essentialist approach, can help colonial structures and apparatuses to function. They in particular show how academic work, “however free of the essentialist and epistemic violences [...] , still retains a potential to feed into these diachronic processes or to synchronically inform decisions regarding the exercise and extension of imperial power.” See Guhin and Wytzten, “The Violence of Knowledge: Edward Said, Sociology, and Post-Orientalist Reflexivity,” Postcolonial Sociology: Political Power and Social Theory 24 (2013): 247.

received anthology edited by Stefan Wild. Only rarely do we find explanations of what exactly is meant and implied by viewing the Qur'ān as text. What is the use of seeing the Qur'ān as text? And what would be the text of the Qur'ān? Its linguistic structure, its material constitution, a kind of meta-text that refers to its overall meaning? Is the Qur'ān coextensive with its linguistic structure or does its meaning and constitution go beyond this? And why does this matter? The title question in regard to the Nöldeke translation episode *what's all the fuss about this nāṣṣ?* is much more complex than one may first think and throws us into the heart of this thesis – the politics of scripture. Before delving into the first part of the question – the explanation of the “fuss” which will occupy us in the following chapters – it is worthwhile to reflect on the second part: the nāṣṣ or text. My claim here is that to view the Qur'ān as text is itself a political move.

For once the term reflects both the ambiguity and polysemy of the concept of *nāṣṣ* in an Arabic-Islamic, as well as that of *text* in a western context. *Nāṣṣ* carries several meanings: text, wording, literal text, version, lectionary (of a text), passage, citation, quotation (esp. from the Qur'ān), formulation (of a text), diction, style, definition (of a concept or meaning), stipulation, or provision.39 *Text* in English (and other European) parlance is similarly multivalent. Originally, “text” comes from the Latin *texere* (to weave). The noun *textum* can refer to “a web” and, when applied to a literary composition, to “tissue, texture, style” and “a woven fabric.”40 Especially since postmodernity, text has become a contested yet “fashionable” term.41 Most people would associate text with its bibliographical sense: a written book, pamphlet or article, some kind of

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41 Ibid., 156. Jerome J. McGann, “The Text, the Poem, and the Problem of Historical Method,” *New Literary History* 12.2 (1981): 274. Barthes and McGann have very different views as to what a text is, how it functions and how it should be analyzed. McGann criticizes Barthes’ semiological approach for elevating the text to a level where it transcends its concrete and actual textuality. See McGann, “‘Text,’” 274, 277, 286, footnote 3.
material written composition, a literary work that has been deliberately edited, shaped, and arranged. Paul Ricoeur defines text as “a discourse fixed by writing.” Yet, text has come to refer not only to written works but to anything one can interpret, such as a map, a picture, painting, music, an oral poem or speech, and even a body.

Roland Barthes’ idea of “Text” – “a methodological field,” transported and “held in language” – transcends the material texts to which it refers and becomes an almost timeless object, detached from history. In contrast, Jerome McGann uses “text” as a purely physical frame of reference. For him, text entails the actual embodiment of a poem (or other literary work), and the process of how and for which purpose it becomes materialized (on paper, pamphlet, book, etc. widely or narrowly distributed). The process of how a literary work becomes text is important for understanding the text itself. True, the text has a literary structure, but the same literary structure can be embodied in various texts for different purposes and with a different effect. We see here quite distinct notions of text. How one defines text hinges on how one interprets it and vice versa.

If text refers to the material embodiment of the Qur’an, then there is more than one qur’anic text; they differ from each other in regard to variations in the counting of the suras, the numeration of aayas (verses), or the vocalization that at times changes the grammar and semiotic import, at times only the pronunciation or intonation of words and sentences. Even when two

43 Barthes, Image, 156-157. Barthes further states: “the [work] is displayed, the [text] demonstrated; likewise, the work can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses), the text is a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of discourse […] it is the work that is the imaginary tail of the text.” Here I mean Text with a capital “T” as “transcending the events and materials describable in their materialities. In this usage we are dealing with ‘texts’ which transcend their concrete and actual textualities [that] point to a meta-work.” See McGann, “Text,” 274. See also Barthes, Image, 155-164.
44 McGann, “Text,” 274.
qu’ānic editions are linguistically identical, this does not entail that their “texts” are the same. One reads an ornamental huge copy of the Qur’ān sitting in a mosque and used mainly for pious reading circles or ritual recitation in a different way than a pocket Qur’ān one has in one's glove box in the car. These are different textual constitutions. As material text, the Qur’ān becomes a social product with various and changing social functions to perform.

It can be a source of law; a constitution for a utopian Islamic state; an inspiration and legitimizing authority for a feminist theology as well as for a patriarchal society; it can be a healing device, a helper in decision making, or an amulet hanging down from one's driving mirror in a car. The Qur’ān can also be embodied in the voice of a reciter that today comes to the listener on the radio, tape, MP3, or CD. These are different physical “texts” of the Qur’ān, even if they include ideally the same Text. They have different religious, political, and social functions whose differences indicate varying productive processes. If the Text of the Qur’ān refers to its overall meaning or intention (its meta-text), one would assume that there is only one such Text.

The problem with “text” is that it has become so vulgarized, being employed so widely and indeterminately, that it seems to have lost its heuristic value in the end since it may well refer to anything. But there is yet another problem. The contemporary usage of “text” suggests that it conveys a neutral meaning that helps us refrain from regarding the text as “literary,” “poetic,” religious, or indeed as “scripture” or “revelation.” Although text pretends to be a more objective concept than, say, “scripture,” it is never neutral because, as McGann states with regard to a work of art, text is “not determined sui generis but is, rather, the result of a process involving the actions and interactions of a specific and socially integrated group of people.”

45 One may most think of Ḥasan al-Bannā's motto: “The Qur’ān is our constitution, the Prophet is our leader.” Quoted in Gudrun Krämer, Hasan al-Banna (New York: One World Publication: 2010), 112-113.
46 McGann, “Text,” 274.
We see an example of a social and political act on the body of text of the Qurʾān in the decision of a committee of Azhar scholars, who in 1924 agreed on a print version of the Qurʾān that has come to be the most widely used edition today.\textsuperscript{47} The Cairo edition followed the specific reading (qirāʿa) of the Qurʾān, usually referred to as Ḥafs ʿĀṣim.\textsuperscript{48} Qirāʿāt are variant readings of the Qurʾān attributed to a number of early scholars that can differ in vocalization, grammar, and sometimes, in exceptional cases, in words or whole sūras.\textsuperscript{49} Obviously, we only know the Qurʾān through the qirāʿāt. The Cairo edition was closely modeled on the orthographic form of the original ʿUthmānic codex in regard to its consonantal text. In the decades before this publication, lithographs of the Qurʾān that followed the version of Ḥafs ʿan ʿĀṣim had gradually been conformed to non-religious literature.\textsuperscript{50} The publication of the standard version of the Azhar was meant to counter this development.

Interestingly, highlighting the importance of orality in Islamic cultural production of knowledge, the scholars who were responsible for the Cairo edition relied mostly on their knowledge of the most venerable qirāʿāt, not on early Qurʾān manuscripts.\textsuperscript{51} The mass production of this edition ensured that it became the most widespread version of the Qurʾān. This example demonstrates how a “text” is being produced by social actors (the committee of al-Azhar), how

\textsuperscript{47} Dates for the production of the Cairo edition range from 1919 to 1926. See William Graham, \textit{Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 211. The Cairo edition was not the first attempt at a standard print version of the Qurʾān. The first printed version had been commissioned by Muḥammad ʿAlī in Egypt in 1833. Religious scholars challenged this print version because they held that the Word of God should not be put into printing that followed mechanical processes.


\textsuperscript{49} Claude Gilliot notes, for example, that the codex of Ibn Masʿūd differed from that of ʿUthmān in that it did not include the first sūra, besides other “synonymous variants.” The codex of Ubayy is said to have contained two sūras that are not in the ʿUthmānic codex. See Gilliot, “Creation of a Fixed Text,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān}, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.


its materiality and form convey an ideological purport (to counter earlier versions of the text that suggested its similarity to profane literature), and how, by means of a new way of distribution, this version of qur'ānic text came to be thought of as the most authoritative one, simply due to its quantitative prevalence in Muslim countries.

The politics of the (material) text still exceeded these aspects and had far-reaching consequences for the perception, interpretation, and understanding of the Qur'ān. On a rather obvious level, it led to the accessibility of Qur'ān for a wider range of people when it became affordable. More Muslims started to engage in reading the Qur'ān in a private setting at home. The politics of the text also become evident on a more subtle level. The printing of the Azhar edition took place at a time when Muslim scholars started to critically question the plurality of qirā‘t. This process of striving toward a unified text of the Qur'ān had started with some orientalists in the West who took the plurality of qirā‘t as a sign that the Qur'ān had not been transmitted soundly, i.e., in an unvarying, uniform manner.52 The desire for a unification of the qur'ānic textual composition, including a unified reading, was soon adopted by many Arab intellectuals. The authenticity of the Qur'ān for Muslim scholars who had Islamic reform in mind was proven by its permanent freedom from variations, which suddenly seemed to them like an embarrassment to be avoided.53

One can go much further back in history to the point where probably the greatest shift in the Qur'ān's materiality took place, when the qur'ān (an oral recitation) became muṣḥaf (a written

52 See, for example, Ignaz Goldziher, Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung: An der Universität Upsala gehaltene Olaus-Petri-Vorlesungen (Leiden: Brill, 1952), 2-32. He clearly regards the lack of one unified textus receptus among early Muslims as problematic. He writes: “There is no other canonical revealed or inspired document of any religious community, whose text in its oldest time presents the picture of unsteadiness and insecurity to such an extent as we see this in the text of the Qur'ān.” Ibid., 2. He cannot fathom how early Muslims “were so indifferent about transmitting the text in its urbild.” Ibid., 33. This whole “freedom and almost individuality” in readings of the Qur'ān deviating from the “original” Goldziher finds “fremdartig” (strange). Ibid., 35. His account on the qirā‘āt is nevertheless still valuable and mostly empathetic and accurate. Ibid., 39.

53 Bauer, Kultur, 95, 101-102. For example, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the Pakistani/Indian thinker Abū A‘la al-Mawdūdī.
document), as especially stressed by Neuwirth. She refers to both as a Qur’ānic text, one oral and pre-canonical because not yet fixed in writing, the other written and arranged in a certain format.⁵⁴ According to Neuwirth, “Islamic tradition […] does distinguish between the (divinely) 'authored Book,' labeled al-muṣḥaf, as the canonical codex, and the Qur’ānic communication process, labeled al-qur’ān.”⁵⁵ Neuwirth explains the “shift from the 'original,' that is, the intra-Qur’ānic concept of qur’ān, to the post-Muḥammadan concept of muṣḥaf,” as a reconfiguration “of the text from a historical document into a timeless symbol.”⁵⁶ Her distinction between qur’ān and muṣḥaf points to the important insight that there is a material difference between a chain of oral communications and the canonized material text of the Qur’ān.

Daniel Madigan argued forcefully that the oral character of the revelation process during the Prophet’s lifetime was never recorded as a written document and was not even intended or expected to be so.⁵⁷ The Lebanese scholar Wajīh Qānṣū came to a similar conclusion independently.⁵⁸ As critical reason for not editing a written text in the Prophet’s lifetime, Madigan indicates the early Muslim (and not only Muslim) suspicion vis-à-vis the written word and

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⁵⁷ Daniel Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture* (Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press: 2001), 35-46, 183-184. He notes: “Since the source of the kitāb is the writing activity of God, kitāb retains an active sense. It is not the kind of writing scorned by Socrates, which looked intelligent but when questioned could do nothing more than repeat the same words again. It is writing as process, rather than a writing that is the finished product of that process. This is manifested in the Qur’ān by the way its thought is constantly developing and its commands are becoming more specific or more appropriate to changing situations. As writing it is constantly rewriting and so upsetting the boundaries of the text.” Ibid., 182. While in the Bible, mainly in the Old Testament, God at times orders a prophet to “write His words down,” no such command is found in the Qur’ān or in Islamic historiography on the revelation event. See Van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration?” 179.

conviction that the Word or Speech (kalām) of God is not accessible to humans except through oral transmission.59 This view did not wear off and was reinforced by later Muslim scholars, such as Ibn al-Jazarī (1350 – 1429) who wrote one of the standard works of ‘ilm al-qirā’āt.60 In Ibn al-Jazarī's view, God made the Islamic umma special because he ordered it to memorize the Qurʾān. In his account of the redaction of the qurʾānic text, he accentuates the primarily oral tradition of the Qurʾān. Just as the Prophet had been reciting the Qurʾān orally, similarly one should first refer to the oral tradition when attempting to understand the Qurʾān.61

Western qurʾānic studies has traditionally focused on the written relics of the Qurʾān and how this written constitution came into being, prioritizing written over oral documentation.62 Accordingly, Muslims would have written down the Qurʾān clearly and in definitive script, in a scriptio plena, if such a script had existed in Arabic, but “unfortunately,” as Claude Gilliot remarks, “Arabic was written in a scriptio defectiva, i.e., without vowels or diacritical points. […] The short vowels were not marked, nor were the long ones consistently indicated.”63 Gilliot refers to the rasm, the consonantial skeleton of the Qurʾān. He has in mind a particular form of a text, and early qurʾānic manuscripts did not fulfill his criteria, which led, he states, to “dubious pronunciation.” Gilliot's judgment of early Qurʾān manuscripts is a consequence of reading them according to his own peculiar assumptions about how texts and words work.

60 Madigan notes a shift in the confidence in writing from earlier to later commentators, indicating a development that tended to put trust into the written word, and less in oral tradition, although orality of the Qurʾān never ceased to be important for the Islamic community. See ibid., 27; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn al-Jazarī, al-Nashr fīl-qiraʿāt al-ʿashe, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbā’, 2 Vols. (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1996); Bauer, Kultur, 64.
61 Bauer, Kultur, 65. Ibn al-Jawzī holds a similar view. See Hamādy al-Masʿūdi, Min al-wahy ʿilā al-tadhwīn (Tunis: Dār saḥr liʿl-nashr, 2005), 70-73. We find numerous traditions (according to Bauer’s judgment, even the majority on the topic) that tend to privilege oral testimony over written. See also Madigan, Self-Image, 26-27.
62 Exemplarily see Gilliot, “Creation,” 44-46; Goldziher, Richtungen, 39.
63 Gilliot, “Creation,” 47.
As Beatrice Gruendler has demonstrated, we do have textual evidence that Arabic script knew of and used diacritical dots as early as 643. Thomas Bauer argues that perhaps those dots were intentionally not added in the Qurʾān manuscripts. Interestingly, the above mentioned Ibn al-Jazarī viewed this *scriptio defectiva* as an advantage for the correct understanding and recitation of the Qurʾān (a theory adopted by Ibn Taymīya). Ibn al-Jazarī writes:

The *maṣāḥif* were all unclothed of the diacritical dots and vocal signs, so that they would allow for any reading that has been soundly transmitted – all those recitations that go back to the Prophet – because one primarily relies on memory, not only on the scripture – those that belong to the seven *aḥruf* that the Prophet points to when he states: The Qurʾān was revealed in seven *aḥruf*.  

Such a reading required a personal teacher who knew how to read correctly. The tradition of transmitting the Qurʾān personally, by reading it aloud, word by word and verse by verse, to guarantee its authority, is still alive, although technology has increasingly marginalized this practice. I wish not to overdraw the distinction between oral and written transmission. Rather, I want to emphasize that “text” might not have been the proper designation for “God's word” when it existed solely, and afterwards preferably, in oral recitation. Linked to the idea of a fixed written text is that of an ideally univocal mechanical communication of one meaning. Once the text becomes fixed in printing (fully endowed with diacritics and vowel signs), a change in

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64 Beatrice Gruendler, *The Development of the Arabic Script: From the Nabatean Era to the First Islamic Century According to Dated Texts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 22. For example, there exists a papyrus from the year 643 with diacritical dots. However, not all letters for which we know diacritical dots in that mentioned inscription actually carry diacritical dots. See ibid., 79. It seems that already in 709/710, diacritical dots had become to be more comprehensively used. Ibid., 26. Gruendler remarks: “By the sixth century the Arabic letters have acquired, in essence, their present form. But the script is still far removed from the homogeneity and stylistic refinement displayed in the Umayyad correspondence at the end of the first Islamic century (708-10 CE).” Ibid., 4.
67 According to Bauer, there has been a shift in Islamic perception of the early written character of the Qurʾān within the past 150 years toward stressing the written over the oral character. Compare Bauer, *Kultur*, 61-74.
68 Mitchell, *Colonising*, 150.
authority over the text also occurs because it is now seen as not in need of a “master” who transmits its correct pronunciation and interpretation. A fixed text also becomes detached from any form of *adab* – the proper manners, politeness, and propriety that a Qurʾān interpreter should possess. In other words, rendering the Qurʾān a text facilitates to turn it into an object to be examined in a detached and “objective” way. To refer to the Qurʾān as text is not wrong. It may, however, deflect how early Muslims or Muḥammad received the Qurʾān or how it was perceived throughout much of Islamic history. *Naṣṣ* is in any case not a qurʾānic term.

Yet, *naṣṣ* has been an important Islamic concept and, as indicated above, it was not clearly defined, either. According to Abū Zayd and others, 69 classical Islamic scholars in the past never referred to the whole of the Qurʾān as *naṣṣ*. When classical Islamic scholars referenced *naṣṣ*, they only meant a small part of the revelation that did not allow for polyvalence due to its linguistic structure. In al-Shāfīʿī’s words, a *naṣṣ* is “that in which the revelation (*tanzīl*) makes *tafsīr* superfluous,” i.e., any passage that seems unambiguous. In other words, every passage or part of the Qurʾān whose meaning was not clear needed interpretation and was therefore not *naṣṣ* in the strict sense. 70 What counts as *naṣṣ* has always shifted and can have significant consequences for legal as well as popular discourse.

According to Abū Zayd, when the contemporary religious establishment (in Egypt) refers to *naṣṣ*, it does not denote the unambiguous passages which were understood as such by the classical Islamic scholars. Instead, the contemporary religious discourse conflates specific clear

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70 Abū Zayd, *Naqḍ*, 88. According to Abū Zayd, Qurʾān scholars classified passages in the Qurʾān in a fourfold way: 1) the unambiguous and unanimous, 2) that which has two meanings, one of which is the more probable [i.e.,] the *zāhir*, 3) that which has two meanings both of which are in the same way probable, [...] the *mujmal* (that which is being summarized), 4) that which has more than one meaning, in which, however, the more probable is that which one would first not guess. This is the interpretable (*muʿawwal*). See ibid., 96.
passages of the Qur'ān and the Sunna, originally referred to as *nasṣ*, with the whole corpus of Qur'ān and Sunna. In his view, by mingling the classical idea of *nasṣ* with the modern concept of *nasṣ*, they enlarge what is considered clear, not in need of interpretation, and therefore unobjectionable. This leads to a narrowing of the meaning of Qur'ānic passages.\(^{71}\) To conflate *nasṣ* (the whole of the Qur'ānic text) and *nasṣ* (those passages in the Qur'ān that are understood as entirely clear and certain), as the Islamic establishment in Egypt allegedly does, is a political act, according to Abū Zayd. But to conflate *nasṣ* (the whole of the Qur'ānic text) and *nasṣ* (a literary and historical text) is political, too.

To read the Qur'ān as text is often linked to the quest for reading it as literature or as historical document, as has been successfully realized in relation to the Bible in the West. Texts considered sacred, or God's word, have become malleable, and in particular German Higher Criticism posited the Bible “as a system of human signifiers.” Asad remarks that when “the Bible is read as art (whether as poetry or myth or philosophy) [...] a complicated historical development of disciplines and sensibilities has made this possible.”\(^{72}\) This development was linked to political configurations. In many instances in Europe, history was utilized to tame religion and re-form it to effectuate stable and peaceful political entities, often by destabilizing established religious authorities.\(^{73}\) Historical critique proved useful in actuating this form of

\(^{71}\) Abū Zayd, *Naqd*, 84.


\(^{73}\) John Stroup, “Protestant Churchmen in the German Enlightenment,” in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, ed. Hans E. Bödeker (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 170. Stroup writes in regard to Protestant Church historians, “What mattered was arriving at a Christianity that transcended existing factions: one immune from the machinations of the clerical estate. The related attack on the divine legitimation, apostolic foundation, and juridical privilege of the existing institutional church and its dogma and clergy, utilized an appeal to history.”
secularization. The historical processes regarding disciplines as well as sensibilities that are needed to view the Qur'ān as human text(s) will be further explored in the course of this thesis.

It should have become clear by now that text is not in itself a neutral concept. Not much is gained from the objective of reading the Qur'ān as text as long as one refrains from defining what this means. Decisions on the material qur'ānic text can very well be termed textual politics. Text is hard to explain, and the answer to the question “what it is” ties into one's “theory of the author and the reader.”

My point here is not simply that the Qurʾān is an inherently political text because it has political content or because any public text shapes the world. Rather, the way we conceptualize the text itself has changed under the influence of modern epistemologies.

To read the Qurʾān as a literary or historical text presupposes a certain concept of religion. Moreover, I will show that to read the Qurʾān as text may require a shift in the view of human subjectivity and even human nature. The aspect of looking at the concept of human nature to explain certain hermeneutical approaches to the Qurʾān has not yet been explored, and to the best of my knowledge it has not been noticed in western qurʾānic studies as an important element that has an effect on how the Qurʾān is understood. Often, scholars focus on the ontological character of the Qurʾān to explain why the Qurʾān has not yet been properly historicized by Muslim scholars, without noticing its close connection to ontology and epistemology.

A mantra often repeated by western academics as well as by the media is that it is the Muslim conviction that the Qurʾān is the “direct word of God” or, in Christian parlance, “the concept of verbal inspiration” that constitutes the main obstacle for applying historicizing hermeneutics to the Qurʾān. As will be demonstrated, the concept of human nature is an equally important key for understanding the dissonance between proponents and adversaries of applying

74 Vanhoozer, Is there a Meaning, 103.
the historical critique to the Qurʾān. To read the Qurʾān as literature or historical document not only presupposes a change in epistemology or method but also hinges on conceptions of language and speech, subject and object, and finally on human nature.

**Framework of Questioning: A Guard against Mono-Directional Scholarship**

The recent publication of a number of articles that survey how western Qurʾānic studies are received by non-western Muslims indicates a growing interest in authors outside of the western academy. To make known hitherto neglected non-western Muslim voices on western Qurʾānic studies will contribute to the theoretical debates in the field. But I intend more than a descriptive reception history. My inquiry sensitizes the structural asymmetry entailed in the expectation that one day Muslims will adopt historical critique to the Qurʾān.

Since the nineteenth century, Muslim thinkers have been confronted with western methods and epistemologies for understanding “Islam.” Western works on the Qurʾān entered the Muslim world not only in the form of translations but also implicitly when orientalist works were utilized (and still are) for missionary, apologetic, and polemical purposes. “Cultural transfer” is not a descriptive, neutral term. The concepts of culture and history, even today notoriously vague, were inherently hierarchical and evaluative. Cultural transfer of a specific “scientific” method is embedded in a range of social and political practices that are part of a wider field of power and knowledge.

Regarding the Nöldeke episode, it is noteworthy that several works with the same title (Tārīkh al-Qurʾān) appeared in the Muslim world almost simultaneously with the original publication of Nöldeke's book, which points to an awakening interest in the Qurʾān's history at

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that time.\textsuperscript{76} In the course of colonialism and imperialism, such scholarly influence was considered less and less innocent. Many Arab reformers experienced a West that “did not merely exploit the military weakness of Islam politically but sanctioned it scientifically.”\textsuperscript{77} The historical-critical approach, as central method of western Qur’\textsuperscript{n}ic studies, touches upon the textual and symbolic core of Islam, and some approaches threaten to deconstruct its coherency entirely.\textsuperscript{78} Any method carries the baggage of its own history, and so does the historical-critical approach. The at times strong reactions to historicizing the Qur’\textsuperscript{n} cannot be understood without considering how its proponents correlate history with a secular modernity and reform of Muslim societies.

This thesis is then not simply concerned with the question of how mainly non-European Muslim thinkers receive, adopt, or contest the historical-critical approach to the Qur’\textsuperscript{n}. Rather, this concern entails farther-reaching questions, namely how specific hermeneutical approaches are linked to visions about the constitution of society, metaphysics, politics, and, above all, about what makes humans truly human. Of particular relevance in this context is the question of epistemic violence. Michel Foucault understands epistemic violence as “a complete overhaul of [a prevalent] episteme,” in whose process “a whole set of knowledge that have [sic] been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Karimi-Nia, “Historiography,” 49.
\textsuperscript{78} In this respect one may mention exemplarily Christoph Luxenberg, Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000); Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); John Wansbrough, Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
\textsuperscript{79} Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 82. Foucault stated further: “The episteme is the apparatus which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may not be characterized as scientific.” Ibid., 197.
Building on Foucault's definition, Gayatri Spivak extends epistemic violence in the colonial and post-colonial context to refer to a process in which western forms of knowing (e.g., epistemological concepts, categories, and methodologies) preclude or destroy local forms of knowledge. With regard to changes in Hindu law, Spivak demonstrates how history served to establish a view of the Brahmans that conformed to British rule and aligned their intentions with those of the British. In the process, certain voices that disagreed with this particular codification became silenced and marginal. In effect, those voices cannot “be heard.” What can be heard are the voices of those who formulate their thoughts in accordance with the new *episteme*.

Spivak directs our attention to the problems entailed in the questions posed by a mere reception history, that is, the tracing of a concept, method, or way of thinking from A to B. Surveying such a transfer of thoughts from A to B is a laudable undertaking. However, limiting one's research to mere reception history ignores the power structures in which this transfer takes place and often does not allow for questioning one's own framework of reference – and hence one's framework of questioning. Importantly, questions themselves are culturally conditioned. As Bauer aptly notes,

People and cultures may differ in nothing as much as in what they consider important. Thus, it happens that when one inquires about the phenomenon x in culture y because x is important for the inquirer one does not receive a satisfying answer. Yet, culture y holds several answers to questions that are not being asked [by culture x].

If one's extra-textual coordinates, implied in the framing of one's question, proceed unidirectionally and do not allow for a redirection of these questions, the outcome is often disappointment on the side of the researcher who discovers that the examined authors do not

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80 Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 280-283. Postcolonial theory itself reveals a certain measure of Eurocentrism in its conviction that all the “Other” literatures should deal solely with the encounter between the East and the West, hybridity, in-betweenness, and border-crossing.

submit to her pre-conceived concepts, methods, and, yes, worldview. Focusing on a reception history of the historical-critical approach (or hermeneutics more generally) from A to B often entails the expectation that one day Muslims will apply a form of historical-critique to the Qurʾān. By assuming such a development of Qurʾān hermeneutics, one easily adopts a deterministic reading of history, i.e., the assumption that embracing historical-critical methods to the Qurʾān is inevitable, that it is a question of time rather than potentiality. We see this attitude exemplified in some recent studies that examine new trends in Muslim scholarship on the Qurʾān and pay particular attention to how historical-critical or western hermeneutical approaches are or are not applied to the Qurʾān in the Muslim world. If one merely examines how and whether a certain method (following firmly established criteria) is adopted by Muslim scholars, one's inquiry easily remains within the limits of a particular structure of authoritative knowledge on which the construction and professionalization of the hermeneutical tradition rests.

At the same time, such an inquiry ignores the historical factors – often connected to very specific ideological, apologetic, or polemical contexts – that gave rise to that particular structure of authoritative knowledge in the first place and, therefore, leaves this knowledge unquestioned. Framing the question simply to trace influences, trajectories, or applications of historical critique leaves the method itself unquestioned and solidifies a picture of “method” as a disinterested neutral tool to discover facts.\(^{82}\)

For example, when one scholar takes as the guiding question “How hermeneutical are Muslim scholars?” while simultaneously tying this question to a concept of modernity whose qualifier is proper historical consciousness,\(^{83}\) the question entails a normative claim by accepting

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\(^{82}\) The question of method and its underlying presuppositions will be one of the major concerns of one of the Muslim Lebanese intellectuals whom we will encounter in this thesis, Shafiq Jarāfī who has written extensively on the problematic of methodology as the new binary of religion. See chapter VII.

\(^{83}\) The reference is to Körner, *Koran Hermeneutics*, 33.
upfront the value judgment that equates modernity with “proper historical consciousness.” This is not an isolated assumption. Konrad Jarausch, for example, sees historicizing one's self, identity, beliefs, and history as core elements of the formation of the “modern mind.” Ninian Smart characterizes historicism “as the decisively new element in modern Western thought.” For Ricoeur, agency and historical consciousness are crucial components of the “western mind,” core features of modernity, and become manifest primarily in “reconnaissance,” in recognizing one's heritage and deciding which parts of it should be actively maintained, and which ones should be forgotten. History, as a discipline and a consciousness, thus become trademarks of modernity.

For Ricoeur, “Our modernity” consists of the coming to consciousness of our existence in the “condition” of “history.” This historical experience is embedded in the consciousness of human frailty and contingency within a singular, secular time. History has meaning insofar as humans endow it with significance. Historical knowledge, in Ricoeur's words, “memory exercised, cultivated, trained, sculpted,” in short “memory disciplined,” is necessary for a properly human conception of humanity as both individuals and members of communities and for producing a “collective” past on the basis of which a collective identity can be forged.

The Islamic discursive tradition has, of course, institutions and customs designed to discipline memory; and the Qur'ān plays a pivotal role in this memory construction. But one must question whether history, understood as the modern historical discipline, is the only and best

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87 White, “Guilty of History,” 244.
form for “disciplining collective memory” and most indicative of “modernity.” By posit
historical consciousness as essential to modernity precludes other forms of making sense of the
world and being in it. Modernity in that case does not simply denote a certain historical period in
which all people share equally but conveys a spacial and temporary hierarchy that posits Europe
as its end-point. One ought to recognize that “Europe's acquisition of the adjective 'modern' for
itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history.”

It is the inherent value judgment that renders the concept of modernity in relation with
religion and secularism difficult. The problem in many western Islamic studies is that the “major
ideas it uses to grasp its subject (non-modern, local, traditional) are often dependent on its
contrastive sense of the modern.” Of course, the “West” should not be imagined as a
continuous, fixed spatial and temporal entity, unchanging and homogenous, whose core essentials
and characteristics are facile to name. The West is not an all-pervasive force or an autonomous
space. Its constituents (however much they are imagined) are permanently being disputed and re-
arranged. Yet, as Asad states,

It informs innumerable intentions, practices, and discourses in systematic ways. This is not
to say that there is an integrated western culture, or a fixed western identity, or a
single western way of thinking, but that a singular collective identity defines itself in
terms of a unique historicity in contrast to all others. Western forms of knowledge, and history as a core feature of that knowledge, have become the
dominant forms of understanding, structuring, and organizing the world. The language of the
Enlightenment is particularly pervasive because it is the language in which politics and the social

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89 The term “collective memory” was first used by Maurice Halbwachs in La Memoire Collective: Ouvrage Posthume Publié (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950). It was later developed further by Pierre Nora and by Eric Hobsbawn, Age of Empire: 1875 – 1914 (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995).
90 Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 40.
91 Asad, Genealogies, 19.
92 Ibid., 18-19.
sciences are being thought and practiced, despite the fact that what we call European or Western thought is itself an imagined thing. However, this is the genealogy in which academic discourse coaches and imagines itself.\textsuperscript{93} We will encounter various ways of “disciplining collective memory” that will be considered as equally appropriate for the negotiation of modern life and institutions, and thus leave room for imagining the world as heterogeneous. While it is difficult to entirely circumvent the notions of modernity and tradition, these terms are used in this thesis mainly as descriptions of “new” and “old” ways of conceptualizing and doing things.

To merely trace the influence western methodologies have had on Muslim Qurʾān scholars and ask in how far they use those methods “correctly,” tends to imply an expectation for the future whose course should ideally follow western hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{94} If the standard and measure for one's inquiry is western knowledge, it is easy to reach the conclusion that “Muslims are not yet there” or that they have not yet reached the teleological endpoint of hermeneutics. Inscribed in such a grammar is an evolutionary, pseudo-temporal, and hierarchical value judgment that presupposes a clearly defined image of a western normative (secular) modernity.

To limit one's framework of inquiry from the outset can reinforce the structures of western academic discourse in a way that fosters rather than keeps fluid and penetrable the unthought and unthinkable of that very discourse.\textsuperscript{95} It can also simply lead to an under-appreciation of the examined authors, fail to grasp what they consider most important, and thus misunderstand their work fully. In turn, a side effect of ignoring the political and ideological implications of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{93} Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Körner, Koran Hermeneutics, 45.
\item \textsuperscript{95} For the notions of the “thinkable” and “unthought,” see Arkoun. According to him, “The unthought is made up of the accumulated issues declared unthinkable in a given logosphere. A logosphere is the linguistic mental space shared by all those who use the same language with which to articulate their thoughts, their representations, their collective memory, and their knowledge according to fundamental principles and values claimed as a unifying weltanschauung.” Arkoun, Islam: To Reform or to Subvert (London: Saqi Essentials, 2006), 19.
\end{itemize}
methodologies themselves is often the discovery of voices and authors who serve as a mirror for one's own opinions, convictions, and desires. Such an approach can solidify (even if this is not intended) a “diffusionist” view of the world.

James Blaut explains diffusionism as a model of the world that portrays Europeans as “makers of history” – as progressing, thinking, and developing, while non-Europe is represented as stagnating or only slowly modernizing, often called traditional societies. This narrative creates a picture of an Inside (a center) and an Outside (the periphery). As Blaut states, “Inside leads, outside lags. Inside innovates, outside imitates.” This model suggests a cultural movement according to which everything good, innovative, and meaningful flows out of Europe and enriches the outside, the non-European world being mostly the receiver of European diffusion.96

Mono-directional approaches – by no means exceptional in western academic research on non-western subject matters – tend to strengthen this view and operate implicitly on diffusionist assumptions. Asad famously wrote that one can “write the history of modern western thought […] on its own, but not so the history of contemporary Arab thought. One opposition between the West and the non-West (and so a mode of connection between them) is constructed historically by these asymmetrical differences.”97 To clarify, this statement does not mean that western academic disciplines were in fact autonomous undertakings that operated on their own, separated from the rest of the world, but that they are treated as if they were.98 One aim of my study is to address these “asymmetrical differences,” not to overcome them, since this is hardly possible, but

97 Asad, Genealogies, 1.
98 Similar statements could be made in view of philosophy, linguistics, and – ironically given the legacy of Said in that field – also in view to literary studies. One barely finds Arab authors in postcolonial studies, although Arab thinkers often initiated the postcolonial turn in literary studies. See Wail S. Hassan, “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application,” Journal of Arabic Literature 33.1 (2002): 45-64.
to contribute to opening up Qur’ānic studies to theoretical questions that can help clarify what it is the western discipline of Qur’ānic studies is doing and how the inter-academic discourse can be improved. The one-sidedness of western humanities is especially noticeable in the historiography of hermeneutics. As Jan Loop asserts,

The least common denominator, that keeps the [almost] unmanageable material together, which concerns the history of “reflecting on the rules of interpretation” seems to be the conviction that we are dealing here with an occidental contemporary phenomenon that has its roots in the philological and allegorical interpretative methods of Antiquity and Late-Antiquity, the Jewish Halakha and Haggada and of the Hellenic diaspora.99

The idea that the production of academic work can be achieved in relative ignorance of non-western histories is implied in much of western scholarship. While it is assumed that this does not affect the quality of the work of western academics, this “gesture” does not work the other way around. Non-western scholars simply cannot ignore western scholarly production without being seen as “outdated,” “old-fashioned,” or traditional in the derogatory sense.

This historical asymmetry, or what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “asymmetric ignorance,”100 is responsible for mono-directional approaches that assess non-western thought without seriously considering what that thought could mean for the methods, concepts, and theories the scholar brings to her sources in the first place. To simply assume that certain western methods, judged by western standards, should reverberate in Muslim Qur’ānic studies affirms the superiority of a particular form of epistemology and knowledge over another. Instead, being open to the questions asked by “culture Y” may challenge one's own assumptions and help to let one's “data” have an impact on one's inquiry.

The particular ways Muslim thinkers respond to historical-critical and hermeneutical


methods could be used to reflect critically back on them. To circumvent epistemic violence, I
critique both western and contemporary Islamic Qur'an scholarship, paying attention to the
connection of knowledge and power. Qur'anic and related Islamic studies will not be treated as
secondary sources in order to understand what Islam or the Qur'an are or say. Rather, I take this
kind of scholarship as primary data in order to investigate how the Qur'an is represented,
analyzed, used or interpreted under various circumstances and for different reasons.

I am less interested in the history of ideas in respect to Qur'anic studies. “Meaning” of the
texts is not my primary concern, although this is part of my analysis, too. Instead, I inquire how
these texts function in the context of greater societal debates and what they convey. These works
will be understood as products of cultural practices that give valuable insights into the politics of
scripture. Which role does or did a certain text play in its milieu? How does a text present itself
to the readers? How are the themes presented and which themes are addressed at all? These
questions are as important as the actual straightforward content and meaning of the texts.

Bringing western and Muslim non-European Qur'anic studies into dialogue with each
other should ideally result in what Clifford Geertz has called the “enlargement of the universe of
human discourse,”¹⁰¹ in accordance with Rippin who envisions such a research partnership as a
“two-way street.”¹⁰² In other words, one should not simply presume the flow of ideas out of
western academia into the non-West. Importantly, such a conversation, even if only imagined, is
not intended to talk about an object but aims at “conversing with people.”¹⁰³ This approach
attempts to ideally take all conversation partners seriously to the same extent by giving them an
equal voice and thus limit the possibility of epistemic violence.

¹⁰¹ Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz (New York: Basic Books,
¹⁰³ Geertz, Interpretation, 14.
My thesis will have a threefold structure, starting with a survey and critique of the debate over the approach to the Qur’ân in western academia. To understand how Muslim intellectuals view the application of historical-critical methods to the Qur’ân, part I of this thesis critically reviews these methods and their development in their own western context. The aim of this section is not an encyclopedic account of all studies that have been produced within the last century and a half. Instead, I will examine seminal works and how representations of the Qur’ân function in the scholars' discourse to negotiate far-reaching societal and political questions.

The first chapter works out the ideational background of the historical-critical approach and establishes that secular scholarship cannot be considered as neutral. Historicizing hermeneutics have served a liberal secular form of politics and have, in return, been furthered by a secular political rationale. To understand this link, it is incumbent to place historicizing methods against the background of the development of the categories “religion” and “secularism” that explain much of the underlying assumptions of historical-critical approaches. Scriptural hermeneutics convey a certain form of religious subjectivity necessary for liberal politics and were used in the nineteenth century to write history anew. History has served ideological functions, and it has to be understood as such. I will accentuate the link between historical critique and the paradigm of reform in relation to the Wissenschaft des Judentums and some eminent scholars of western qu'ânic studies.

The second chapter problematizes comparison as the main tool of historical critique by examining the works of Gabriel Said Reynolds and Christoph Luxenberg (Pseud.). Both are good examples for the problem inherent in combining the discipline of philology or history with normative claims. Chapter III provides the reader with an overview of the politicization of Qur’ân scholarship in the media to underline the connection between historicizing methods and societal
and religious reform and discuss the locale of the Qur'ān in the western *imaginaire*. Moreover, this chapter introduces the work of Neuwirth and the Corpus Coranicum in order to accomplish two things: first, to reflect further on western approaches to the Qur'ān; and second, to introduce self-consciously political qur'ānic studies. Since the underlying question in this thesis is the rapprochement between western and non-western qur'ānic studies, Neuwirth's work, being paradigmatic for this demand, cannot be ignored.

Chapter IV transitions to the western perception of qur'ānic studies in the Muslim world. Linking the theoretical claims made on Qur'ān scholarship by Wierandt with the translation of scholarly assumptions into U.S. foreign policy draws out the problem of the normativity of secularism in Qur'ān scholarship. In return, this link also poses the question (raised by Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind) of how to view Muslim scholars who have adopted a historicist framework for approaching the Qur'ān – an issue that will be discussed on the basis of the case of Abū Zayd and Mahmood and Hirschkind's responses to his approach.\(^\text{104}\)

Part II of this thesis examines how historicizing approaches to the Qur'ān are perceived and contested by Muslim Arab thinkers (theologians, writers, jurisprudents, etc.), principally in Lebanon. Chapter V problematizes the general introduction of secular history and orientalist studies into the Arab context by focusing on the reception of the Arabic Nóldeke translation. History has not only been formative for western nation states and imperial practices but also for the resistance against imperialism, which has created a paradoxical situation for the reception of historical critique. On the basis of Tamer's deliberations, I work out the implications of historical criticism in relation to the Qur'ān and demonstrate that the proponents of historical critique often

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link this method to the achievement of societal reform modeled after the western secular paradigm. This assumption becomes substantiated in the rest of the thesis.

Chapter VI introduces the Lebanese scene of interreligious discourse and polemics that serve partially as a space for the introduction of historical-critical hermeneutics. Certain Christian authors have adopted the western conviction that the Qurʾān must be historicized in order for society to progress. The reactions to this demand and the pervasiveness of the historical discourse will be probed on the basis of four Muslim thinkers who have all dealt with historicizing approaches to the Qurʾān in very different ways, namely Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, Naylâ Ṭabbāra, Shafiq Jarādī, and Wajīh Qānṣū. While some of these thinkers directly engage with particular western Qurʾānic studies, others reply to what they perceive as historical critique.

To reiterate, my interest in the work of these authors is not a reception history in the common sense but a study of how historicizing approaches are being perceived and entailed in farther-reaching questions in order to work out the particularities and pitfalls of historical critique. One must ask in this respect what qualifies as a historicizing approach and which works Muslim-Arab scholars apparently know and reference. To be sure, there are Muslim Lebanese scholars who deliberately and with great sophistication use western Qurʾānic studies or hermeneutics to advance their own approaches to the Qurʾān (e.g., Ṭabbāra and Qānṣū).

At other times, historicizing approaches are being discussed on the basis of non-European authors who draw on different western Qurʾānic and hermeneutical approaches, such as Abdulkarim Sorouch, Abū Zayd, and Mohammad Arkoun. These authors can all be characterized as applying a form of historicizing critique to the Qurʾān or at least promote such approaches. Their work seems to be well known in the Arab world, which becomes evident when one skims through Islamic journals. One can infer what a critique of western historicizing approaches would
look like, and detect what the biggest discords between them are, by looking at the criticism leveled against authors who work on the basis of a historicist epistemological framework.

As important as statements about the historical-critical or other western hermeneutical methods are when applied to the Qur'ān, the silence on those methods or the disregard of them is similarly important and will also be considered, for example, on the basis of Faḍlallāh's thought. The purpose of Part II is to include Lebanese Muslim and Christian thinkers who have not drawn the attention of academics in the debate over Qur'ānic studies. Finally, I wish to engage the findings from Lebanon in a dialogue with the western academic debate to explore the viability of Neuwirth's vision of a rapprochement of western and Islamic Qur'ānic studies.

The arguments and categories the authors display reflect how society, religion, and religious language are imagined and indicate reconfigurations in ways of dealing with the Qur'ān in a changing political field. What are the implications of importing western hermeneutics into Islamic Qur'ānic studies for the understanding of the text, and for what this text means to Muslim faith communities? And on the contrary, what does it mean when certain forms of historical critique are explicitly rejected or simply neglected? Therefore, rather than asking what motivates certain authors to apply particular hermeneutics to the Qur'ān, this thesis deals with the arguments that are being employed to justify certain methods and what kind of politics, societal construction, and religious subjectivity they convey.\(^\text{105}\) In what follows, I am less interested in “completed works,” and more in an ongoing debate that is still in flux, and in which many

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\(^{105}\) In James DiCenso's words, “In contrast to the 'closed' ego, the subject is defined as a dynamic process that is both relational and temporal and by which a more encompassing and self-aware mode of consciousness is cultivated.” Religious subjectivity refers to an open self-consciousness and its relation to and production of truth. It is inherently linked to questions of epistemology and ethics. See DiCenso, “Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Inquiries into Religious Subjectivity, in Changing the Scientific Study of Religion: Beyond Freud?”, ed. Jacob A. Belzen (New York: Springer, 2009), 276. See also Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 55, 115, 133, 134, 151.
different elements are being negotiated. Let me briefly explain the rationale for this approach.

Oftentimes, western research on “Islam” focuses on systematic thinkers who have already produced comprehensive work on the Qurʾān and are therefore easily accessible. Once western academic attention has been drawn to these people, a body of work appears that publicizes their views and creates a field of discourse about as well as for them. Publications on hermeneutics or modern readings of the Qurʾān focus mainly on liberal thinkers, intellectuals with whose methods and thought the western reader can identify. Many scholars who produce similar or qualitatively more sophisticated work are often unknown in academic scholarship. This situation may be owed to the tendency in Islamic Studies to classify its objects as either being representative for Islam or as exceptional. Consequently, there exists much literature on a “canon” of selected liberal Muslim thinkers, while another strand of research deals with Islamic “movements” who are oftentimes seen as representing “mainstream” Islam. The importance of authors, thinkers, and activists is frequently measured in regard to their political and social impact and the authority they exert on their community, but also with respect to their popularity in western academic circles.

Western choice and classification of topics, people, and objects have created an Islamic Studies archive that has had a strong influence on what is being translated, discussed and made public in western academia. In many cases, this selection and valorization of “Islamic material” fortified a discourse of orthodoxy and authority. This hierarchy of importance was often adopted in the Muslim world as well. It led to the canonization of some (e.g., al-Ṭabarī) and to the neglect

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106 One may exemplarily mention the following works: Suha Taji-Farouki, Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qurʾān (London: Oxford University Press, 2010); Massimo Campanini, Qurʾān: Modern Muslim Interpretations (New York: Routledge, 2011); Kari Voigt and Lena Larsen et al., New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition (London/New York: Tauris, 2009); Kenneth Cragg, Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qurʾān (London/New York: Routledge, 2008).
of others and influenced Muslim knowledge production.\textsuperscript{107} The hierarchical structure of religious authority is then re-produced and re-presented in the secondary literature, which, in return, can strengthen the actual power and influence of the respective authorities.\textsuperscript{108}

Perhaps we cannot entirely bracket the terminology of “mainstream Islam” (orthodoxy)\textsuperscript{109} versus the dissidents (often called heterodoxy, or even heresy). These classifications may at times be useful, but they miss many of the nuances – the grey “in-between” – of the people who constitute these movements or represent the “dissidents.” There is, one must note, a Muslim population beyond “mainstream” and “liberal” who are often not organized in movements or greatly visible. Such overlooked figures are often the ones who best illuminate the problems and tensions of a certain period. To be sure, some of the thinkers, activists, clerics, and scholars examined here are widely recognized or exert great authority in their communities (e.g., Fadlallāh, Sorouch, and Abū Zayd). Besides the luminaries, however, there are other neglected figures, no less important in helping us understand the internal dynamics and intellectual presuppositions of the last decade.

Recently, and especially since 9/11, there has been a trend to divide authors into \textit{islamophile} (hostile to Islam) and \textit{islamophile} (sympathetic to Islam). It should be clear by now that politics of scripture transcend the search for such categories. To commend secularism or a private form of religion, for example, by means of certain hermeneutical approaches does not

\textsuperscript{107} Walid Saleh has shown how the western selection of the works that were chosen to be edited and made accessible promoted the publication of some works while it led to the oblivion of others. See Saleh, “Marginalia and Peripheries: A Tunisian Historian and the History of Qur’ānic Exegesis,” \textit{Numen} 58 (2011): 284-313.

\textsuperscript{108} Arkoun has pointed to the reproduction of authority by means of the western Islamic Studies discourse. Compare Arkoun, \textit{Pour une Critique de la Raison Islamique} (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984), 44-46.

\textsuperscript{109} For Arkoun, “orthodoxy” is the official religion produced by an interplay between State and ‘\textit{ulamā’} and creates the social construct of faith: “[Orthodoxy] is the outcome of a long historical process of selection, of elimination and spreading of names, works, schools and ideas depending on the aims of the ruling group, community or those who exert power. Thus a tradition emerges that functions like a system of security and national community. [...] It is either the official potentates or a teaching determined by the dominant discourse which adamantly carries out selection.” Arkoun, \textit{Penser l'Islam Aujourd'hui}, (Algiers: Laphomical/ENAL, 1993), 290.
necessarily entail *Islamophobia*. Muslim authors who have a secular worldview or promote a privatized form of religion can simultaneously be very pious and understand their work as being in the service of Islam. The same holds true for non-Muslim authors writing in the western academy. The dichotomy *Islamophile* and *Islamophobe* is of not much help to understand how discussions about the application of different approaches to the Qurʾān convey political purport because they obscure the nuances of the discourse and can easily lapse into polemical branding.

It may be remarked that the terminology of Euro-American/western and, respectively, Muslim/Islamic Qurʾān scholarship is problematic. For once, Muslims today also participate in academic qurʾānic studies. Moreover, there exists a gray area between non-Muslim and Muslim. For example, a person who identifies as Muslim can reject the transcendental claim of the Qurʾān, the historiography of the faith community, or certain central religious precepts without officially ceasing to be a Muslim. A non-Muslim may believe (maybe with qualifications) that the Qurʾān actually represents God’s message to humans and that Muḥammad founded the Muslim community of believers following the command of God.

Most importantly, the terminology of western versus Islamic qurʾānic studies runs the risk to feed into essentializing assumptions of “the West” versus “Islam” – a dichotomy I do not wish to corroborate. In response, I acknowledge that neither of the two knowledge traditions constitute inherently cohesive entities. Yet I believe that they form stable and distinct enough discursive fields (or maybe better, ideational-semantic formations) to use the vocabulary of Muslim and western qurʾānic studies for lack of a better term. These designations should be understood as “ideal types.” It is equally problematic to label approaches as secular or religious, a vocabulary

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110 There is a wide range of opinions within the Islamic tradition concerning who and on which grounds is to be declared an unbeliever and who is legitimately a Muslim. Often, in actual cases of declaring someone an apostate, political motives are included. *Takfir* (declaring someone an apostate) is a very contested practice in Muslim societies and among Islamic scholars.
that is part of a particular epistemology and problematic for the Islamic tradition. Such labeling processes are part of what Spivak has called epistemic violence because this kind of naming reproduces certain western discourses and hierarchies of knowledge. Yet, various Muslim authors, whether Islamist or self-acclaimed secularist, have adopted these designations and have made them part of their own struggle for self-positioning in debates over the formation of society, politics, and scriptural hermeneutics.

My research demonstrates that proponents of historical critique of the Qurʾān often tie this method to a liberal secular political vision of society. Simultaneously, it will be argued that applying certain forms of historical critique does not have to lead to a complete disenchantment of the Qurʾān or to the secularization of society. What is left to us is to examine what kind of secularism and what type of religion we are talking about, being self-aware that we cannot completely escape the accusation of epistemic violence. The task must be to work out the in-between in these labeling processes rather than merely reproducing them.

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112 When I refer subsequently to “Islamists,” I adopt their own naming. Islamists view Islam as an all-embracing system and draw on Qurʾān and Sunna for the solution of contemporary problems.
PART I

WESTERN QUR'ÄNIC STUDIES
I. The Context of Western Qur'anic Studies

*Neutrality of Historical Critique*

Let us begin by reiterating Neuwirth's call for a unification of the perception of the Qur'an in "East and West." We will assess the reasons Neuwirth gives for this demand later on. For now, it is important to note that Neuwirth's claim is by no means uncontested, either among Muslims or in the western academic context. Two examples may suffice to demonstrate the conviction among many western qur'anic studies scholars that historical-critical research of the Qur'an has its own independent merits and should remain a self-sufficient discipline unperturbed by Muslim concerns.

Since my own thesis mainly deals with the German and Lebanese context, it seems fitting to begin by quoting Manfred Kropp, former director (1999-2007) of the German Orient Institute in Beirut (OIB). Despite the institute's presence in Lebanon, Kropp wishes for a largely independent and "scientific" scholarly approach to the Qur'an. In his view, the discipline of qur'anic studies should be an autonomous part of comparative literature, history, and other fields of academic work and should in particular be decoupled from comparative religion. He identifies two major aims of western qur'anic studies. First,

To demonstrate how much of a text and its history can be known with the help of human reasoning – relative and temporary knowledge, to be sure, that needs periodical revision – rather than what it means to its believers. Faith and tradition of a particular religious community in its scriptures can become the separate subject of academic research in its own right; but the task and goal of historical-critical Qur'an studies is to clarify the origin and genesis of the text, retrieve and describe its earliest forms and functions, and finally collect and publish the results in one or more critical editions of the text accompanied by a historical commentary.\(^{113}\)

Kropp thus precludes categorically any unification of western and Muslim traditional qur'anic

studies à la Neuwirth. History proper and belief do not meet. Historical-critical and Islamic Qur'anic studies are (and ought to remain) distinct endeavors. Obviously, the idea that one can study a “sacred text” in complete negligence of its position in a certain textual system and faith community is not unusual.\textsuperscript{114} At times, it is considered preferable since detachment from one's object of study is one of the principles of (Baconian and Cartesian) science.\textsuperscript{115} It can also be justified with the belief that “believers do not own their texts; all texts are seen as a part of general human history.”\textsuperscript{116} Second, according to Kropp,

> It needs to be stressed once more: the task of scholarly Qur'anic studies, and of *Wissenschaft* as a whole, is not to fuel or entertain [interreligious and intercultural] dialogues, but to study according to universal rational principles and to invite as equal partners all those who respect and adhere to those principles.\textsuperscript{117}

Kropp's vision of academic Qur'anic studies is contrary to Neuwirth's and an appeal for disinterested scholarship. Historical-critical research of the Qur'an can and should not serve societal purposes such as interreligious dialogue, because such a purpose would alter the neutrality of the scientific method. Kropp's statement displays a justified fear of biased approaches encroaching upon academic historical Qur'anic studies. In his view, the scholarly endorsement of Islamic historiographical material had the effect that the Qur'an has been accepted in its canonical form and that Islamic history has mainly been modelled after traditional Islamic historiographical data, an assessment that other contemporary scholars share.\textsuperscript{118}

Kropp's statements are clear. Academic Qur'anic studies should be unconcerned and non-


\textsuperscript{116} Rippin, “Reception,” 5.

\textsuperscript{117} Kropp, “Preface,” 2. Italics mine.

cooperative with (traditional) Muslim Qur'anic studies, although they are dealing with the same text, the Qur'an. The dichotomies Kropp uses are familiar ones for any student in the western academy: faith and [universal] reason, secular and religious, historical accuracy over and against tradition. Maybe Kropp does not understand these terms as opposites but implies history and faith to be irrelevant to each other. In any case, he leaves no doubt that the ideal Qur'anic studies scholars are “secular, positive scholars writing and researching from a salutary distance to their subject.”\(^{119}\) Losing this distance, one can only assume, would cook one's results due to bias and possibly even belief, the gravest sin one can commit, so it seems, against historical truth.

In these two previous quotes Kropp does two things. First, he limits the range of the significance of historical Qur'anic studies. Second, he absolves them from any responsibility or accountability to those people who might see their tradition threatened by such an approach. The line of demarcation Kropp draws is, of course, common in academic scholarship. On the one hand, this distinction exonerates one's scholarship from accusations of being offensive to believers. On the other, it is a means to safe-guard scholarly integrity. As Albert de Jong puts it, “There can be no room for a scenario in which religious sensibilities of any community can decide the subject, questions and methods of research, even if it concerns the community itself and what it considers sacred.”\(^{120}\) The underlying ethos of such a view is the special status of academia and academic knowledge performed apart from everyday context and able to asses data unconditionally in the scientific spirit of freedom of research. Kropp's belief in the neutrality of historical studies should not be doubted; I will, however, challenge it in the course of this thesis. Kropp seems to link the neutrality of history to the secular stance of the researcher, which again

\(^{119}\) Kropp, “Preface,” 2.

is more of a prejudice than a scientifically proven claim. Secularism is neither neutral nor disinterested. I will leave the point of bias in history writing aside for now.

The first point Kropp makes, namely the justification for an autonomous field of study for academic historical-critical scholarship, merits a comment. That Kropp feels the need to assert this point is an indication that it is in fact contested. Writing in the same volume, Lawrence Conrad states similarly, “The future of Islam may depend on a number of factors, but the research interests of a small circle of professional academics in the West is not one of them.”

Their statements sound almost like a stubborn “why-would-you-not-leave-us-alone-already?” Interestingly, Kropp emphasizes the autonomy of historical-critical scholarship not from Muslim scholarship (which for him seems to be a given) but from theology and comparative religion. Part of his plea for independence is hence meant to demarcate his discipline and prevent meddling from fields that may actually challenge propositions historical-critical scholarship makes.

He is concerned for the “neutrality” of the field which, by definition, theology cannot yield. Kropp may even have in mind missionaries who in the past and present used historical-critical scholarship in their favour to convert Muslims to Christianity. Thus he wants to shield the discipline from polemical utilization and misuse. How to pursue historical-critical scholarship without comparative religion, however, is a riddle he does not bother to solve. Comparison, as will be subsequently explained, is at the heart of the historical-critical method. From a historical perspective, to say anything meaningful about the Qurʾān's genesis one always reverts to some kind of comparative strategy, be that etymology, referring to similar texts from other traditions, or examining possible birth places of a scripture to find clues regarding its cultural and religious

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milieu. My second point of contention in regard to Conrad and Kropp's plea for the independence of Qur'ānic historical-critical scholarship is that it seems unrealistic. While there is no need to doubt either Kropp or Conrad's conviction of historical studies as disinterested and purely empirical, Qur'ānic studies and biblical studies have fulfilled ideological functions within the western context as well as in the colonies. Once these studies leave their confined range of impact within the academic context, they can be utilized, misused, or be brought into other academic and national narratives.\(^{122}\) In short, Kropp and Conrad underestimate the potential of prescriptiveness and norm setting of historical studies of the Qur'ān once interpretation is understood as action that yields concrete consequences.

“Objective” scientific historical study of religion, in particular the origin of religion, can very well have bearing on critical contemporary issues. Scholarship that is seemingly far removed from contemporary topics has had far-reaching impacts on the faith communities. Already in 1967, Charles Adams referred to the vital consequences that Ignaz Goldziher’s (d. 1921) work had on contemporary Muslim interpretations of Islam. Goldziher is one of the key figures of western Islamic and Arabic studies. More so than his predecessors, he held that scriptural writings offered insights into the emergence and development of the religious communities who took these writings as their axial point.\(^{123}\) Despite Goldziher's conviction of pursuing Islamic studies only out of a “scientific interest” (\textit{wissenschaftliches Interesse}) as a pure philologist and historian, his considerations impacted Muslim thought and practice.\(^{124}\) The effect of scholarly work on institutionalized religion is still an understudied subject. But there is no

\(^{122}\) De Jong, “Historians,” 195-208.


doubt that the history of religion in various ways entered and influenced religious thought and
practice. The impact of scholarly writing may be non-obvious and its consequences delayed.
Yet, any scholarly interpretation, particularly of a contested subject like the Qur’an, can have a
large impact if it is read by others and when there is societal readiness and receptiveness
(willingness or aversion) toward such interpretations. Kropp and Conrad's assurance of the
professionalization of their field, and therefore its insignificance for societal questions, appears
almost as a stubborn credo in that light. One might object that a scholar is innocent of the impact
of her work once the research leaves the “mind” of the scholar and enters into the fuzzy field of
the public that can do with it as it pleases.

Two points should be kept in mind in this context. First, following Thomas Teo, writing
and publishing are forms of action: “Interpretations as expressed in articles and books are past
actions, but from the perspective of a reader they are current actions on the part of the writer, in
the sense of becoming actualized in the process of reading.” This implies a potential effect on
the reader – any reader – unless one attempts to limit one's readership from the outset, as two
eminent Islamic studies scholars did provocatively in their presentation of a radical revision of
early Islamic history, exclaiming, “This is a book written by infidels for infidels.” Statements
that either apologize to an audience that might be offended by one's research or (as the previous
quote) suggest the exclusion of a certain audience from the outset indicate an awareness that
one's scholarship is not confined to a narrow clientele of academics; the unacknowledged
audience may well be “wider and more directly, personally, involved than the circle of scholarly

colleagues.” Then again, why should a scholar who truthfully has followed her scientific method be concerned with the possible disgruntlement or happiness of an unintended readership?

This brings me to my second point. The claim of the irrelevance of academic Qur'ānic studies for believers, or those who do not follow historical-critical methods, is predicated on epistemological asymmetry. That is, the claims of academic scholars cannot easily be repudiated. The academic scholar accomplishes her interpretation in the name of science and, therefore, appeals to a privileged authority. In Teo's words, “Truth claims are asymmetrical: whereas the scientist can argue that the Other is motivated by political or moral [and one may add, religious] concerns, he or she is interested in truth. [...] Essentially, the scientist can refuse to listen or take seriously the truth claims by the Other.” Both history (the discipline) and science have established a close to complete hegemony over the domains they cover to the exclusion of other practices that deal with the same fields. Even if the historical-critical Qur'ān scholar feels like belonging to a minority in the face of so many who reject it, she is situated in an institutional context that grants her interpretation authority over unscientific ones. In short, there exist power inequalities in the global evaluation of different forms of knowledge.

The statements of Kropp and Conrad may be interpreted as scholarly humility. Their field is simply small and does not claim to offer anything beyond historical data for specialized academic circles. Research on the Qur'ān stems from historical curiosity and makes no grander claims than this. Kropp in particular wants to direct its significance to fields in history and literary studies and away from theological questions. There is no reason to question either Kropp or Conrad's belief in the neutrality of their undertaking. That does not mean, however, that they

130 Teo, “Empirical Race Psychology,” 250.
131 On the hegemonic dominance of science and history over other forms of knowing, see, e.g., Ashis Nandy, The Romance of the State and the Fate if Dissent in the Tropics (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).
are right. Giving Qur’ānic scholars the benefit of the doubt and trusting that they indeed believe in their own impartiality, one still has to wonder whether Kropp takes his own words seriously when he pledges the insignificance of Qur’ānic studies. This begs the question what the reason for any scholarly endeavor is if the “knowledge” one produced was irrelevant, truly disinterested, and would not serve any purpose? If this was in fact the case, would one not have to dismiss that scholarship as purposeless? Ranke's claim to write history “wie es eigentlīch gewesen” (to write history as it really happened),\(^{132}\) resonates in this conviction.

Many scholars have interpreted Ranke's phrase as doing history for history's sake. Yet, even Ranke was not as disinterested as is often believed. He strove to construct a fundamental and coherent view of history, on the basis of which a “philosophy of life” could be worked out that would relate “the life and values of modern man in his search for understanding the meaning of the past.”\(^{133}\) As Magne Sæbø asserts, “Central to this ideologically very fundamental concern for a ‘worldview’ (Weltanschauung) was, in the first place, the nature of humanity itself/the human being (die Individualität) with its life and culture.”\(^{134}\) Ranke was not only to a certain extent a “public intellectual;” he also worked in the service of the Prussian court, for whom he redacted a history of the Ottoman Empire. This work was probably a direct response to the “Turkish crisis” and can thus be considered Orientalism in Said's use of the term, that is, as a tool for exerting control over the “Orient.”\(^{135}\)

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\(^{134}\) Ibid., 27.

The strong conviction especially in German Islamic Studies of pursuing an objective, impartial, and scientific endeavor has not only been challenged by postmodern critique. One would in fact hope that academic scholarship is not meaningless, detached from the world and is not confined to inner-academic circles. There is no disinterested research because there is simply no disinterested interest. A scholar, one would think, should have an interest in (even an attachment to) her research. Most often, such ideational investment, however, is either rejected or simply ignored. The initial concern that drew the scholar to her subject matter in the first place comes out of view.

In this respect, social scientist Donald Levine may be right when he notes, “Although the act of selecting problems figures as enormously consequential, it may well be the most under-investigated component of scientific inquiry.” The causes for this state of affairs are blurry. Levine reasons that maybe scholars do not wish to be confronted with their own “non-rational basis of their selections.” Choosing an object of study often seems to rest on conventions, the availability of resources, the directions and preferences of one's mentor, or even a “narcissistic impulse.” As stated before, I am not concerned with a theory of motives in this thesis. Suffice it here to say that the ideal of the objective and detached scholar has been one of the major paradigms of the modern scientific worldview. This scientific paradigm entails the distance between ourselves and nature, object and subject, and an ethos that Morris Berman called “non-participating consciousness” – “the state of mind in which one knows phenomena precisely in the

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136 Nandy, *Romance*, 91-94. See also Anthony Giddens, “Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and the Production of Culture,” in *Social Theory Today*, ed. Giddens and Jonathan Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 194-223. Giddens states with regard to Foucault's conception of history: “Foucault's style of writing history does not flow along with chronological time. Nor does it depend upon the narrative description of a sequence of events [...]” In Foucault's view, [...] history is one form of knowledge among others – and of course, like other forms of knowledge, a mode of mobilizing power.” See ibid., 212. Also quoted in Nandy, *Romance*, 92, footnote 12.
138 Ibid., 197.
act of distancing oneself from them.”

Linked to this mode of thinking is a whole set of presuppositions about values, meaning, and our relation to the world in general that can be dominated and manipulated in our favor.

The point I wish to argue subsequently is not simply that any historical scholarship can be manipulated for ideological reasons; nor is the major contention that the Qurʾān cannot be reduced to a merely historical document as long as one accepts these results to be only limited. Kropp and Conrad would probably agree that any historical-critical or literary method can always only reveal certain qualified dimensions of the Qurʾān. Instead, in what follows, I will argue that historical critique is itself not neutral and must not be portrayed as if it were. Since its inception in the Renaissance, history writing has had a role in assisting states, nations, and empires to construct their legacy and worldview and exert control over other peoples. Moreover, most scholars we will be examining, who start from the premise that they examine the Qurʾān – its text and constitution – historically, convey a certain ethics of reading texts. Some indeed venture into theological judgments, which, to be fair, is a problem Kropp emphatically wants to avert. The question is whether one can avoid this problem.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, we have to take the silence of authors as seriously as their explicit claims. This approach will lead us to not only consider the silence of Lebanese Muslim scholars on historical critique to the Qurʾān, but to equally ask for that silence in western scholarship on theological and philosophical matters. According to Marius Reiser, practitioners of historical-critical scholarship of the Bible often lack a thorough knowledge about the history of their own discipline, its presuppositions, and underlying philosophical assumptions.

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140 Ibid., 27-29.
For many, serious biblical scholarship only started in the nineteenth century while much of the scholarship preceding modern historical-biblical practice is outright rejected as prescientific and therefore dubious.\textsuperscript{141} The same can be concluded for much of western Qur'\text{"a}nic studies.

In the following sections we will hence investigate the development of historical-critical scholarship in regard to both the Bible and the Qur'\text{"a}n. Before we can peruse that scholarship thoroughly, it is crucial to understand some of the core concepts with which western Qur'\text{"a}n scholarship operates as well as the categories it uses to classify its data. In short, we have to assess the \textit{culture} in which this scholarship arose. By culture I mean the “set of practices by which meanings are produced and exchanged within a group”\textsuperscript{142} – in our case the \textit{language} of Qur'\text{"a}nic studies scholars and historians more generally. Language here is not confined to what we say but refers to the entire system of signs that we use to make sense of the world. Sociologists following \text{"E}mile Durkheim and Claude L\text{"e}vi-Strauss (so-called structuralists) have proposed that thought – its structure, way of argument, and vocabulary – and values move within particular structures that are provided, if not determined, by society or a particular culture. In Durkheim's view, even the most basic categories of thought, such as time and space, or causation are collective representations – “socially shared frameworks within which individual experience is classified.”\textsuperscript{143} This means that any individual – whether scholar or practitioner – has to make use of a particular pre-given language to formulate thought and mostly remains in that culturally enclosed framework. While Durkheim and L\text{"e}vi-Strauss have been criticized for failing to account for change in thinking, it is, nevertheless, useful to take the claim seriously that we are

\textsuperscript{141} Marius Reiser, \textit{Bibelkritik und Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift} (T"ubingen: Mohr Sibeck, 2007), 4-5. See also James L. Kugel, “The Bible in the University,” in \textit{The Hebrew Bible and its Interpreters}, ed. William Henry Propp et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 143.


\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 240.
close to unable to think outside of our particular cultural language. That is to say, certain lines of argument and reason make sense because they adhere to the culturally conditioned logic in which they operate, while they may be unable to grasp the logic of another cultural language.

The question why Muslim Qur’anic studies are disjoined from the western academy finds its answer in the historical conditions in which western Qur’anic studies commenced, its close connection to historical-critical studies of the Bible, and the emergence of history and historicism in Europe. The development of Qur’anic studies in the West fell into a time when Europe was undergoing rapid secularization and invented the concept of religion as a distinct sphere separated from politics, economics, and other “secular” spheres, such as art and literature. We have to pay attention to all these concepts – religion, scripture, and history – and the context in which they emerged in order to understand that historical scholarship, particularly the one applied to texts formerly considered sacred, facilitated and was possible because of certain configurations of power. Secularization and religion are both loaded terms and cannot be conceptualized apart from each other.

Let me therefore briefly explain what I mean by secularization. Similar to religion, secularization has a distinctly Christian-western genealogy. According to José Casanova, secularization refers to the historical process in Europe by which a secular sphere and a religious sphere crystallized as separate fields of human action. Secularization describes a process in which “persons, things, functions, meanings, and so forth, were transferred from their traditional location in the religious to the secular spheres.” Mostly, secularization connotes the “appropriation of functions or institutions that had traditionally been in the hands of ecclesiastic

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144 Bocock, “Cultural Formations,” 236.
145 Therefore, Asad calls them the “Siamese twins.” See Asad, “Reading,” 221.
institutions into the hands of the state.”\textsuperscript{146} In medieval times, the social realm was dualistically structured into a religious and a secular sphere. However, these spheres do not correspond to what we today understand as religious and secular.

The medieval worldview was based on a double dualist system of classification. There was “this world” and “the other.” This world was again divided into the religious and secular. In this context, to be religious mainly denoted members of the monastic order. Thus, there was religious and secular clergy. To become secular meant to leave a monastery and return to the world. This world (as separate from the other world), entailed both the religious and the secular and was mediated through the Church that belonged to both spheres. According to Casanova, “Secularization as a concept refers to the actual historical process whereby this dualist system within 'this world' and the sacramental structures of mediation between this world and the other world progressively break down until the entire medieval system of classification disappears, to be replaced by new systems of spatial structuring of the spheres.”\textsuperscript{147}

After the Reformation, secularization was the large-scale transfer of monasteries, landholdings, and the wealth of the church to the state. With the symbolic “breaking of the monastery walls,” the dualistic spatial structuring collapsed, and what we have now is one world, the secular one, and religion has to find its place within it.\textsuperscript{148} Yet, what precisely constituted religion was not at all clear in the course of the past five-hundred years and is still contested today.\textsuperscript{149} Several studies have shown that religion as “distinctive space of human practice and

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 13-15. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
belief which cannot be reduced to any other,” was the outcome of a complicated political process within Europe and its struggles over the constitution first of territorial and later nation states. For the invention of religion, scripture played a crucial role as contested space for struggles over religion and its role in society.

It is clear from this short overview that secularism and religion are western categories that owe their invention to specific political configurations and the particular constitution of European society. William Cavanaugh has demonstrated that the concept of religion, as used by most contemporaries, is a development of the modern liberal state. Moreover, “The religious-secular distinction accompanies the invention of public-private, religion-politics, and church-state dichotomies. The religious-secular distinction also accompanies the state’s monopoly over internal violence and its colonial expansion.” Religion (as a concept and organizing principle of society) was introduced and enforced upon the non-western world by means of colonial power.

This raises the question of the usefulness of these categories for a non-European framework. Indeed, some scholars want to dispense with these categories entirely. For example, Gregory Starrett contends that “the unfixedness is one of [secularism's] essential features. […] Its significance, therefore, is a function of the arguments it generates and the conflicts it organizes, rather than of some phenomenon it purports to describe.” In other words, secularism is never merely a descriptive term but is active, and thus normative, in generating certain forms of discourse. Meanwhile, religion and secularism have come to serve as categories not only by

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150 Asad, Genealogies, 27.
151 See exemplarily the following studies: Ibid.; Smith, “Religion;” Dubuisson, The Western Construction; McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion.
scholars but by the general public both inside and outside the West. It may also be remarked that
terms like science, art, history, politics, and poetry are equally problematic and western-centric.
The point scholars like J.Z. Smith, Russell McCutcheon, and Asad highlight is not to be mistaken
as a quarrel over words or naming a phenomenon. Rather, they alert us to the danger inherent in
normalizing these terms, which obstructs the fact that the definition of the concepts of religion
and secularism are part of the history of western power. Transhistorical approaches to religion
can be not only distorting and anachronistic but normative, that is, they are suggestive (and
forcefully so) of the way that authority and power are distributed within a society.¹⁵⁴

Some words of caution are therefore in place that concern the normativity of secularism
and its link to modernity. Casanova differentiates between three forms or elements that are
usually associated with the process of secularization: First, secularization as religious decline;
second, secularization as differentiation of the religious and secular spheres; and third,
secularization as the privatization of religion. Modern development has shown that the first
element is not defensible anymore as part of modernization more generally. In other words, for a
society to be modern, it does not have to become a-religious or accept a merely spiritual and a-
political definition of religion. Similarly, privatization of religion is no longer considered a
necessary consequence of differentiation. Yet, Casanova argues, the thesis of differentiation still
holds.¹⁵⁵ This does not mean that in Europe secularization was not indeed linked with the decline
of religious institutions and religious belief, but that theories of modernization neither have to
assume that differentiation must lead to the decline of religious faith nor to the confinement of
religion within the private sphere. To come to this conclusion, Casanova distinguishes between

¹⁵⁴ Cavanaugh, Myth, 82.
¹⁵⁵ Casanova, Public Religions, 7.
the concept of secularization as described above and the theory of secularization that is normative and, therefore, indeed problematic. Understanding secularization as the differentiation of social spheres is, in my opinion, valid and helpful.

Charles Taylor favors understanding secularism as “a kind of philosophically unstable relativism in which moderns have come to realize the inevitability of choice and difference within modern societies.”156 In other words, secularism is a state of affairs in which people are aware of alternatives to their own way of life and acknowledge the right of others to choose another way. An awareness of alternative ways of life can probably be attested to almost all modern societies; yet, the right to choose from alternatives is usually confined to those choices that do not conflict with the monopoly of the state over violence, law, and politics.157

Asad addresses precisely this role of the state by which secularism becomes enacted at the expense of other identities. For him, “the secular” is partially a set of practices, concepts, and sensibilities that are linked to the way people think about individual freedom and sovereignty in contrast to those offered by religious discourse. Secularism and debates about it are linked to projects of power, “in which a universalized rationalism exerts itself through necessary violence.”158 Moreover, secular “reason requires that false things are either proscribed and eliminated, or transcribed […] as objects to be seen, heard and touched by the properly educated senses.”159 Empiricism is certainly one of secularism's features. Yet, the exertion of violence and use of power are not confined to secular discourses, and the pervasiveness of the state is a modern phenomenon whether that state identifies as religious or secular.

157 Asad takes issue with a specific implication of Taylor's view of secularism that characterizes the secular order as an implicit social contract. See Asad, Formations, 2, 8.
158 Ibid., 59.
159 Ibid., 35.
Starrett wants to dispense with the term secularism altogether, because, in his eyes, it is always a normative category. To be clear, to dispense with secularism would also entail giving up the category of religion. In his opinion, “Every time we contrast secularism and religion, we implicitly make a choice of sides between the two, and our own implicit choice arises from our own positions within local, national, regional, and global systems of social organization and discourse.” What Starrett means here is that by deciding whether phenomena are secular or religious we strengthen or weaken hegemonic discourses. This conceptual problem indeed only arose with the invention of religion. I agree with Starrett that we cannot easily and responsibly read the categories of secularism and religion back into pre-modern history.

Yet, with the entry of most societies into modernity (i.e., nation states, differentiation of social spheres, the introduction of categories such as religion and secularism), I do think we have to deal with these categories, even if they entered the non-western world through imperialism. True enough, as Asad claims, it is in fact difficult to produce conceptions of religion and secularism adequate for cross-cultural purposes. How one defines or conceptualizes religion will inevitably determine which questions one asks and how one frames them. In this respect, Starrett is equally right in highlighting the normative tendencies of both religion and secularism. This observation, however, does not have to lead to the exclusion of religion and secularism as useful categories for scholarly analysis. The suggestion Francisca Cho and Richard Squier make in respect to religion is useful for secularism as well. They agree that the task cannot consist in finding an “immutable kernel” or “timeless nucleus” in each and every instance of “religion,” since it is not a fixed category. Yet, they claim “religion” is a useful category to meaningfully

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161 Asad, Genealogies, 16.
relate and explain instances, thoughts, and phenomena; religion can then be “the axiomatic, a
priori guide to thought that organizes our observations and creates a context for knowledge.”

That Christian discourse has shaped the discourse on religion and changed other religious
traditions “need not lead to claims of epistemological monopoly or solipsism.” Cho and Squier
underline the usefulness of religion as a wide category that is rendered otiose for any scientific
endeavor if it were to “perfectly approximate a known phenomenon.” In other words, “a social
theory or category that is too precise in what it identifies” loses its heuristic value. I, moreover,
disagree with Starrett that one has to make an ideological choice between the secular and the
religious (if I understand him here correctly). Because secularism and religion have been such
powerful concepts in the political shaping of Europe and the “rest of the world” under European
influence, we cannot dispense with these terms. Rather, the task must be to work out in how far
they shaped or served political configurations and to qualify what we mean by them.

Max Weber understood modernity (and for him this entailed secularization) as the
disenchantment of the world, the division between human spheres that are subject to human
reason and technical manipulation, and those spheres that could be reserved for the supernatural,
irrational, the area of imagination. As long as one does not understand this definition as a
normative claim, but as a description of how people who identify as secular think, I find it
accurate and will adopt it as my definition when referring to “secular hermeneutics.” To read a
text by means of secular hermeneutics means to evacuate the transcendent or the divine from
these texts, whether in regard to their origin, constitution, or the ability to derive truth from them.

162 Francisca Cho and Richard Squier, “He Blinded Me With Science: Science Chauvinism in the Study of
163 Ibid., 433.
164 Ibid., 430.
The secularization of texts also entails the ontological singularity of the reader, which means the reader is herself historically (read naturally, non-transcendentally) situated, and therefore limited. The categories of religion and secularism certainly belong to the discourse on historical critique of scripture and were fundamentally formative in the self-understanding of this discipline as well as of history and philosophy. It is to these disciplines that we now turn.

**Historical-Critical Exegesis**

No historical-critical method is simply a technique of processing a text. Rather, the development of historical-critical methods was bound to the context in which and for which they were developed. They give witness to the scholarly and intellectual milieu of their time rather than being transhistorical tools. The question of when modern exegesis began is contested in scholarship. Some place the beginning of historical-critical approaches in humanism and the Renaissance. Most let it only begin with the eighteenth century. It is in any case clear that with humanism, there emerged a group of scholars who examined the Bible on the basis of philological and historical considerations, aiming to neglect (and at times to fight) dogmatic and spiritual deliberations in order to arrive at the texts' truths.\(^{166}\)

One can contend that a certain form of criticism of the authenticity of the Bible is inherent in the Qur'ān when it charges the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) with the corruption of the biblical texts, the alteration of words, and the concealment of meanings (e.g. Q 3:78). From the early Islamic period onward, Muslims charged Christians and Jews with the falsification of their scriptures (*taḥrīf*).\(^{167}\) From the emergence of Islam until well into the Middle Ages, polemics between Jews, Muslims, and Christians entailed the charge and countercharge of corrupting the

\(^{166}\) Reiser, *Bibelkritik*, 15-16.

scriptures. John Wansbrough even credits the concern for the authenticity of scripture and Jewish-Muslim-Christian polemics with giving rise to biblical criticism. Although not all historical exegesis was polemically motivated, Wansbrough's observation should alert us that much of it was and still is.

Curiously, critical Bible commentary might have emerged in contact with Islamic exegesis, further developed by Jewish exegesists. Rina Drory demonstrates that the (Jewish) Karaite re was strongly influenced by literary genres from the broader Islamic context. The Karaites rejected Rabbinic commentary and gave priority to philology. They emphasized the context of scriptural passages and championed the literal sense of scripture over allegory, systematic exposition, and, above all, the role of reason in the exegetical endeavor. In France, eleventh century Jewish authors developed a sense of the literariness of the Bible, which, they claimed, should not be interpreted according to religious tradition, but against its context as well as that of the authors of the various biblical books. Of course, all of these endeavors were not “critical” in the sense how the term is often understood today, much less secular. The Jewish

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170 Thus, Jewish exegesists had developed authorial voices in the tenth century. In Baghdad, Saadia Gaon (d. 942) inquired about the origins and genres of the various biblical books, their authorship, aims, and particular characteristics. See Daniel Frank, Search Scripture Well: Karaite Exegesists and the Origins of the Jewish Bible Commentary in the Islamic East (Leiden: Brill: 2004), 251-252.

171 Their use of the Arabic term zahir (exoteric sense) to indicate the literal sense of a text points to Islamic influence. Frank, Search Scripture, 255. Ibn Ḥazm stated: “It is one's duty to interpret God's word literally [...]. This may be abandoned only when another written word of God, or the consensus, or a compelling fact based on logical conclusion supplies conclusive evidence that a particular word of God should not be understood literally.” Quoted in Haggai Ben-Shamai, “The Tension between literal Interpretation and Exegetical Freedom,” in Scripture and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, ed. Thomas Heffernan and Thomas Burnam (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 36.

authors held on to divine inspiration of the scriptures, unless polemics were involved. In fact, the case can be made that historical scholarship does not need to conflict with the epistemological category of the transcendent, a claim to which we will return.

In Europe, it was the humanistic movement that was the precursor of historical-critical scholarship with its interest in classical literature, rhetoric, and grammar. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jewish converts to Catholicism in Spain came to develop Bible exegesis as a continuation of Hebrew studies. The humanist Joseph Scaliger (1540 – 1609) introduced the term “la Critique” for Bible exegesis that was based on historical considerations. For Richard Simon (1638 – 1712), critique meant to approach the Bible competently by means of history and philology. The basic hermeneutical assumptions of the patristics remained intact for both the reformed tradition and for Catholicism. Critical exegesis was in that time a Catholic, and particularly a Jesuit, affair.

That most works on historical-critical scholarship today see it as a mainly Protestant undertaking is noteworthy. The prevalence of this view indicates a certain form of history writing that connects Protestantism with progress and paints the Reformation as an important step (sometimes the crucial one) on the way of Europe toward modernity. In reality, Protestants merely did not accept the pope as main interpreter of the Bible. In general, Protestants strove to eliminate ambiguous passages in the Bible in order to emphasize the authority of holy scripture over and against the papacy. On the contrary, Catholics highlighted scripture's ambiguity in order to emphasize the necessity of church authority for its interpretation. According to Reiser, there

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174 Reiser, Bibelkritik, 19.
175 Ibid., 225.
176 Thus, Catholic scholars like von Rotterdam and Simon are frequently seen as crypto-Protestants. Ibid., 31-33. Reiser states: “The cliché that historical-critical scholarship followed from the Reformation is certainly wrong. It was the critical biblical science of humanism that paved the way for the historical-critical method. Luther and Calvin operated mainly within the framework of medieval theological exegesis.” Ibid., 226-233.

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were two reasons for the Protestant resilience to historical-critical scholarship: the dogma of the absolute authority of scripture and the dogma of verbal inspiration that came to be emphasized and altered by Protestants following the Reformation. This meant that any critique that challenged the sacredness of scripture also challenged the sacred foundations of the Protestant faith as independent church. On the Catholic side, the principle of the importance of tradition, in which scriptural exegesis was embedded, left some wiggle room for critical research due to considerations in matters of church politics. For example, the Church used historical arguments to legitimate the Vulgata against Protestant accusations.  

However, no confession was very sympathetic to the historical-critical approach that remained a risky undertaking until the seventeenth century. Humanistic research challenged the scholastic method and made the Bible appear even less clear and in parts muddled. Catholics saw the humanistic philological and grammatical studies as insolent trespass into church matters by lay people. The humanists thus competed over competence with the church specialists and threatened their authority as interpreters of scripture. This led in Spain to the inquisition of historical biblical scholars. Yet it is striking that philological-historical biblical commentaries were published until the beginning of the eighteenth century almost exclusively by Catholics who were often motivated by the urge to defend Catholicism against Protestant attacks. Both Protestant and Catholic biblical critique was highly polemical and written with its respective adversary in mind.

Until the eighteenth century, critique meant a philological examination of texts, mainly

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177 It must be noted that scriptural exegesis among Catholics was not reduced to countering Protestant claims and attacks. See Reiser, Bibelkritik, 17-19. Simon warned against “polluted” manuscripts; a final urtext could not be achieved, which rendered the Church as institution and seat of truth the more important. Ibid., 231-233. The council of Trent declared the Vulgata an “authentic” text, which was crucial for the Church’s mission to create a common identity among its members.

178 Ibid., 234-237.
textual critique; later on, it also entailed chronological, geographic, and historical inquiries, and
the question of the authenticity of the scripture. 179 While the humanists had left the patristics
mainly untouched, their authority fell with the Enlightenment, since allegorical readings of the
Bible were seen as unscientific. Maybe more importantly, given the general trend toward a “flight
from ambiguity,” 180 allegory dissolved any contradictions in the Bible into harmony. 181

The actual break with traditional exegesis did not follow from historical discoveries but
was a result of Enlightenment assumptions. It must be emphasized that the historical-critical
approach as it developed subsequently was not merely a side-project of a new and increasingly
secular world-view but furthered such a perspective. The development of historical-critical
methods overlapped with the emergence of political philosophy. Almost all of the “fathers of
modern philosophy,” among them Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza (1632-1677), Voltaire, Locke,
and Rousseau also engaged in the development of historical-critical biblical scholarship. 182 A core
topos of these Enlightenment thinkers was to connect a certain form of scriptural hermeneutics
with what they perceived as religious violence. This is not simply an interesting side aspect of the
formation of modernity. Rather, we see the same rationale repeated today with a view to the
Qur'ān. Therefore, we do well to know its roots.

The centrality of the reform of scriptural hermeneutics in order to bring peace and
toleration to the newly emergent territorial states in Europe can well be perceived in Spinoza. In
his Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (1670), he declared historical critique to be central for his
political vision. Spinoza saw the dogmas and the irrationality of the various religious factions in
Europe as the initiator of the Thirty Years War. He was hardly alone with his opinion. Hobbes

179 Reiser, Bibelkritik, 231-234.
180 Levine, Social Theory, 214.
181 Reiser, Bibelkritik, 25.
182 Hahn and Wiker, Politicizing the Bible, 8-9.
similarly saw the “pointless quarrelling of religious actors” as the cause of the wars. The solution for many political thinkers was the transfer of power from the churches to the state to determine morals and religious public ritual.\textsuperscript{183} Scriptural hermeneutics were central to this endeavor.

Spinoza is often referred to as the father of modern biblical scholarship.\textsuperscript{184} As Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker have demonstrated, his thought can be seen as paradigmatic of a mentality among certain intellectuals that increasingly gained momentum in Europe. As is well-known, Spinoza combined a Cartesian understanding of truth as “distinct and clear” with a pantheist worldview that made miracles practically impossible. He declared God's causality intrinsic to the world. Once God and nature are identical, and the distinction between nature and the divine is collapsed, nature cannot violate its own order and rules. Therefore, God can equally not violate those rules (since God and nature are one). Anything that is “un-” or “super-natural” must therefore either be explained by recourse to nature, or, if this proofs to be impossible, the miracle cannot have happened. This cosmology also made supernatural revelation impossible, or at least superfluous, because God's essence is entirely revealed in nature.\textsuperscript{185}

In David Lachterman's opinion, “The relationship between commitment to the explanatory intentions of modern physics and the dismantling of scriptural theology [were] intimately reciprocal.”\textsuperscript{186} Elaborating the thought of al-Fārābī (d. 951) and Ibn Rushd (1126 – 1198), Spinoza assumed that there were three kinds of knowledge. First, knowledge from casual experience (opinions, imagination, fragmentary confused kind of knowledge, and perception of symbols), second, reason (mathematical/mechanical mode of reason), and third, intuition.\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{183} Cavanaugh, \textit{Myth}, 124-129. The list of intellectuals who saw in scriptural hermeneutics the key to peace in Europe could be extended easily. See Hahn and Wiker, \textit{Politicizing the Bible}, 352.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 340.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 358-361.
\textsuperscript{187} Hahn and Wiker, \textit{Politicizing the Bible}, 361.
While the second and third forms of knowledge are reliable, the Bible conveys knowledge of the first kind which is also the primary cause for human error. Since the Bible was written by pre-scientific and “unreasonable” people, its content cannot teach real truth. The Bible could still be used to teach “love of neighbor” and morality to the uneducated masses, which was to become its main task in the Enlightenment project. According to Spinoza, scriptures differ because what they actually communicate is the prophet's imagination about God. Therefore, scripture reveals the character of the prophet rather than that of God. Yirmiyahu Yovel concludes that Spinoza wanted to keep the authority of the Bible while its interpretation had to abide by a higher reason and had to be in the service of the state. An important aim of Spinoza's work was

To establish mental and institutional mechanisms that will transform the imagination [of the people] into an external imitation of reason, using state power and a purified popular religion as vehicles of a semi-rational civilizing process. [...] Purified religion and the rationalized state are thus designed to engender in the multitude the same conduct that the rational model requires. [...] The content of the Bible had to be reinterpreted to suit the message of the new universal religion [of reason]. Although Spinoza insists that biblical hermeneutics must become an *objective science*, he also expects it to serve as a means for reforming historical religion by reducing [...] what is held to be the word of God, to a concise set of general and rather secular principles.

The ideal interpretation for Spinoza was thus pre-determined and had to lead to discovering the Golden Rule. To arrive at an unambiguous interpretation, one had to reconstruct the original biblical texts, discern their redaction processes, detect underlying intentions of the authors, find errors and possible falsifications, and determine its transmitters. Spinoza conceded that this was an impossible task. Hahn and Wiker interpret this concession as a rhetorical strategy to prove that divergent opinions of the scriptures were unavoidable and, hence, had to be accepted not as truth

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188 Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 328.
189 Ibid., 372.
or direct moral guidance but only as a secondary form of truth. The result would be relativism. People could believe what they wanted as long as it remained private. However, in Spinoza's view, the judgment over religion should be made by the state that he envisioned as a democracy.

Thus, in Spinoza's case, secularism would not be the separation of church and state, but the control of religion by the state. The “disarming” of scripture was necessary for people to live together in peace and harmony. Spinoza's hermeneutical move entailed a complete split between philosophy and theology, reason and religion, science and faith — the binaries that would come to define Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. Spinoza hit two birds with one stone, so to speak. He affirmed the credo of sola scriptura, yet rendered it completely harmless. His prediction of historical interpretation being an endless task proved almost prophetically true; however, this hermeneutical revolution took a while to materialize.

The core ideals of the Enlightenment (“rationality” as highest authority, tolerance as its core value, belief in progress as standard of philosophy, and skepticism against anything unclear and mysterious) changed the notions of plausibility fundamentally. It must be noted that it is in general difficult to speak of one uniform Enlightenment. As Sebastian Conrad contends, the birth of Enlightenment thought was not an exclusively European affair but “a product of, and response to, global conjectures; and it was the work of many authors in different parts of the world. [...] The non-European world was always present in eighteenth century intellectual discussions.”

This is maybe nowhere more apparent than in the considerations of the Qur'an by prominent

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191 Spinoza stated: “For [...] just as long ago faith was revealed and written down in accordance with the grasp and opinion of the Prophets and the vulgar of the time, so too each is now bound to accommodate it to his own opinions. For we have shown that faith does not require truth so much as piety.” See Spinoza, Tractatus, 14.2.1-3. Quoted in Hahn and Wiker, Politicizing the Bible, 374-376.
192 Ibid., 380-382.
Enlightenment thinkers. Of course, there is an eminent tradition of polemics against the Qurʾan in European scholarship of the time. There is yet another equally important narrative.

In his book *The Enlightenment Qurʾan* (2009), Ziad Elmarsafy traces translations of the Qurʾan into European languages and examines how these were used in Enlightenment thought. For example, when in the sixteenth century, Protestants fought with Catholics over moral superiority, the Qurʾan became “an integral part of polemics within Christianity.”¹⁹⁵ In a time when the Ottoman Empire was still perceived as strong, Islam became an important foil for criticizing the corruption within Catholicism.¹⁹⁶ The Enlightenment concern with rationalism and exposing superstition was often sympathetic to Islam which was contrasted to Christian blind obedience to a corrupt authority and irrationality. Since there was no true “revelation” to begin with, the Qurʾan could be viewed as a legitimate work of spiritual guidance and literature apart from any competing truth claims. While Voltaire drew on Islam to develop further his critique of Christianity in Europe, Rousseau idealized Muḥammad as an example for the rational and just legislator. For the German romanticist and literary scholar Goethe (1749-1832), fascinated with the Qurʾan at an early age, “Islam made sense in a way that Christianity did not.”¹⁹⁷ Goethe elevated the Qurʾan from a rival sacred scripture to one of the world’s greatest literary texts and viewed Muḥammad as a prophetic poet, neither militarist nor heretic.

The exegetical principles of the European Enlightenment were mainly derived from English Deism. John Toland (1670 – 1722) declared rationality (natural reason) as sole measure to assess the Bible. No other rules than for any other book should be applied in biblical exegesis. Thomas Chubb (1679 – 1746) made “our natural notion of things” and “the eternal rules of right

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 23.
¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 165.
and wrong” the guideline for faith and acting. He used these criteria to separate the true from
the wrong, the probable from the improbable, and the actual words of Jesus from forgeries in the
gospels. Anything else was reading one's own desires into the text. Deists often referred to the
Qur'an in order to make their own theological claims heard or idealized Muḥammad as having
transmitted the true unitarian gospel. A common argument in Deist circles was that the enemy of
faith were the incomprehensible doctrines in which a corrupt clergy had clothed originally clear
beliefs – an attitude that led many Anglicans to accuse Deists of being Muslim. Even on the
basis of these few examples, one can argue that Islam and the Qur'an served different purposes in
the greater projects of these thinkers and politicians. The Qur'an served a function for them.

The point I want to make here is not that Enlightenment thinkers mainly saw the Qur'an in
a positive light. Polemical texts against Islam and its scripture well coexisted with these images.
Rather, Elmarsafy's study proves three things; first, that the Qur'an was often used as a platform
to decide over inner-Christian disputes; second, that the Qur’an and Islam were part of the
European imaginaire although there were only very few Muslims in what we now call Europe;
third, Elmarsafy's study indicates that the treatment of the Qur'an had often more to do with
negotiating religion and politics in Europe than with impartial scholarship. It is also noteworthy
that the more positive images of the Qur'an and Muḥammad from the Enlightenment and
Romantic era are less well known in Arabic writings on orientalist scholarship. Prevalent images
of orientalist attitudes toward Islam are those of the stereotypical anti-Muslim polemics.

In the eighteenth century, biblical scholarship was established as its own scientific
discipline separated from the theological and spiritual traditions of the church. Much of biblical

198 Reiser, Bibelkritik, 261.
199 Elmarsafy, Enlightenment Qur’an, 21.
201 Reiser, Bibelkritik, 1.
exegesis was examined according to whether it contributed to “progress”\textsuperscript{202} and to the liberation of the “yoke” of tradition.\textsuperscript{203} Despite these political aims, true exegesis, it was generally believed, needed impartiality.\textsuperscript{204} In this context, critique again gained a new meaning. As Reiser states, “From now on Bible criticism entailed the judgment of biblical literature according to historical and literary criteria in the light of enlightened convictions.”\textsuperscript{205} The Bible had to be read as any other book, “whatever that might lead to.” Each Christian had to decide independently what the Christian truths were. In conflicts between historical findings and dogma, dogma had to budge.\textsuperscript{206} One important result of the new view of scripture was the atomization of the Bible; each biblical book had to be analyzed on its own. Thus, scholars “discovered” that the New Testament did not contain one but several theologies. The Bible could only be interpreted with the help of the Bible when the passages were linked historically, which rendered analogical interpretation obsolete.

The great change in biblical scholarship came when Protestantism warmed up to Enlightenment thought in the middle of the eighteenth century while Catholicism remained reluctant. Germany replaced the Netherlands as the major proponent of historical-critical scholarship offering theologians unprecedented freedom of thought. In Germany, historical-critical scholarship had its home in academia and became part and parcel of the university.\textsuperscript{207} Linked to scriptural exegesis was the development of the concept of history. Before 1780,

\textsuperscript{202} Gottlob Wilhelm Meyer, \emph{Geschichte der Schriftenkärung seit der Wiederherstellung der Wissenschaften} vol. 3 (Göttingen: Roewer, 1804), 472. See also Reiser, \emph{Bibelkritik}, 6.

\textsuperscript{203} Eduard Reuss, \emph{Die Geschichte der heiligen Schriften Neuen Testaments} (Halle: Schwetschke 1887), § 573.

\textsuperscript{204} Meyer, \emph{Geschichte}, 759-760.

\textsuperscript{205} Reiser, \emph{Bibelkritik}, 265.

\textsuperscript{206} Echoing Spinoza, Johann Jakob Wettstein (1693-1754) argued that the neglect of historical-cultural interpretation was the reason for the fights over dogma since the Reformation. See ibid., 261-264. Goethe found that the Pentateuch was an “unhappily redacted group of disparate books.” Schiller (1759-1805) considered the Bible true only “where it is naïve. In all else, I suspect an underlying purpose and a later origin.” Quoted in ibid., 20-21.

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 27. Matthew Arnold, for example, stated: “To get the facts, the data, in all matters of science, but notably in theology and Biblical learning, one goes to Germany.” Arnold, \emph{Literature and Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible} (London: Smith Elder & Co, 1874), xxiv, 114, 338.
“history” always meant the history of something particular. The idea of a history-in-general is a modern, post-Enlightenment exercise. As Reinhart Kosselleck states:

Our contemporary concept of history, together with its numerous zones of meaning [...] is an outcome of the lengthy theoretical reflections of the Enlightenment. Formerly there had existed, for instance, the history that God had set in motion with humanity. But there was no history for which humanity might have been the subject or which could be thought of as its own subject.208

James Turner and Jon Roberts explain the secularization of the university as the move from “ideal knowledge cohering under a Christian worldview toward an attractive new ideal of specialized disciplinary learning.” This development was particularly prevalent in the humanities and was made possible by philological historicism, which postulated that “every human phenomenon was determined by its own distinct, unique, ultimately contingent history.”209 Importantly, for knowledge to be produced, Foucault argues, certain political circumstances for its production have already to be in place.210 That history became an important “science” in the humanities was due to the increased economic ability of modern states to establish universities and support an intellectual elite financially. According to John H. Arnold, at the root of this support was “a desire that history should serve the needs of the nation state in producing 'national' histories.”211 This directive shaped the questions that would be thinkable, asked, and

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210 Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) 44-45. He refers here more generally to the question of what makes the appearance of an object in discourse possible: “The conditions necessary for the appearance of an object of discourse, the historical conditions required if one is to 'say anything' about it, and if several people are to say different things about it, the conditions necessary if it is to exist in relation to other objects, if it is to establish with them relations of resemblance, proximity, distance, difference, transformation – as we can see, these conditions are many and imposing. Which means that one cannot speak of anything at any time; it is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, or to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground.” Foucault seems to direct us to a dead end where nothing is left to say or nothing new possible to be stated.
211 Arnold, History, 56.
thought. With regard to university historians, Arnold rightly adds, “professional” did not mean impartial but “paid,”\textsuperscript{212} which points to yet another relationship between knowledge and wealth, or to the economics of knowledge.

State Protestantism was actively involved in the privatization of religion. Protestant scholars gradually replaced dogma with “private conscience” or “private reason,” and finally “private judgment.” What Ernst Troeltsch called \textit{Neuprotestantismus} (neo-Protestantism) entailed the conviction that every individual had to arrive at his or her own judgment even in regard to dogma. The new variant of critical exegesis was historical-critical with the main premise that anything miraculous and supernatural had to be excluded from interpretation. In the nineteenth century, the belief in miracles or God's acting in the world had become “non-modern.”

Matthew Arnold wanted to dispense with anything miraculous and supernatural, which would eventually lead to the destruction of traditional Christianity. In its stead he envisioned a cultural Christianity, viewing Jesus as a teacher, preacher, and thinker. The biblical authors were the immature children of their unenlightened times; the apostles, limited in their mental capacities, had gotten Jesus all wrong. The authority of the Bible came to be frustrated in the process, being reduced to a literary or historical classic. Gradually, this approach led to a historical view that created a corridor between the contemporary times and the ancient texts, which partly explains the opposition within the churches to these methods.\textsuperscript{213}

Not only historical findings questioned the Bible's authority. Changes in ethics and theology raised questions as to whether the stories in the Old Testament were amoral, cruel, and whether Christianity needed the Old Testament at all. The unity of Old and New Testament

\textsuperscript{212} Arnold, \textit{History}, 57.
\textsuperscript{213} Reiser, \textit{Bibelkritik}, 234-239, 241.
remained to be a problem, and so was the attitude toward Judaism. While the miracles and stories from the Old Testament were mainly discarded by scholarship in the nineteenth century, most (Christian) scholars were not yet ready to do the same with the New Testament.\textsuperscript{214} Nineteenth century historians generally described traditional exegesis, for example \textit{allegoresis} and the interpretation of the Old through the New Testament, as “imprisoned and chained by dogma,” clouding its actual meaning. Scholars now had to “salvage historical treasures from beneath the rubble of tradition.”\textsuperscript{215} Reiser describes the common tenor of historical-critical scholarship when he states, “One came to the realization that the history of exegesis only really started in the eighteenth century when one (allegedly!) dared to read the Bible \textit{impartially}. This conviction is until today prominent in the historical consciousness of biblical sciences.”\textsuperscript{216}

There was not much impartiality involved in historical-critical scholarship, however. In the case of Germany, certainly true for other milieus as well, the antagonism between Catholics and Protestants played a crucial role in assessing the biblical texts. Many Protestant critics believed that they were continuing the work of the Reformers by using historical-critical tools to arrive at the \textit{original meaning} of Christianity, while purging it from accumulated and inauthentic ecclesiastical and traditional layers.\textsuperscript{217} The search for the Ur-Christianity by means of historical criticism was first and foremost a Protestant undertaking, among other reasons, to detect the “corruptions” Christianity had suffered under the Catholic Church. According to this Protestant historiographic myth, the apostolic church symbolizes Protestantism ready to restore and cleanse

\textsuperscript{214} Reiser, \textit{Bibelkritik}, 21-24. Ernest Renan caused stir in 1863 when he rejected the miracle reports about Jesus. The miraculous elements of the New Testament had already been challenged, but only in the middle of the twentieth century, this view became commonplace in educational curricula in the universities, even among Catholics.


\textsuperscript{216} Reiser, \textit{Bibelkritik}, 27.

Ur-Christianity, while the foreign influences represent the contagion of Catholicism with non-Christian elements.\textsuperscript{218} Philological studies of the nineteenth century were characterized by ideological contrasts despite the common image of objective and detached scholarship.

For example, scholars in Germany felt that the French brand of Enlightenment was a rival and thus recast French Enlightenment. Both countries found themselves in almost ongoing mutual political or military struggle. In German lands, the Jewish question became especially relevant and these various tensions were reflected directly in the discussions in philology, biblical criticism, and, as we shall see, in Qur'\textsuperscript{n}ic studies. For example, the tension between Hellenism and Hebraism, i.e., the question of what has Athens to do with Jerusalem, was partly a product of these debates and found its way into these “objective” disciplines.\textsuperscript{219} In the search for their own identity, European biblical scholars linked their search for the historical Jesus to national aspirations and ideologies. They projected their crisis of nation, race, and social constitutions onto their historical Jesus – arriving either at an Aryan, Greek, or Semitic Jesus.\textsuperscript{220}

Oftentimes, the results of science were only poorly substantiated theses that were soon to be passed over, or at least modified. Much of the research was driven by critique of clergy and dogma.\textsuperscript{221} Moreover, as R.S. Sugirtharajah writes, “Historical Jesus scholarship tends to represent, voice, or support hegemonic cultural assumptions about the nature and role of identity.” Importantly, “these assumptions include the idea of empire and colonialism.”\textsuperscript{222}

\textsuperscript{218} Jonathan Z. Smith, Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 43-44.

\textsuperscript{219} Taştekin, Another Look, 71.

\textsuperscript{220} As Masuzawa states: “Nineteenth century philology, linguistics and ethnology strived at detaching Christianity’s essence from its Semitic roots and tried to establish Christianity’s Arian and Greek origin. Not only was Christianity’s essence reaffirmed as the pinnacle of monotheism and universalism, similarly the kernel of Judaism was lifted above its outer “national” and “local” character.” See Mazusawa, Invention, 191-193.

\textsuperscript{221} The Catholic church remained skeptical toward the new liberal exegesis and mobilized against it by making all of its members pledge an “antimodernist” oath. This duty was only lifted in 1967. See Reiser, Bibelkritik, 245-246.

Much has changed in biblical studies since the eighteenth century. Yet, as Reiser notes, the changes almost only refer to new questions, preferences, and plausibilities, not to the actual principles of exegesis. One of the favored methods to approach the Bible is literary critique or Higher Criticism that is guided by the belief that one can step behind the sources and read them “against the grain.” Following more or less arbitrary selection, one first has to create the Text, on the basis of which one then constructs the historical situation. This method tends to “turn the Bible into a museum” and leads to separating exegesis from liturgy and faith from history. The more the Bible was studied historically, Wilken observes, the more “it was taken as axiomatic that the scholarly study of the Bible had to exclude references to Christian teaching.” For many historians, the Bible ceased to be a Christian book, much less scripture.

According to Gerhard Ebeling, historical criticism differs from mere historical curiosity and philological refinement in that it meets tradition with skepticism and questions its fundamentals. It presupposes a whole new intellectual mindset closely linked to philosophical developments. Aside from the method of literary critique, it is a form of exegesis that is “exercised according to certain rules – the rules of critique – and under specific presuppositions: the fundamental convictions of the Enlightenment.” It has become common in biblical scholarship to differentiate between pre-critical and critical. This terminology does not simply refer to a periodization, but implies a judgment or even “condemning.” Historical-critical scholarship, Reiser notes, often privileges criticism over understanding:

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Historical research that wants to be critical in the Enlightenment sense has as its aim exposure and debunking. To uncover inconsistencies, mistakes, errors, lies, perversions, legends, inventions; to trace prejudices, tendencies, and illusions and to find “natural” explanations for the seemingly supernatural: this is what one understood under historical research and the search for the truth. Truth was the rationally explainable facts and veracity the quest for it.  

Such a process starts from a hermeneutics of suspicion. With all the striving to understand the world historically, the lack of interest among Enlightenment and rationalist thinkers in tradition and history generally is striking. The most obvious problem with the Enlightenment convictions is that they are in complete opposition to the mind-set of the authors of the biblical books. This is a more general problem of modern history writing that is by definition secular. Chakrabarty has drawn attention to this problem when he states,

A secular subject like history faces certain problems in handling practices in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency in the world. […] Secular histories are usually produced by ignoring the signs of the presences. Such histories represent a meeting of two systems of thought, one in which the world is ultimately, that is, in the final analysis disenchanted, and the other in which humans are not the only meaningful agents. For the purpose of writing history, the first system, the secular one, translates the second into itself.

We will be dealing with this particular problem of the meeting of two systems of thought in history writing for the rest of this thesis. There is yet another problem that is linked to the use of the category of “time” to describe critical and un-critical. In his study on the use of Time in anthropological endeavors, Johannes Fabian criticized that cultural differences were often not simply explained in spatial terms, but in terms of chronological categories (for example, the binary of traditional and modern) that distort the view of anthropology concerning the objects it studies. This chronological differentiation implies a process of denying the “coevalness” of the researcher with its subject. Typologies that are based on chronological distance negate the close

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228 Ibid., 265-270.
relationship of influence, dominance, as well as the mutual constitution of contemporaneous societies. As Fabian writes, “When modern anthropology began to construct its Other in terms of topoi implying distance, difference, and opposition, its intent was above all […] to construct ordered space and time – a cosmos – for western society to inhabit, rather than understanding other cultures.” Historical-critical scholarship did not only remove the authors of scripture – its referent – “from the present of the speaking/writing subject,” and claimed to know better what the scriptural books meant than their authors; by adopting the critical/pre-critical division as a difference of time, these scholars often also passed judgment on those who still used “pre-critical” scriptural interpretation and viewed any form of “traditional” interpretation as a sign of an underdeveloped mindset. Higher criticism became a formidable tool to discredit other religions on the basis of their “faulty scriptures” or “naïve” approach to those scriptures in the colonial context. We will see this rationale also at work in qu'ānic studies. The link between “progress” and a particular scriptural hermeneutics, so central to the Enlightenment discourse, also aided in marking “them” from “us” and provided a rationale for imperial endeavors.

Even though Europe had found itself on the steady road to secularization since the eighteenth century, theology was still a prestigious discipline. This led to a paradox in secular history writing. New findings in theology’s subfields of biblical studies, ethics, and church history not only forced systematic theologians to rethink church doctrines, ethics, and epistemology; the reverse happened as well: those fields in return influenced the disciplines of philosophy, hermeneutics, political thought, and history. Thomas Howard showed that historical-critical theology and biblical exegesis exerted a strong influence on modern culture and on the

231 Ibid., 143.
232 Sugirtharajah, Exploring, 39-44.
concept of secular history. A significant number of historians in the nineteenth century were trained theologians, and many theorists of history incorporated theological concepts into secular history writing. For example, original sin translated into a pessimistic conception of “this world” and skepticism of anything human.233

In his study of the intricacies of theology and history writing in these centuries, Howard concludes, “The long shadows of theological presuppositions and attitudes, albeit in secularized forms, [were] ultimately more significant than the radical break that notions of religious crisis and apostasy seem to entail.”234 The place of Christian theology was a core element in the western academy, even if the over-all influence of the church(es) was receding in Europe. Qur'ānic studies was in a much more volatile position. Since there was no Islamic theology in Europe and no significant Muslim community, Qur'ānic studies served rather different purposes than its equivalents in biblical studies, albeit the scholarly premises were the same.

Qur'ānic studies was a more isolated scholarly undertaking in the sense that it was not directly linked to theological discussions and the Qur'ān only marginally rooted in the European collective memory. However, as we have seen, the Qur'ān was not completely absent from the European imaginaire, and its reputation was not always negative. Particularly in the time of the Enlightenment, many intellectuals in Europe had looked toward foreign civilizations, religions, and cultures in order to figure out the best possible policy for their own lands and constitutions. The information obtained was often used to formulate critiques of one's own government or ruler. The Qur'ān was utilized to critique the Bible, absolutist governments, and forms of scholarship that were considered traditional and outdated. This spirit became lost during the period of

233 Howard, Religion, 3-11.
234 Ibid., 5-7.
imperialism, which strengthens the argument that the production of knowledge and power structures are closely intertwined. Once the power of the Ottoman Empire crumbled, the European view of Islam changed, too.

**Qur’ānic Studies: What Has Mecca to Do with Jerusalem?**

The question “What has Mecca to do with Jerusalem?” – one of the themes of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in 2011, seems particularly indicative of debates over qur’ānic studies in the western academy over the past 150 years. How one interprets this question depends on the addressee’s standpoint. A western trained person might immediately think of the Christian author Tertullian (c. 160 – c. 220 AD), who raised the question “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Or the Academy with the Church?” For Tertullian, the Christian scriptures and the teachings of philosophy were incompatible, insofar as the latter was the origins of heresies.

Since the time of Tertullian, that quote has become paradigmatic for questions that touch upon the authority of scripture in relation to reason, history, philosophy, and historical criticism. In the context of the AAR panel, the question alluded to the intersections between the disciplines of biblical and qur’ānic studies. But the question of the connection between Mecca and Jerusalem evokes a whole set of other associations that throw us into the heart of issues that accompany the scholarly treatment of the Qur’ān in Europe; for example, the applicability of historical critique to the Qur’ān, the intertextuality of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic scriptures, the relationship between Judaism and Islam, and, more generally, the place of Muslims in Europe.

In the West, biblical and qur’ānic studies share common roots. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Arabic studies was a sub-category of “sacred philology” (*philologia sacra*)

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236 The participants in the panel were: Gordon D. Newby (Emory University), Kathryn M. Kueny (Fordham University), Alford T. Welch (Michigan State University), Daniel A. Madigan (Georgetown University) and Michael Pregill (Elon University).
and was considered to be a tool for the study of the Bible. Particularly in the course of imperialist projects by France, England, and the Habsburg Reich, Arabic came to be seen increasingly as a practical instrument for advancing knowledge about the colonized people. In German lands this development began only later, probably not until the beginning of the twentieth century, and was linked to the emergence of Islamic studies. This does not mean at any rate that orientalists did not share in colonial discourse that developed synonymously with the rise and professionalization of historical scholarship. Protestant theology itself was active in shaping colonialist thinking. As Susannah Heschel writes, “Accustomed to a theological position as colonizer, Christian theology, by the nineteenth century, quite easily reproduced many patterns of thought, if not the particular fantasies, that dominated German colonialist imagination.” In the nineteenth century, many of the leading orientalists in Germany also had a theological background.

For orientalist studies, critical Protestant theology played a major role. According to Baber Johansen, “It legitimised the critical philological analysis of sacred texts and thus encouraged the rewriting of religious history.” In short, Protestant historical-critical scholarship provided the rationale for a secular approach to sacred texts. Wellhausen is an excellent example of a scholar who switched over from theology to oriental studies as a result of his unorthodox views in biblical studies. In 1882, he transferred from theology to Semitics because he felt uncomfortable to train students for the clergy. This change of career was possible because he

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240 Among them: Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827), Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780-1849), Heinrich Ewald (1803-1875), Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801-1888), Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), and Nöldeke (1836-1930). See Johansen, “Islamic Studies,” §18.
used the same methods he knew from biblical studies in orientalist studies. While he was dismissed from his chair in theology due to confessional concerns, no such guard existed for Islamic and Qur'ānic studies in which he could freely follow his secular convictions.243

Similarly, Ernest Renan (1823 – 1892) gradually developed from a Catholic into a convinced atheist and produced several anti-religious works that attacked the foundations of Catholicism. Renan's controversial “Life of Jesus” produced fifty-two editions in France alone and led to his dismissal as professor.244 Once he was reinstated, his attacks on Islam and the Qur'ān, to be examined more closely in the next section, elicited no such reactions. The careers of these two scholars demonstrate that Islamic and Qur'ānic studies served partly as a safe haven for scholars whose thought had become too controversial for biblical studies. Orientalist studies had no religious establishment that could take issue with the critical approaches to the Qur'ān. This reaction would be delayed once these studies reached the Muslim world.

Renan's historical studies of the origins of religion served him to advance his political vision of an enlightened and emancipated population that would eventually suspend religion and submit entirely to the idea of progress.245 Heinrich Ewald (1803 – 1875), one of the seven founders of the “Gesellschaft für Orientstudien” (Society for Orient studies), articulated similar ideas. For him, the French Revolution represented the beginning of a time in which society was liberated from institutionalized religion. He was convinced that the objective study of religion and history would lead to the advancement of societies in which an ideal form of religion would be realized. To make such objective research possible, historical and philological research had to

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244 Reiser, Bibelkritik, 246.
245 See, for example, Ernest Renan, Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse, ed. J. Pommier (Paris: Nizet, 2003), 7. He states, “there are no religious masses anymore […] Religion has become an affair of personal taste.” See also Renan, Islam and Science. A Lecture presented at La Sorbonne 29 March 1883 by Ernest Renan, trans. Sally P. Ragep (Montreal: McGill University, 2011). We will deal with his views more closely in the next section.
be independent from “all ecclesiastical and theological control.”

Independence, for Ewald, meant not impartiality but the freedom to contribute to the shaping of a new world with a privatized form of religion. Orientalist studies were part of this ideological endeavor. Secularism in this context should not be understood simply as the separation of church and state or religious decline, but as its rearrangement and social differentiation in order to bring religion in line with a certain modality of liberal politics; in short, to further certain religious subjectivities.

Part of the orientalist project was the “Oriental within” – the Jews in Europe, who were often conceptually linked to Islam. Christian historians functioned as “experts on Judaism,” whose origins they reconstructed. They were thus actively involved in debates over Jewish emancipation and hence in politics. One of the major questions in the course of Jewish emancipation was whether Jews could really be German as long as

They retained their separate communal institutions and identity and adhered to a religion that most Christians had long seen as carnal rather than spiritual, disastrously focused on the letter rather than the spirit, as either a cause or a symptom of criminality and exploitation, and patently inferior to Christianity.

It was the emergence of the nation-state that produced the conceptualization of Judaism as religion in the process. According to Heschel, the Wissenschafi des Judentums developed out of the desire to construct a powerful counter narrative to the hegemonic Protestant historical discourse. Its most ardent representatives also used the Qur'ān in their arguments.

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246 Johansen, “Islamic Studies,” §27.
Qur’ān scholars who had Talmudic training included Abraham Geiger (1810 – 1874), Gustav Weil (1809 – 1889), and Jacob Barth (1851 – 1914).251

For the German context, it is worthwhile to examine the contribution to qur’ānic studies of Geiger and Weil. As noted by Bernard Lewis, Jewish scholars seemed to have a greater potential to produce impartial research on Islam since they did not share with their Christian colleagues a history of strife and competition with Muslims. The Jewish scholar was then “freed from inherited fears, prejudices, and inhibitions that had often marred Christian scholarship.”252 Yet, Jewish Qur’ān scholarship was not apolitical; in fact, quite the opposite is true. Currents in biblical studies that had emerged with the Haskala, and its modernizing and rationalizing vision, influenced the enterprise of qur’ānic studies from an early stage. An important reason for the inordinate contribution by Jewish scholars to the field of Orientalism was that they were allowed in that field relatively early compared to other academic disciplines.

Another reason was that the study of Islam provided opportunities to address the situation of the Jews in Europe by linking Islam and Judaism analogically and historically. Through Islamic studies Jewish concerns could be publicly addressed. Qur’ānic studies thus did not merely satisfy a scientific curiosity or pure interest in history in general. Reform Judaism used historical-critical scholarship as a means to achieve assimilation of the Jews into the social life of their countries, or to “de-orientalize” both Judaism and Islam. In order to do so, “They aligned Islam and Judaism in opposition to Christianity.”253 Jewish historians and Qur’ān scholars helped to simultaneously create a space for (Jewish) difference in the largely Protestant academy and enabled scholars to include Jews in world history. Islam, via its Jewish adaptations, came to be

251 Johansen, “Islamic Studies,” §18.
dialectically involved in the making of European identity.

Harnack, Wellhausen, and others argued that the Jewish material in the Qurʾān had been introduced through Christian sources. Weil and Geiger retorted by tracing Jewish influences in the Qurʾān. They utilized historical-critical scholarship to the Qurʾān in order to highlight the importance of Judaism in world history. In her detailed examination of Geiger's work, Heschel demonstrates convincingly that he followed several political incentives in his research on the origins of Christianity and Islam. Countering the widespread anti-Judaism in New Testament scholarship was part of a larger effort to overcome religious and cultural objections to Jewish equality. Geiger envisioned the integration of the study of Judaism into the academy. In order to make his claim heard, he argued that rabbinical Judaism was critical for understanding Jesus's life and thoughts. As Heschel contends, Jewish assimilation into German society required an explanation of Christianity that made it respectable for Jews without rendering Judaism irrelevant or leading Jews to convert to Christianity. Constructing the story of Christian origins from a Jewish perspective was an act of Jewish self-empowerment.

Geiger's Qurʾānic studies were similarly an act of Jewish empowerment. In his prize-winning essay *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* he traced Jewish sources in the Qurʾān and repositioned Judaism on “the map of western history as the font of one of its daughter religions, Islam.” Often, it was assumed that the modernization of Judaism

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254 For example, Friedrich Schwally assumed in his preface to Nöldke that Islam was a particular form of Christianity adapted to the Arab environment. See Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58-59.

255 His thesis was that Jesus had been a pharisee who had sought to liberalize Judaism. Reform Judaism would be the actual (spiritual and rational) religion of Jesus. One could then adopt elements from liberal Christianity since they were really Jewish to begin with. In the nineteenth century, Jews began to view Jesus as the ideal Jew of the first century and one of the greatest Jewish religious leaders. Ibid., 3-5, 13.


would result in Jewish conversion to Christianity. Geiger's response was a powerful antagonistic narrative. He introduced the category “Semitic monotheism” as a counter concept to the Philhellenism and Protestant bias in contemporary scholarship by suggesting a historical allegiance between Islam and Judaism as a corrective to Christian polytheistic degeneration.258 While Geiger considered all religions human Muḥammad as the author of the Qurʾān (a narrative has largely been dismissed in more recent scholarship), he depicted Islam in a notably positive way. Geiger's account reads remarkably differentiated and concerted. Careful not to take resemblance of religious rites, practices, words, and narratives as proof that the Prophet had “borrowed” (entlehnen) from Judaism, he also referred to Christian influences on the Qurʾān.259

In his opinion, the variety of religious communities and their views during the emergence of Islam made it hard to detect a direct link between Jewish sources and the Qurʾān. While he had a predominantly positive view of Muḥammad, he considered the Qurʾān a “cheaper version” of its original sources. This sorry state of affairs resulted from the “low [civilizational] stage” of the Jews who were present in the Arabian Peninsula. Muḥammad “made mistakes,” at times confused the prophets and the chronology of events, was ignorant, disoriented, and “[repeated] himself endlessly.” In general, Geiger thought the Qurʾān reflected well its “childlike” environment.260 It is obvious that Geiger viewed the Qurʾān as an emulation of the Bible, a theme that runs through many subsequent qurʾānic studies. Nonetheless, he also defended Muḥammad against the

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258 Taştekin, Another Look, 7-8.
259 Geiger, Was hat Mohammed, 2, 94-98. One may assume, so Geiger, that most parts that tell stories of the Old Testament were taken from the Jews since he holds that the Christians of that time did not really care about the Old Testament. Passages that Christians actually cared about were not mentioned in the Qurʾān. In his essay, he examined questions such as: Did borrowing from Judaism serve any purpose for Muḥammad, i.e., did he want to borrow from Judaism? Was Muḥammad in the position to borrow, did he have the means, texts, knowledge, and surroundings that enabled a borrowing? Ibid., 5. To prove that something had been borrowed from Judaism two criteria had to be fulfilled: First the evidence that the material was actually present in the Judaism of Muḥammad's time, and that it was not something similar that had already been present among the ancient Arabs. Second, it had to be shown that it was incorporated from Judaism and not from Christianity. Ibid., 41.
260 Ibid., 10, 24-25, 28, 31, 74-75, 109, 139.
accusations of being an imposter, who consciously aimed to betray people. In Geiger's view, such an opinion failed to take “the human heart” into consideration where Muḥammad's revelation, in truly Romantic fashion, originated: As a “Schwärmer (enthusiast) Muḥammad was convinced of his divine calling and mission and considered an alloy of all religious world views into one as necessity for the sake of humanity. He felt so strongly about this that every idea appeared to him like a divine inspiration.” Nevertheless, sometimes Muḥammad, overcome by a desire to political power, did apply “a ruse” to achieve his aims.  

With his work, Geiger strove to highlight the importance of Judaism as giving rise not only to Christianity but also to Islam. Implicit in this new history of Islam was a critique against what Geiger perceived as the prevailing Enlightenment paradigm that was loth to give Judaism any credit for the events of world history. Islam was proof that Judaism, even in its primitive version, was attractive to Muḥammad. Why else would he have borrowed from it? While at times Geiger conveyed the impression that Islam was only a dim version of Judaism, he also emphasized the originality of Islam. It can be rightly concluded that Geiger's study of the Qurʾān was as much a study of Islam as it was of Judaism. The relationship between Mecca and Jerusalem was a happy one, even if one can argue, as Emel Taştekin does, that Geiger also exerted violence against Islam because he questioned its autonomy. Compared to his contemporaries, however, Geiger presented a surprisingly positive account of Islam. Both Geiger and Weil's accounts of early Islamic history, the Qurʾān, and Muḥammad give us clues as to how

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261 Geiger, Was hat Mohammed, 34-35.
262 Geiger entails criticism about the Enlightenment and its inner anti-Jewish polemic. For example, he rhetorically asks why the Arabs should have minded Jewish elements in the Qurʾān since they had not subscribed to an Enlightenment theory according to which only one religion was true and superior to all others, “to consider the [possession] of one religious party as solely excellent, call the possession of another one reprehensible, to narrow the universally human to the Christian, and to represent the Jewish as merely dead and lifeless.” See ibid., 32.
263 Ibid., 42-58. See also Heschel, German Jewish Scholarship, 95-96.
264 Taştekin, Another Look, 29, 112.
they negotiated their identities in a hostile environment by means of historical-critical research. Central to this project was the historicization of religion and the adoption of historicism. Since most of western scholarship has focused on Geiger, I will elaborate on Gustav Weil.

In his *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in den Koran* (1844), Weil discussed the future of Islam, which he saw intrinsically linked to the application of the historical-critical approach to the Qur’ān – a theme we will encounter repeatedly in various authors. The following part of his work illustrates well how the contemporary discourse on religion influenced his conclusion at the end of his study of the Qur’ān. Weil saw Islam, which he encountered during his travels, and Judaism in a similar backward position vis-à-vis (and in need of) Enlightenment. He was dedicated to the modernization project that was underway but not yet achieved in Europe itself.

Time and again he represented Islam in analogy to Ashkenazi Judaism as unchanging, archaic, and superstitious. His reading of Islam often incorporated German complaints about the *Ostjuden* – the Eastern Jews.265 His hope for reform of Judaism and Islam was their epistemological and hermeneutical alignment with liberal Protestant rationalism, precipitating religion’s de-politicization and historicization. The following passage illustrates this bias well:

If we pose the question which future we can predict for [Islam] to achieve the heights of European civilization, we believe that it has to follow the same path as Judaism, both in sundering tradition from revelation; and in making a distinction in the holy scripture between eternal truths and precepts that were evoked only by temporary external circumstances and are suited only for a certain period and people. A merging of Christianity with Islam is predictable because Mohammed himself honored Christ and Mary in a stronger degree than even a part of Protestant Christians does today. If Mohammedans one day reach the conviction by means of historical-theological studies that the current Christianity is an entirely different one from that which Mohammed knew, that the *Urchristentum* returned to its original purity out of its own strength, that, as a Christian, one only has to believe in one God, who created heaven and earth, that one neither has to conceive of God’s mother as God’s wife nor of Christ as reproduced by them, then it will become evident that the partition wall between them and Christians will be breached. [...] Jews and Mohammedans can only be convinced through rationalism. Non-rationalists should realize this, even Catholics. [...] Mohammed could then remain God’s messenger for the Arabs,

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just as Moses is for the Jews. As the greatest prophet of all humanity and in all eternity, however, they would have to acknowledge Christ.\textsuperscript{266}

Weil reads Islam through the prism of a contemporary liberal Protestant understanding of religion. This is noteworthy because Weil himself was Jewish, and it demonstrates the pervasiveness of Protestant and Enlightenment discourse on religion in Western Europe. There is no question for Weil that the goal of Islamic civilization should be to catch up with Europe – the pinnacle of civilization. Thus he reproduces the “not yet” position in which much of European knowledge production placed the “rest” of the world. For Weil, to achieve this goal, two crucial things had to change. First, religion had to be separated from tradition, and second, the very fundament of that tradition, i.e., the Qur‘ān, had to be reconsidered and reformed. In a Protestant manner, the “authentic teaching” and substance of the revelation had to be disentangled from the body of tradition that cluttered the origin of the religion.

This rhetorical move can be described as applying the \textit{sola scriptura} principle to Islam. As Weil states, “Muḥammad and the Qur‘ān cannot be made responsible for the crimes and atrocities of later Islamic political institutions and rulers,” just as Jesus was innocent of the later aberrations of the Catholic Church. “Tradition” and politics fudged the originally \textit{religious} “ur-message” and often dictated certain dogmas that are absent from the Qur‘ān.\textsuperscript{267} The key to overcome stagnation and gain agency over their lives was for Muslims to retrieve that original ur-message at the expense of all kinds of other political precepts. The equation of his own reading of the Qur‘ān with what “the-Qur‘ān-and-therefore-Islam-really-says” leads Weil to a prescriptive claim as to how Muslims should understand certain dogmas and the Qur‘ānic text itself.

The parallels between his Enlightenment understanding of Judaism and Islam are striking.

\textsuperscript{266} Gustav Weil, \textit{Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran} (Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1844), 120-121.
\textsuperscript{267} As example, he argues that the Umayyads instrumentalized the teaching of predestination that they saw as supporting their rule against political opposition. Ibid., 104-106.
For example, a Muslim trait still awaiting remedy was their adherence to “the dead letter (der todtte Buchstabe) of a wrong tradition instead of using their independent reasoning.”\textsuperscript{268} The topos of the “dead letter” runs through Protestant polemics against Judaism and Catholicism and refers to the blind following of shallow rules and rites that leave the soul of the believer untouched. Endorsing an anti-Semitic characterization of Judaism, “dead letter” for Weil equals “dead religion” which remains unable to “enliven the soul with authentic religiosity.”\textsuperscript{269} What caused the “decadence and final downfall of Islam” was not only its clinging to tradition, but also how Muslims understood the Qur’ān. Weil laments that the Qur’ān “lays before us like an anachronism” because those who adhere to it fail to see that certain laws are time-bound and only intended for a specific time and place – again, “just like the Mosaic law.”

Weil's second suggestion on how to bring Islam to the heights of European civilization was, therefore, to “make a distinction in the holy scripture between eternal truths” and the contingent, temporal.\textsuperscript{270} Similarly to Geiger, Weil thought that the Qur’ān revealed Muḥammad's innermost feeling (Gefühl).\textsuperscript{271} Unfortunately, Muḥammad's incoherent behavior (when compared with Jesus) also introduced some “non-religious” elements into Islam (such as politics and war), although he started out as a righteous Prophet and (in Protestant spirit) as a reformer. Weil thus ascribed the Muslim inability to reform and the fate of their stagnation to the Qur’ān itself. Once the Qur’ān's original message was salvaged from under the rubble of history and politics, by means of the historical-critical method, Islam could aspire to the ideal of Protestant rationalism

\textsuperscript{268} Weil, Historisch-kritische Einleitung, 53.
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{271} On Weil's focus on Gefühl for explaining Muḥammad's revelations, see Weil, Historisch-kritische Einleitung, 90. Surprisingly positive is his judgment on polygamy and the treatment of women, which he assesses as an improvement compared to pre-Islamic times. See ibid., 115-119.
that constituted Weil's reference point and comparative standard for judging any other religion.

All in all, Weil strove to be sympathetic toward the Prophet. He saw Muḥammad as a Prophet for the Arabs, who criticized the superstitious and incorrect doctrines of Jews and Christians (such as the trinity, divinity of Jesus, etc.). In these statements, one can see that Weil included a critique of Christianity as well and took a position in inner-Christian debates on the side of rationality and Bildung. However, as soon as Muḥammad left the realm of religion, and entered politics, the military, and any other sphere that, in Weil’s view, had to be disjoined from religion, he overstepped his own circuit of prophethood and coined God’s word according to his own thoughts: “As soon as he ceased to be a sufferer (ein Duldender) and tried to enforce the truth with the sword and issued new ceremonial, civil, and criminal laws in the name of God, he left the mark of human weakness and fugacity on His Word.”

It was strikingly the political and legal content that Weil identified asMuḥammad's own additions. The glory and failure of Islam were both to be found in the person of the Prophet. In Weil's comparison of Muḥammad with Jesus, Muḥammad ultimately fell short of the former's example: While Jesus died for his mission Muḥammad took up the sword. Such high praise of Jesus from a Jewish scholar is possible once it is referred to Jesus as a historical figure, teacher and preacher, not as Son of God.

Together with other early qur'ānic studies scholars, Weil had the strong conviction that religions were historical products. However, the means by which he assessed Islam were only semi-secular. The Enlightenment he had in mind for Islam might be surprising for the reader, namely, to reach a unity with Christians on the grounds of a rational and privatized religion. This

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272 Weil, Historisch-kritische Einleitung, 88-89.
273 Ibid., 116. See also ibid., 41.
vision can be called secular in Saba Mahmood’s sense of the term, in that Weil opted for a reconfiguration of the constitution of Islam. His Enlightenment vision oversubscribed his entire account of religions. For him, irrationality was not a token of Islam, but of non-enlightened Christians, especially Catholics, which might reflect the *Kulturkampf* in Prussia between Catholics and Protestants at the time. Islam's existence had its legitimacy not only because it brought Arabs to monotheism, but also because it aimed to reform Judaism and Christianity that had both gone wrong. One had become “dead letter” (Judaism) and the other had clouded its eternal truths in absurd and convoluted dogmas that were borderline polytheistic (Christianity).274

According to Weil, both these religions, and Christianity recently more so than Judaism, had evolved toward rationality and suspended the supernatural and mythical elements of their religion by means of theological-historical criticism. Historical criticism of the Qur’ân was equally necessary for Muslims to actuate their agency in history and partake in progress. One sees in his treatment of Islam also his historicist vision for Christianity and Judaism. Inherent in that thought was the need of nations and peoples to progress: “to make history, the agent must create the future, remake herself, and help others to do so, where the criteria of successful remaking are seen to be universal.”275 Judging from Weil's *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung*, he perceived himself as such a helper. The tool for his aid (for Islam and Judaism alike) was the historical-critical approach.

Reading Weil from today’s perspective, it occurs to us as all too obviously that his approach was neither neutral nor detached. His own personal background and the general discourse on religion and society are patently reflected in his work, giving the impression that he

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saw himself engaged in his own *Mission Civilisatrice*. This attitude, of course, has strong patronizing connotations. But his critique of Islam also served to make a case about irrational Christianity and Judaism. Weil used Islam as a foil on which he projected and critiqued the homegrown superstitions. Note that he refers to Jews and Muslims as only to be convinced by rational proofs and even identifies to a certain extent with Islam when he exclaims, “Islam has to wander the same path as Judaism.”\(^{276}\) In short, for religion to be successful in Weil's sense, it had to be brought into the fold of history.

Jewish history had been twisted over centuries. Weil and Geiger attempted to give Judaism a new identity and voice in the modernizing European societies. Their concern was, in Heschel's words, how they could “speak back to the master narrative of Western history, which is rooted in traditions of Christian religious supremacy.”\(^{277}\) They achieved this by means of historical critique. The place of Islam in their thought is complex and their work can neither be reduced to islamophilia nor islamophobia. Yet both authors can be read as participating in the politics of scripture, i.e., in the reconfiguration of scripture's range of significance. Their project was controversial within the Jewish communities for which they were writing, and Geiger elicited hostility from Christian theologians for his work on the historical Jesus.

Heschel suggests that with regard to Christianity, Geiger exercised a form of “counter-history” which is “a form of polemic in which the sources of the adversary are exploited and turned 'against the grain' [and] deprive the adversary of his positive identity, of his self-image, and substitutes it with a pejorative counter-image.”\(^{278}\) This form of history writing, which always entails identity politics, is particularly relevant in scriptural hermeneutics. As indicated before,

\(^{276}\) Weil, *Historisch-krítische Einleitung*, 120.
\(^{278}\) Ibid., 2.
the Qur‘ān itself contains a form of counter-history of Judaism and Christianity, and Christianity entails a counter-history of Judaism. When Jews write a counter-history of Christianity and Islam, or Christians and secular scholars write a counter-history of Islam, historical arguments easily lend themselves to polemics. This is a danger that comes with the discipline. The works of Geiger and Weil demonstrate that historical-critical scholarship can be effectively political and so is the question of what has Jerusalem to do with Mecca. Historical-critical research is albeit not only political when it is undertaken to write counter-history.

The introduction of history as hermeneutical tool to unveil religious truth also had other notable consequences. In his book *Zakhor* (1982), historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi evaluated the effect of the adaptation of scientific historicism by nineteenth century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars for the Jewish collective memory. If we accept the argument that the Jews can be viewed as the “Orientals within,” Yerushalmi’s critique of historical-critical scholarship provides valuable insight into the general problems that come with introducing history to colonized or formerly colonized societies. Yerushalmi argued that the embrace of historiography in the nineteenth century did not naturally follow the trajectory of Jewish tradition and memory. Instead, “it began precipitously out of that assimilation from without and collapse from within that characterized the sudden emergence of Jews out of the ghetto.”

In Yerushalmi’s view, Jewish philosophy did not interact with European culture on an equal footing. Instead, Jewish historians adapted European Enlightenment thought for the study of Jewish history, which unsettled Jewish memory that had been kept alive through ritual. The

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282 While Yerushalmi conceded that Jewish recorded history (even in its mythologized forms) was primarily a
“discovery of Jewish history” – scientific empirical history – overthrew Jewish sacred texts, living traditions, recitation, and ritual as being central to Jewish identity. As Taştekin affirms, “Jewish scholars assimilated Jewish history to a Christian epistemology that perceived Judaism as a superseded history.” Yerushalmi saw the embrace of historiography by Jewish scholars and the encounter between Jewish tradition and the Enlightenment as one-sided. Historiography under the name of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was “the faith of fallen Jews” and constituted a serious disruption of Jewish collective memory. While scholars like Geiger and Weil, utilized history for the empowerment of the Jewish communities in Europe, they simultaneously had to exclude other forms of knowing from their scientific repertoire.

The more dominant form of authoritative knowledge swallowed up and replaced other forms of knowledge. Epistemic violence espoused both a form of loss of a way of being in the world and the potential to speak back to dominant society in its own idiom. To make their case heard, Geiger and Weil appropriated Enlightenment rationality and left behind other forms of understanding and knowing that might have seemed strange to the society they were addressing. Epistemological appropriation entailed adopting a particular evaluative scheme with its vocabulary of progress and backwardness, superiority and inferiority. Translating the specific into history's generalities paved the way for declaring invalid those modes of thinking and being that entailed the religious, premodern, local, etc. Once judged by the universal standard of history, other forms of memory and pasts could only be placed on a timeline prior to the present moment, ripe to be brought into the teleological vision of a progressive history. In imperial politics, this

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_concrete and human history, he claimed that after the destruction of the Second Temple, their interpretation of historical events became more “archetypical” and messianic. See Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 36-52. Especially after the expulsion from Spain, Jewish memory, through recital and ritual, remained strongest. Ibid., 57-74._

_Taştekin, *Another Look*, 103._

_284 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 86._
process of seeing the specific as an instance of “a familiar structure of generality” served, in
Uday Mehta's words, “an elaborate vision of how politically to assimilate things, even when
those things are thoroughly unfamiliar.” Importantly, in the denial of other ways of being in the
world “lie their incorporation into the teleologies of imperial and liberal imperatives.”

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, history, with its classificatory scheme, justified
the subjugation of people who had not yet reached that higher point of civilization – those who
were outside of history. Imperial power was then “the instrument required to align a deviant and
recalcitrant history with the appropriate future.” The danger in declaring history to be the only
way to understand the past is not simply that it can easily be turned into supporting imperialism
ideologically, but in losing sight of the specific at the expense of the general (i.e., history). The
particulars that could not easily be fitted into history (those things we call a-historical, e.g., local
traditions and customs) posed a serious problem for political thinkers concerned with the legal
authority of the state that rested on principles declared to be universal. Those particulars had to
be inscribed in history by whose standard the particulars were then judged.

Geiger and Weil were not simply curious about Judaism or Islam's past. Rather, this past
had to be fitted into a theory of history that always already had political considerations about the
future in mind, coached in abstract terms, such as rationality, progress, and utility. The proper
treatment of the past (history over other forms of memory) was imperative for them since its
adoption would determine the political course of a Jewish future in Europe. Ironically, the
particulars of history (i.e., historical facts) that had led to such an abstract theory of history
became subverted by means of generalization to the extent that they did not have to be engaged

285 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought*
286 Ibid., 30-31.
seriously anymore. They now belonged to an outdated past and were considered anachronistic. Seen in that light, the application of historical-critical scholarship to the Qur’an by non-Muslims as well as by Muslims might easily be perceived as an attempt to upset intellectually the basis of the Islamic religious fabric and Muslim collective memory.

Yerushalmi, himself a historian unwilling to give up history entirely, grappled with the question of how to overcome this dilemma. Taştekin suggests to view his critique of the scientific study of Jewish history as a healthy corrective to historical over-specialization that leads memory and history to become detached. For Yerushalmi, historical studies ought to have a purpose. Similar to Ricoeur, he emphasizes the responsibility of historians toward particular groups: “The notion that everything in the past is worth knowing 'for its own sake' is a mythology of modern historians, as is the lingering suspicion that a conscious responsibility toward the living concerns of the group must result in history that is somehow less scholarly or 'scientific.’” In his view, for the historical study of a specific subject one ought to pay heed to the collective memory of the group most concerned by it. In short, impartial history writing is not in itself something desirable even if it were attainable. Yerushalmi’s appeal for responsible history writing, with the general good of the concerned group in mind, may also be taken as a benchmark for Qur’an scholarship.

The adoption of western historical epistemology by the colonized is highly complex. History in the imperialist project served both to declare certain peoples as being outside of history, therefore not yet ready to govern themselves, but also to resist imperialism. As we will see in the second part of this thesis, the use of history is a two-sided sword that can border on epistemic violence, has its own repressive strategies and practices, and was yet incorporated into

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287 Other Jewish thinkers after the Holocaust were similarly disillusioned with the bias toward science and historicity of German-Jewish scholarship of the nineteenth century. See Yerushalmi, Zakhor, 100.
288 Mehta, Liberalism, 17-22.
all modernizing societies one way or another as part of nation and community building as well as to formulate resistance to imperialism.

Since the late nineteenth century, the question of reform of Muslim societies came to be associated with the reform of Qur'ān hermeneutics.289 With the changing power relations between Europe and Muslim countries, in particular the Ottoman Empire, the often positive view of Enlightenment thinkers of Islam and the Qur'ān – at least regarding its rationality – gave way to a much more negative image. According to many western scholars, it was essentially the Qur'ān, and the unfitness of Muslims to approach it rationally, that made any progress of Muslims or Islam impossible. For some, Islam and Muslims were able to reform if they followed western models. Others considered them a lost cause. Despite the small size of the field of qur'ānic studies, its findings reverberated in the broader academic world, for example, in Abraham Kuenen's *National Religions and Universal Religions*:

Islam is a side branch of Christianity, or better still, as we should now say, of Judaism: a selection as it were from Law and Gospel, made by an Arab and for Arabs, leveled to their capacity, and further supplemented – or must we say adulterated? – by national elements calculated to facilitate their reception of it. Thus derived from the long acknowledged documents of God's revelation, and presently entering the lists against them, Islam was destined, after a very brief period of growth and development, to stereotype itself once and for all and assume its unalterable shape.290

In this quote, Kuenen combines his knowledge of recent historical-critical work with elements of a racial theory that traced Muslim backwardness to the Semitic nature and language of Arabs. Kuenen is paradigmatic of an established late nineteenth century view of Islam as a bizarre, misguided offshoot of Christianity and Judaism. Kuenen acknowledges the affinity between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but to the detriment of Islam. Mecca becomes the place where

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the truth of Jerusalem is adapted in a mediocre version, suitable for racially inferior Arabs, “leveled to their capacity,” and therefore debased. Islam has realistically (that is, historically) nothing to offer beyond what is already entailed in the “long acknowledged documents of God’s revelation.” One may understand Kuenen as reversing Christendom’s age-old fear of the “Arab peril.” In Kuenen's account, Islam becomes domesticated, less foreign and dangerous at the price of being rendered replaceable and irrelevant for all non-Arabs – no longer dangerous because it is essentially portrayed as a stagnant religious artifact. Note again the role history plays in this account. Once Islam's historical stage is determined, it can be conceptualized abstractly. It is historical universals that define Islam as inferior and preclude engagement with the particulars.

Given Islam’s vast global spread, it is startling that it came only gradually to be included in the canon of world-religions. The transnational spread of Islam was not explained with its universalism but with Islam’s ambition toward expansion. To achieve such a reading of history some linguistic and philological leaps were necessary. Colonialism of the Arab world concurred with “scientific” theories that declared Arabs (as Semites) an inferior race. The alleged backwardness of Semites was explained as stemming from the structure of their language that supposedly made clear thought impossible. A prominent example of such thinking is Renan, whose view of Islam fit into his greater conceptualization of religion as something that would be surpassed once reason had overcome superstition and irrationality. In the 1880s, Renan engaged in a controversy with the pan-Islamic reformer Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī.

Renan and others left no doubt about “the decadence of states governed by Islam [and] the intellectual sterility of races that derive their culture and education from that religion.” In his

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291 Masuzawa, Invention, 186-206.
292 Renan, Islam and Science; Réponse de Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Compare for this exchange Nikki Keddie, An Islamic Response to Imperialism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 84-86. See also Reiser, Bibelkritik, 246.
view, Islam's inferiority, expressed in a lack of “rationalism and science,” derived from its Semitic character. Take, for example, the following comment:

We cannot demand philosophical insights from the Semitic race. It is only by a strange coincidence of fate that this race instilled a fine character of power in its religious creations, it never produced any philosophical treatise of its own. Semitic philosophy is a cheap borrowing and imitation of Greek philosophy. This should be, in fact, said about Medieval philosophy in general.

One must remember that for many contemporaries of Renan, it was Judaism that constituted a serious obstacle for the development of society. Europe could progress, but it was less clear that Jews keep up. In Renan's view, Islam's suppression was justified because it had become “useless to human progress.” Anything scientific in Islam was due to the non-Arabic elements in it, while “Islam, in reality, has then always harassed the science and philosophy. [It] is the heaviest chain that humankind has ever born.” Muslim contributions to human history “were made despite the [Muslim] theologians,” not because of them. Renan's view of Islam corresponded to his concept of religion as defined by “theologians” and represents a modernization theory that equated modernization with the decline of religion and its privatization. Any discipline, such as philosophy, politics, or poetry could not possibly be part of Islam in such a conceptualization.

For Renan, while Muslim history contained glimpses of brilliance whenever other social elements overruled religion, all of these successes were due to military power. On the contrary, European superiority, characterized by authentic progress, was based on reason and intellect, which, “constitutes the true European spirit.” Science, embodied in reason, “creates military

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295 Renan, Islam and Science, 7-9.
superiority and industrial superiority. It will one day create social superiority.”296 Thus, science and reason are what made European states exceptional, not military or economic power. Whether science and reason could be realized by Muslims was less certain. Only if Muslims followed the example of Europe (or what Renan imagined as Europe) could they hope to “catch up.” Renan is a good example for the myth of the “European miracle”297 that identifies European thought as the actual engine driving its political superiority, while ignoring military and economic factors.

This myth, stubbornly persistent in academic and public discourse, contends that Europe owes its historical role and place to “some special quality of race, culture, environment, mind or spirit, which gives this human community a permanent superiority over all other communities, at all times.”298 Part of the myth is the belief that Europe reached its progressive and superior status autonomously, independent from the rest of the world, solely based on its own inherent qualities. Such a view ignores the immense impact colonialism had on Europe's economy, and that it was “colonialism, the basic process after 1492 [that] led to the selective rise of Europe, the modernization or development of Europe (and outlying Europeanized culture areas like the United States), and [to] the underdevelopment of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.”299

While the narrative of the “European miracle” emphasized Europe's intellectual superiority as embodied in science, it depicted the non-western world as static Other that lacked the intellectual ability to make and write its own history. For Renan, in Islam's case, its political success was based on military victory, in Europe's case, its military successes followed inevitably from its progressive and scientific mindset.

296 Renan, Islam and Science, 2-11.
298 Blaut, Colonizer's Model, 1-2. Quotation slightly altered.
299 Ibid., 2. Several historical studies have recently demonstrated that Europe's economic, political, and military ascent was very much dependent on its colonies. See also ibid., 10.
John Arnott MacCulloch (1868 – 1950) and Sir Hamilton Gibb came to similar judgments about Islam. The source of the problem was the Qur’ān and Muslim adherence to the Semitic elements in their religion. In the European *imaginaire*, the relationship between Mecca and Jerusalem, one could say, came to be seen as an unfortunate one. Nevertheless, MacCulloch pointed to the implicit possibility that Muslims could change once certain obstacles were removed. He declared, “More than any other religion Islam has shown itself unable to develop from within and to adapt itself to the varying needs of successive ages. The absolute authority of the Quran is the cause why [...] 'Islam is lifeless, and, because lifeless, cannot grow, cannot advance, cannot change, and was never intended to do so.”

The Qur’ān, as the axial particular of Islam, stands effectively against history. The remedy for Islam's failure to progress was the modification of the relationship of Muslims with their Qur’ān, which would have to come from outside the tradition, namely, from Europe with its scientific tools and history. At the root of Islam's outdated epistemology (Gibb) was the Qur’ān that now moved to the center of attention in discussing the possibility of any societal progress. The hope for Muslims, in the opinion of many an orientalist, was consequently their encounter with the western world and an alignment of Islamic thought with western standards, often described as an “opening” to rationality, science, and a critical way of thinking, – all attributes that Muslims were allegedly

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303 See, for example, Gustave E. Von Grunebaum, *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1962), 131: “The formal constraint of thought [...] collided with the West's passionate devotion to scientific progress [...]. To the cult of the inherited, the West opposed active interference in social conditions [...] Whereas the Arab was prepared to satisfy himself with supra-rational interpretation of the real, the European insisted upon rationalistic criticism.”
missing. The mode of thinking political modernity always entailed some version of theory of history as happening in stages toward development and progress. The “first in Europe and then elsewhere” structure of time is what Johannes Fabian has called “the denial of coevalness.” Participation in political modernity hence depended on the epistemological adoption of history.

Some of the most important orientalists of the twentieth century strongly criticized Renan, most famously Goldziher. Others emphasized the proximity of European and Islamic cultures, such as Carl Heinrich Becker (1876 – 1933), who believed in the commensurability of all Mediterranean cultures, the Muslim one included – a thesis he defended against Troeltsch, who held that these “cultural circles” were incommensurable and fundamentally foreign to each other. The basis for conceptualizing familiarity or strangeness, however, remained history with its classificatory scheme to judge communities and religions.

We are back to the question of what Jerusalem has to do with Mecca, and so far, one may conclude that the question may as well read: What has Mecca to do with Europe? In the nineteenth century, the mainly religiously-motivated treatment of the Qurʾān had given way to a new perspective with scholars from the Wissenschaft des Judentums and other Qurʾān scholars, such as Nöldeke and Goldziher, who took on to study Islam and other religions as human phenomena. Qurʾānic studies was a small field. But this did not make it insignificant for the broader societal context, as we have seen. What other disciplines took from it was not in the hands of these Qurʾānic scholars. Historical-critical findings in Qurʾānic studies proved

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304 Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 9.
305 Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other, chapters 1 and 2.
particularly attractive to missionaries.\textsuperscript{308} Some orientalists, such as William Muir (1819 – 1905), who was also a colonial administrator, tied their studies of early Islam explicitly to Christian-missionary convictions. Muir deliberately presented Muḥammad's life in a negative light and aimed to persuade Muslims “that Muḥammad was not worth their allegiance” and had possibly been under Satanic influence.\textsuperscript{309} While much of Muir's scholarship was religiously motivated, he was yet a serious scholar who contributed to the study of the chronological arrangement of the Qur'ān that would occupy western Qur'ān scholarship until today.

Nöldeke's \textit{Geschichte des Qorāns} soon became authoritative among other orientalist chronological arrangements of the Qur'ān. In 1857, he won the prize for the best “critical history” of the Qur'ān, offered by the Paris academy. Until today, Nöldeke is seen as one of the founders of historical-critical scholarship. He was the first western scholar to write a book that specifically dealt with the Qur'ān's textual history. Other scholars before him had already directed their focus to the construction of the historical context of the Qur'ān, including Weil and Muir, but Nöldeke scrutinized the history of the Qur'ān itself, instead of the life of Muḥammad. Yet, elaborating on the original Islamic classification of Meccan and Medinan \textit{sūras}, Nöldeke still greatly utilized Islamic original source material, even though he approached it critically. He adopted most of the historical structure suggested by the \textit{sīra} and relied on the idea that the Qur'ān was revealed in disparate pieces, which seems to be suggested by the \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl} material. His approach can thus not be characterized as resting on the Qur'ān or its literary structure alone.\textsuperscript{310}


\textsuperscript{309} Compare Muir's statement: “May we conceive that a diabolical influence and inspiration was permitted to enslave the heart of [Mahomet] who had deliberately yielded to the compromise with evil.” Muir, \textit{Life of Mahomet}, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1858), 90-91; Clinton Bennett, \textit{In Search of Muhammad} (London/New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998), 111.

\textsuperscript{310} Theodor Nöldeke, \textit{Geschichte des Qorāns} I, ed. Friedrich Schwally (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2005), 30.
On the basis of structural and formal observations, Nöldeke divided the Qur'ānic sūras into three Medinan periods and one Meccan – a classification already undertaken by Weil. Nöldeke was a stern positivist and probably not interested in what the Qur'ān in his time meant to living Muslims. He also was not sensitive to any form of sacredness of scripture. Instead, he aimed to discern the Qur'ān’s “original meaning.” His student Friedrich Schwally began a full revision of this work in 1909 that was completed by Otto Pretzl and Bergsträsser. The attempts at a chronology of sūras in the Qur'ān have since been enhanced by Alfred Guillaume, Régis Blachère, and Montgomery Watt. Their works attest to the difficulty of establishing a chronology of the Qur'ān independent of other Islamic material.

Historical-critical scholarship of the Qur'ān had its stronghold in Germany, and a significant number of the scholars were Jewish. The Second World War disrupted this kind of scholarship and led to the decline of Qur'ānic studies in Germany. Scholars such as Rudi Paret and Watt relied heavily on Muslim sīra material, often taking Islamic reports at face-value. The focus shifted to Muḥammad as represented in the Islamic sources, a trend that can still be discerned in many textbooks on Islam. The Qur'ān as text almost disappeared as an object of study in these works. This seems all the more remarkable considering that Paret has become most famous for his Qur'ān translation and concordance. As if to compensate for the tendencies of European scholars in the nineteenth century of speaking for Islam, many books published on

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His acceptance of Islamic source material is one of the major reasons why many revisionist scholars reject his approach. Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 5-7, 13.


Hughes, “Contextualizing Contexts,” 91-93.

Islam in the second half of the twentieth century set out to write more sympathetically. Wilfred Cantwell Smith criticized the historical-critical approach and the western focus on finding the ur-text of the Qurʾān. He demanded to study Muslim exegetical commentaries on the Qurʾān to arrive at an understanding of what the Qurʾān has “really meant to Muslims.” As if answering Smith’s lamentation in this regard, within Qurʾānic studies, the *tafsīr* genre came into focus by virtue of its direct association with the Qurʾān. This strengthened the tendency to understand the Qurʾān through the lens of the life of the Prophet, derived on the basis of the medieval Islamic sources without attempting to further historicize the Qurʾān.

Several scholars since then have pointed to the mode of “catholicity” at work in Qurʾānic studies. Arkoun observed that the approaches to the Qurʾān, the topics discussed, and the disciplinary structures on which its results were based were not improved since al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505). The sources of modern scholars and the assumptions with which they worked, Arkoun lamented, did not differ much from Muslim tradition regarding the text. In his view, most scholars understood the Qurʾān as static and unchanging – a book that could be understood against the backdrop of seventh century Arabia.

Rippin similarly noted that the core premises of Muslim historiography mostly remained intact in academic scholarship. Most western scholars accept and follow the basic Muslim narratives concerning the emergence of the Qurʾān. While the earliest works on Islam in Europe were polemical and heavily biased, often ignoring how Muslims themselves interpreted the Qurʾān, the last decade has seen the tendency in the history of religion to let dogmatic

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319 Rippin, “Western scholarship,” 244-244. I have adopted the term “catholicity” from him. See ibid., 244.
statements speak for themselves, reproducing the representations of the believers and their texts.

The emergence of new literary trends favoring synchronicity, textual plurality, and historical skepticism, posed the question of a chronological reordering anew. Scholars suspicious of Muslim sources stressed the dependence of any chronological enterprise on this material. Introducing a renewed skepticism into the debate over the Qur’ān, they pointed to the circularity of its argument and inability to account for and appreciate the present state of the Qur'ānic text.\(^{320}\) They radically questioned the reliability of early Islamic sources which caused a stir in Qur’ānic studies. Though completely heterogenous in their scholarly hypotheses, revisionist scholars established yet another connection between Mecca and Jerusalem.

Wansbrough can be seen as trend-setting in this regard. He took the Qur'ān as a coherent whole. Differing from earlier orientalist work, he appreciated the literary style of the Qur'ān but found it too eloquent to have originated in seventh century Hejaz. His landmark study mistrusted all elements of traditional Islamic narrative on the origins of Islam and questioned the historical scenario of the Islamic origin story. The presence of biblical and post-biblical traditions in the Qur’ān led Wansbrough to conclude that the Qur’ān was the product of sophisticated debates in a “sectarian milieu,” which he placed in eighth century Mesopotamia.\(^{321}\) His thesis prompted the corollary that the Qur’ān cannot be viewed as a source to shed light on early Islam.

Similarly, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook argued in their Hagarism that Islam had in fact more to do with Jerusalem than with Mecca.\(^{322}\) According to them, the geographical space in which Islam emerged was to be looked for in the fertile crescent, not the Arabian peninsula – a thesis that was adapted and extended by Karl-Heinz Ohlig and received linguistic and

\(^{320}\) Stefanidis, “The Qurʾān,” 3.
\(^{321}\) Wansbrough, Quranic Studies.
\(^{322}\) Crone and Cook, Hagarism.
philological backing in 2000 from Christoph Luxenberg (pseud.). The latter did not remove the Islamic origins from Arabia, but Arabic from the Qurʾān. Following the skeptical publications put forth by Wansbrough, Crone, and Cook, it no longer seemed tenable to tell the Prophet’s biography in historical detail. The problem with this trend is that it results in an ahistorical Qurʾān that seems to be floating trans-historically through time and space and can hence be bent to fit any theory. The late redaction of the Qurʾān, posited by Wansbrough, has definitely been refuted by recent manuscript findings. The question of the trustworthiness of Islamic historical material is tied to the question of how to read the Qurʾān since it decides the context in light of which it is being understood. In particular, the sīra has come under attack as not being factual.

For Fred Donner, the real question concerning early Islamic history and the Qurʾān is whether the sīra historically describes the setting of the emergence of Islam or whether it was fabricated as a form of exegesis to explain the Qurʾān. Scholars who understand the sīra as a form of exegesis usually group the asbāb al-nuzūl under the same category. Hans-Thomas Tillschneider has recently refuted the theory that the sīra is exegetical in nature. Instead, he argues, the sīra uses the Qurʾānic text to tell the life of the prophet with minimal effort.

The sīra selects those passages in the Qurʾān that can be used to tell the story of the prophet. In the process, the Qurʾān, serving the sīra as a historical source and inspiration, becomes part of another text. This short episode elucidates that the historical study of the Qurʾān stands in need of also scrutinizing the inner-Islamic disciplines that deal with the Qurʾān and the prophet. One cannot declare this literature to be useless without grasping its central concerns. The same is true, as we will see in the next chapter, for tafsīr.

323 In Donner’s view, the formation of the Qurʾān was attained by 656-61. See Donner, “The historical context,” 33.
What most Qur’anic scholars in the last decade have in common is that they emphasize the Late Antique context of the Qur’an extending the frame of reference of the Qur’anic milieu preceding Islam. This is the starting point for the recently launched Corpus Coranicum in Berlin, Germany. The debates surrounding new approaches in Qur’anic studies are a further indication for the renewed interest in historical critique of the Qur’an and the controversy surrounding western Qur’anic studies. To assert Islam's emergence in a “sectarian milieu,” a term framed by Watt, was a response to the Islamic presentation of history that seems to suggest that Islam “happened” in a Pagan milieu in the middle of nowhere – an “empty Hejaz,” as James E. Montgomery called it. Muslim tradition mostly depicts the Arab milieu as pagan and idolatrous. This narrative sets Islam aside from other religions and thus severs the relationship between Athens and Mecca.

Islam, by its own account, seems to have emerged independently from Christianity and Judaism. Even non-Muslim accounts that trace Islam's origin to political, economic, and social factors maintain this picture. As noted by several scholars, Muslims produced a narrative that depicts Islam as having emerged in a monotheistic vacuum. They present Muhammad's environment as mainly polytheistic and idolatrous, remote and somewhat isolated from the other great religious centres. Islam, despite its strong emphasis on the oneness of God and its Christian and Jewish narratives, symbols, and imagery, yet seems to have “fallen from the sky” free from “outer influences.” Gerald Hawting rightly contends that this detachment can be positive or negative when faced with anti-Islamic polemics. On the one hand, presenting Islam on the basis of Muslim history construction, emphasizing the jāhilīya, highlights the originality of the Qur’ān. It absolves the Prophet from the accusation that he merely borrowed randomly other religious

symbols, scriptures, and rhetoric and reworked them into a new framework. On the other hand, Hawting argues, anti-Islamic polemics used Islam's detachment from any real contact with monotheistic religions to prove that Muḥammad was only semi-knowledgeable, adopting bits and pieces of the traditions that he did not really understand, which led to confused accounts and wrong depictions of original biblical narratives.\(^{326}\) As we have seen, these polemists argue that Muḥammad followed a somewhat crude version of the earlier traditions that came to be corrupted through the “uncivilized” Arabian environment. 

As demonstrated in this chapter, the historical-critical approach is not neutral. To claim neutrality would presuppose that we had all the historical facts right (and are actually in a position to achieve this aim), and be able to study the Qurʾān detached from our own reality. Claiming impartiality also means pretending that we are dealing with a text that is not embedded in a textual and ritualistic system that has, for 1400 years, provided the guidelines for how to view the Qurʾān. One can make the choice to see it this way; this choice, however, is political. It entails to consciously set aside a significant reading tradition. Circumventing this reading tradition, many scholars would claim, is necessary from a historical perspective because this tradition was simply not interested in history understood as homogenous empty time.\(^{327}\) The two endeavors (Muslim and western qurʾānic studies) are then simply different ways to arrive at different summits; they do not have much to do with each other, as Kropp and Lawrence suggest. 

Set aside the question for now whether Islamic tradition is in fact not interested in history, one must acknowledge that historical-critical scholarship upsets religious memory by making an authoritative and conflicting claim to its truth and by declaring to present reality that moves

\(^{326}\) Hawting, \textit{Idolatry}, xii-xiii.

\(^{327}\) Homogeneous time refers to the idea that “time is not affected by any particular events; its existence is independent of such events and in a sense it exists prior to them. Events happen in time but time is not affected by them.” Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing}, 75-76.
within the range of historical possibilities, while it excludes others. Historical critique meets the
self-constitution of religious traditions with suspicion and aims to debunk its “myths and errors.”
As a system of thought that translates another form of memory into its own frame of reality
(ultimately secular and considered to be universal), history claims to supersede “pre-scientific”
modes of remembering the past. Inherent in history is hence a sense of superiority vis-à-vis other
forms of memory construction, which can be problematic. Historical critique is, moreover, a form
of “counter-history.” While Heschel referred mainly to confessionally-motivated “counter-
history,” the very concept of secular history entails a form of counter-history implicitly, because
it writes the transcendent or God out of a history, whose subject God Himself was until recently.

That being said, I believe the discipline of history to be fit to also construct history in a
way that includes “the gods,” in Chakrabarty's spirit. Once the emphasis is placed on the
historical in the “historical-critical,” instead of on criticism, there exist opportunities to rethink
the meaning of (formerly considered) sacred texts. The question “What has Mecca to do with
Jerusalem?” is yet not confined to mere debates about hermeneutics and methods but touches
upon identity politics and is linked to geographical-spatial and temporal imaginations. How one
answers that question positions one in debates over religious autonomy and the role, place, and
legitimacy of Islam in Europe and the USA. In the next two chapters, we will follow these
connections in more depth and turn to specific case studies that examine the politics of scripture
involved in contemporary historical-critical approaches to the Qur'an and scrutinize how the
authors address the questions of resemblance, assimilation, commensurability, and
incommensurability.
II. A Magic Still Dwells: Negotiating Sameness and Difference in Western Qur’ānic Studies

Setting the Stage: Comparison

At the heart of historical-critical scholarship is comparison. This is true for Qur’ānic scholarship (whether so-called “critical” or not) as well. In the following section, I address the general applicability of historical critique to the Qur’ān. To reflect on comparison in regard to historical critique to the Qur’ān is helpful in order to examine the premises on which much of Qur'ān scholarship rests. Understanding these premises and the preconceptions of many Qur'ān scholars is necessary to indicate possible difficulties in such an undertaking and, finally, to better understand some of the discussions about the application of critical scholarship to the Qur’ān.

Applying a form of historical criticism to the Qur’ān raises the question of comparison on various levels. First, the method of historical criticism itself is comparative, because it examines different terms, parts, and passages within the text and compares them with each other as well as with other “similar” texts – their styles, language, vocabulary, and content. Second, to identify any text as text and place it within a particular genre requires comparison as well. Third, applying the same methods to the Qur’ān that were developed in biblical scholarship presupposes an acknowledged familiarity or resemblance between the Bible and the Qur’ān – a comparability between both “scriptures.” This third point may seem trivial, because the Qur’ān so obviously resembles the Bible in so many aspects, references biblical narratives, characters, and beliefs, and situates itself explicitly in the biblical tradition. The Qur’ān claims to be in conversation with those traditions since both belong to the genre “kitāb.” The term “scripture” itself has come under

328 The chapter title is borrowed from Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

329 For example, Q 10:37 states: “But [it is] a confirmation of what was before it and a detailed explanation of the [former] Scripture, about which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the worlds.” See also Q 2:41, 2:89, 2:91, 2:97, 2:101, 3:3, 3:81; 4:47; 5:48; 6:92; 10:37; 12:111; 35:31; 37:37; 37:52; 46:12, and 46:30. The Qur’ān is also called an “elaboration of the book” (10:37), indicating further elucidation of previous tradition.
attack for a number of reasons in the past decades. As Jane D. McAuliffe states,

The term “scripture” [is] a contested category, a subject of scholarly interest and debate [...] Not all texts that have achieved a normative status within particular religious communities are written texts and, for others, writing is not their primary form of dissemination. Scholars of comparative religion have discovered that this category, a category conceived within a Jewish and Christian framework, does not translate easily and accurately to other religious traditions.\(^{330}\)

Given the Qurʾān's own statements about itself in relation to the Jewish and Christian scriptures, one may yet claim that it sees itself in the same category, just superior to them. Since biblical scholarship has already developed an arsenal of methods for deciphering “scripture,” why should one not make the same methods fruitful for qurʾānic studies for understanding the Qurʾān?

From early on, Jews and Christians noticed the relationship between the Qurʾān and their own scriptures. They interpreted this similarity in different ways, mainly to the detriment of the Qurʾān. Academic Qurʾānic studies were from the beginning a comparative undertaking that examined the Qurʾān in light of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. For a long time, the Qurʾān did not fare very well in these comparisons and was often seen as an insufficient and defective derivative of the Bible. Less often, Western Qurʾānic studies undertook to compare the Qurʾān to pre-Islamic poetry or non-Jewish and non-Christian traditions. Yet, both the Bible and the Qurʾān have been claimed by their respective faith communities to be unique.

As J.Z. Smith states, “uniqueness” is often attached to some “incomparable value” or even to the “notion of superlative value.”\(^{331}\) In that case, “uniqueness” leaves theoretically no room for comparison, unlike “distinctiveness.” The term unique is yet also used to indicate a reciprocal relationship of the “unique” with something else, lesser, “unique” in itself. In that case, the “unique” is comparable, however, the term becomes less accurate. In the course of

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\(^{331}\) J.Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 36-37.
discussions about cultural translatability, some scholars, such as Asad, emphasize the uniqueness of cultures and religions and the responsibility toward the concrete particularity of their investigated objects. Comparison for them is a slippery slope that can lead to patronizing readings or to imposing one's own frame of reference and understanding upon another tradition, thereby exerting control over it. Stressing the particular, the special, and the extraordinary of any human phenomenon is, of course, laudable. Asad would not deny that the Islamic tradition has a concept of “scripture,” he merely cautions against accepting western conceptual analytical tools as if they were natural and neutral. He argues forcefully that Muslim societies and thought must be understood on their own terms and not on the basis of superimposed western models. These models are not outright useless, yet they have to be understood in their particular historical context – how they function, why they came to be construed and applied as they are. In general, western scholarship being concerned with non-western religions, thought, peoples, cultures, etc. has to become more aware of its own legacy.332

This critique has been a justified corrective in western scholarship. However, it can tend to overemphasize particularism; and stressing the East-West dichotomy too strongly it runs the risk of inscribing irreconcilable differences into the critique of such dichotomies themselves. To emphasize the particular and the unique can run the risk of becoming “phoenix-like, expresses[ing] that which is sui generis, singularis, and therefore, incomparably valuable. 'Unique' becomes an ontological rather than a taxonomic category; an assertion of a radical difference so absolute that it becomes 'Wholly Other,' and the act of comparison is perceived both an impossibility and an impiety.”333 As we will see later on, it is such incommensurability of the

332 Asad, Genealogies, 3-5; 15.
333 Smith, Drudgery Divine, 38.
Qur’ān that Neuwirth challenges most ardently in her work. We will come back to this argument.

Let us for now return to the problems related to comparison. Before examining both aspects (the comparativeness of the historical-critical method and the comparability of Bible and Qur’ān), some theoretical remarks concerning comparison are in order. J.Z. Smith has directed our attention to the difficulty that inheres in comparison for scholars. Asking how comparison comes about he observes,

The scholar has a kind of déja-vu […], remembers that he has seen “it” or something “like it” before. He thinks he remembers something. This experience, this unintended consequence of research, must then be accorded significance and provided with an explanation. […] It is a process of working from a psychological association to an historical one; it is to assert that similarity and contiguity have a causal effect. But this […] is not science but magic.334

Historical-critical scholarship, of course, claims to be the opposite of magic. It takes the “magic” out of the texts by neutralizing and demystifying them. As we have established in the last chapter, it was the “critical” that determined the historical in the historical-critical. To discover “inconsistencies, mistakes, errors, lies, perversions, legends, inventions; to trace prejudices, tendencies, and illusions and to find 'natural' explanations for the seemingly supernatural”335 necessarily entails comparison. Otherwise, one would not know how to come to these judgments. Such a comparative task also always entails a translation project in which a non-historicist way of being in the world is transposed into a secular-historicist framework for which the standard of judgment is secular history, conceived as the scientifically higher system.

Comparison is at the heart of humanistic scholarship and accounts for the development of taxonomies, evolutionary theories, linguistics, encyclopedias, etc. Comparison is further linked to the situatedness of the person, who examines the subject matter from her own perspective. The

335 Reiser, Bibelkritik, 37.
Sitz im Leben not only of the text, but of the scholar, determines how she looks at texts and with what she compares them. In Gadamer's terminology, her pre-conception of the text constitutes the basis on which she assesses and compares it, often on the sub-conscious level. Historical-critical biblical scholars developed methods that aimed at answering questions they felt the texts proposed to them. Mainly, their methods answered to a loss of understanding of the biblical text.

Enlightenment thought had led to a shift in how the Bible was viewed and studied, which in turn led to the quest for new methods to understand the Bible “correctly.” Before, the Bible was simply understood as God's speech, directed to humans. Now biblical scholars came to see the biblical books as primarily “texts from the past,” bracketing the question of inspiration. As John Barton explains, after the disenchantment of the Bible as divinely inspired, the scholars were faced with the difficulty of not knowing as what to read the texts. By judging biblical books on the basis of what these scholars expected from coherent poetical or literary texts, they implicitly compared the biblical works with their contemporary literary productions. Scholars began to find serious discrepancies within biblical narratives, for example the Pentateuch that entails narrative, poems, and hymns, thrown together allegedly chaotically. Whole sections of the Bible seemed to defy modern literary standards and to present differentGattungen(genres). Historical-critical scholars explained this Gattungs-chaos by tracing different authors for the text, detecting different sources that influenced them and that could account for the “inconsistencies, [and] inexplicable dislocations of theme, form, style and so on.”

In biblical scholarship, the “literary” study of a text refers to the analysis of texts that have come into being through admixing other texts. “Literary” or “higher” criticism is the

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336 Barton, Biblical Criticism, 24.  
337 Hahn and Wiker, Politicizing the Bible, 322.  
338 Barton, Biblical Criticism, 22.
“attempt to divide them up, to assess the relative ages of these parts, to trace the parts of a text, to
detect multiple authorships, and to reconstruct the development of the texts.” Once a tradition
of reading, and with it its method, for a specific text is given up, the text has to be refigured,
relocated, and redefined as to what its purpose is. Importantly, according to Barton, no text can
be understood in itself without knowing anything about the text's purpose, what it aims at, in
short, as what one should read it. With regard to the Old Testament, biblical scholars were
suddenly faced with the “strangeness of the text.” A text that presumably had made sense as a
coherent whole for medieval Christians and, long before that, for ancient Israel, now seemed like
a strange hodgepodge of narrative, law, poetry, and worship. This literary strangeness had to be
brought into the fold of the known and generalizable. Apparently, the scholars had clear ideas as
to which literary genres existed and were capable of existing in ancient Israel.

Barton draws our attention to the fact that “an exclusive acquaintance with the literary
genres available within our own culture can all too easily lead us to regard as impossible or
composite works which are in fact entirely unproblematical within a different literary” – and one
may add religious or cultural – “system.” The scholars of historical-critical biblical scholarship
often worked under the premise of what J.Z. Smith terms a “déjà-vu,” a feeling or intuition of
resemblance for which their methods had to account. Barton's proposal to “see each of our
'methods' as a codification of intuitions about the text which may occur to intelligent readers” is
a useful way to think about method. Understood thus, method loses its potential for any kind of
intellectual or ideological hegemony and draws attention to the role of both text and reader in the

340 For a standard treatment of conventions of apocalyptic literature, see David Syme Russell, The Method and
341 Barton, Biblical Criticism, 27.
342 Smith, Imagining Religion, 22.
343 Barton, Biblical Criticism, 5-6.
production of meaning as well as the concept of a text. There exist many ways of identifying what is going on in a text and any methodology has limitations. Reading a text is situational and relational. To understand a text, any text, we have to relate it to other familiar texts and a context. In short, we have to compare. As Barton asserts,

Reading is not a linear process, in which a method is used on a piece of text which initially is not understood at all. On the contrary, no method can be used until there is some prior understanding of the text, even though this prior understanding is corrected as the methodical reading proceeds […] reading texts depends crucially on decisions about genre, about what a text is to be read as, and that this can only partly be brought under the control of any method.

As established in the previous section, no historical-critical method is simply a technique of processing a text. Rather, the development of historical-critical methods was bound to the context for which they were developed. They give witness to the intellectual milieu of their time, rather than being transhistorical tools. To read the Qurʾān as historical or literary document predicates a certain understanding of what kind of text the Qurʾān is. Presupposing layers of text that together now form the Qurʾān is a way of assimilating the strange (the chaos of the text) as a familiar deviant through a prior commitment to a certain way of conceptualizing texts.

Comparison, explicit or implicit, led to either declaring the Qurʾān “foreign” and incommensurable or to the judgement that it be an either better or worse version of the Bible. In the treatment of the Qurʾān in Europe, comparison was present from the beginning, and most of the comparisons were decided to the detriment of the Qurʾān. Mainly, the Qurʾān was judged on the basis of how one expected “scripture” to behave and function. The criterion for this assessment was the Bible, the “book of books”; never mind that the Qurʾān's self-ascription already points to its oral character, not to its being a book – Qurʾān, i.e., recitation, while the

344 On the limitations of methodology see Feyerabend, Against Method, 16.
345 Barton, Biblical Criticism, 5-6. Italics mine.
Bible points to its character as book (biblia) or many books (ta biblia).\footnote{Neuwirth, Der Koran, 31. Note in this context that it is irrelevant what the etymology of the word qur‘ān is. It may well be an Aramaic loan word, deriving from qeryānā as is so often noticed. For example, Donner, “The Qur‘ān,” 35. This does not change the fact that its meaning connotes orality.}

The comparison of the Qur’ān to the Bible led many western critics of the Qur’ān to pejorative judgments about its composition.\footnote{Stefan Wild, “Schauerliche Öde,” in Gott ist schön und er liebt die Schönheit, ed. Christoph Bürgel and Alma Giese (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 429-447.} Scholars compared the Qur’ān to the Bible and found that the former lacked momentous characteristics of the latter, such as a narrative structure or certain details from the biblical stories. In short, the Qur’ān's “literary structure” and its historical and theological content deviated significantly from the Bible, which many Qur'ānic scholars viewed as deficiencies on the Qur’ān's part. The Qur’ān's “deviance” from the Bible was interpreted as giving witness to the derivative character of the Qur’ān.\footnote{Neuwirth, Der Koran, 33.} The Qur’ān seemed confusing. For example, Scottish Victorian historian, philosopher, and satirical writer Thomas Carlyle described the Qur’ān as

A wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite;—insupportable stupidity, in short! Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran, [...] yet natural stupidity is by no means the character of Mahomet’s Book; it is natural uncultivation rather.”\footnote{Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), 76.}

Carlyle, not unsympathetic to Muslims and Islam, conceded that his judgment of the Qur’ān may have been due to the “discrepancies of national tastes,” or the difficulties of translation. He suggested that reading the Qur’ān in a different chronological order may help with its reading, and yet, his judgment in the end remained: “With every allowance, one feels it difficult to see how any mortal ever could consider this Koran as a book written in heaven, too good for the earth; as a well-written book, or as a book at all, and not a bewildered rhapsody; written so far as
writing goes, as badly as almost any book ever was!” Compare this statement to the thirteenth century Qur'ān commentator al-Suyūṭī:

Praise be to God, Who sent the Book (kitāb) down to His servant as an admonition to the possessors of intelligence; placed in it wondrous forms of knowledge and wisdom; and made it the most glorious of books in value, the most abundant in knowledge, the most pleasing in arrangement, and the most eloquent in address — an Arabic Qurʾān, without any crookedness, uncreated, and beyond all doubt and hesitation.  

Al-Suyūṭī’s perception of the Qurʾān differed fundamentally from Carlyle’s. While al-Suyūṭī elaborates in the above quoted passage on the sciences of the Qurʾān, which, he concedes, are a complex and complicated field of study, there is no doubt that the Qurʾān made sense for him in a way it did not for Carlyle. For al-Suyūṭī, it constituted the fountain of “all knowledge,” if studied and understood correctly. Carlyle expected the Qurʾān to be structured and composed in a certain way, an expectation which it apparently did not fulfill.

One does not have to go back to the nineteenth century to find similar statements to that of Carlyle. Thus, renowned Princeton scholar Michael Cook similarly declares: “The [Qurʾān] is strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in linking of disparate materials, and given to repetition of whole passages in variant versions.” According to Rippin, in the “source critic's view,” the Qurʾān suffered from rushed editing “with only the most superficial concern for the content, the editors/compilers apparently engaged only in establishing a fixed text of scripture.” These examples may suffice. The view of the Qurʾān as disorganized and lacking in structure is not an isolated opinion of a few experts and has found its way into numerous textbooks.

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350 Carlyle, Heroes, 77. Italics mine.  
352 Cook, Hagarism, 18.  
353 Andrew Rippin, Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices (London: Routledge, 1990), 1, 23.  
354 One example may suffice: David Wained, An Introduction to Islam (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1995), 23.
The disparate judgments of the Qurʾān by al-Suyūṭī on the one hand and Carlyle, Cook, and Rippin on the other are not only owed to their different sensibility vis-à-vis the Qurʾān, or their different aesthetic senses more generally. Rather, they result from comparison – from fundamentally different understandings as to how a text, and a religious text in particular, should be constituted. Obviously, their antipodal assessments of the Qurʾān also result from the different situations out of which these scholars approached the text. Al-Suyūṭī wrote out of a continuous reading tradition. This reading tradition did allow for a multiplicity of interpretations and meanings of qurʾānic verses and sūras, but it did not question the coherence or purpose of the Qurʾān itself. On the contrary, in his time, the dogma of the inimitability of the Qurʾān (ʾiʿjāz)355 had already been well established.

The lack of understanding texts as they present themselves often results from failing to grasp the intent and inner structure of those texts, which again rests on a mode of comparison. The “foreignness” of regionally or spacial-temporally distant texts can be challenging and is not confined to the biblical books or the Qurʾān. We encounter today the argument in some western qurʾānic studies that even the earlier mufassirūn did not understand the correct meaning of the Qurʾān anymore; the gap between its original emergence and the beginning of Islamic exegesis proper, tainted by later Islamic theological and legal dogma, was too great. As an example of this view we will turn to qurʾānic studies scholar Gabriel Said Reynolds and his earlier work.356 His treatment of tafsīr is a good example for the way in which his own understanding of what a text should convey – its purpose, method and reasoning – regulates and justifies his own particular critical approach to the Qurʾān. The framework of comparison with which he operates determines

what he considers the correct understanding of the Qurʾān. His work, moreover, highlights the importance of determining a text's genre.

**Tafsīr, Criticism, and the “Original Meaning” of the Qurʾān**

Reynolds is a prolific writer and has gained an important place in American Qurʾān scholarship. The following reflections are based on his *The Biblical Subtext of the Qurʾān*, a pioneering work in reading the Qurʾān through the lens of Syriac and Aramaic literature. It is important to mention that I limit my discussion to this particular work since Reynolds has since elaborated some of his views. Reynolds, in general, can be understood as countering the claim to read the Qurʾān on the basis of its chronology, a matter of contention that will be addressed later in this thesis. For the purpose of this chapter, I am mainly concerned with the strategies of comparison Reynolds utilizes to make his case, the presuppositions that undergird his discussion of tafsīr; and his concept of text.

When it comes to “critical scholarship,” Reynolds rejects the idea of reading the Qurʾān through sīra or tafsīr material which he dismisses as ahistorical, not an unfair statement. Following Wansbrough's expositions on this topic, Reynolds opines, “The stories that would link a certain passage of the Qurʾān to a certain moment in [Muḥammad's] life have no historical authority.” According to Reynolds, sīra material mainly served to explain unclear passages in the Qurʾān. Its characteristic is not historical but exegetical in nature. This statement merits attention since he seems to suggest that there is no difference between sīra and tafsīr material,

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which he groups together under the category “exegesis.” He makes a similar point in regard to the qirāʾāt. In his opinion, they are part of the textual history of the Qurʾān and cannot be its starting-point. The qirāʾāt, similar to sīra and tafsīr, result from an exegetical impetus. It may be noted that declaring everything not explicitly historical to be automatically exegetical leaves exegesis as a broad category and a storage basin for anything one cannot allocate genre-wise. However, Reynolds' contention that sīra and tafsīr are unreliable for providing historical background to the Qurʾān (and with it chronology) has been confirmed by recent scholarship.

Because Reynolds rejects sīra material, he also rejects much of western Qurʾānic studies that mostly understood the Qurʾān through the lens of Muḥammad's life, i.e., through the sīra, even if critically reviewed. Reynolds consciously and explicitly breaks with much of western Qurʾān scholarship, in which the chronology of the Qurʾān featured prominently in understanding the text. In particular, he criticizes Nöldeke and Neuwirth for taking sīra material too seriously. In Reynolds' view, for discerning the Qurʾān's original meaning, tafsīr is unfit, “even when it is read with the critical method.” His assessment of the tafsīr tradition leads him to conclude that “scholars today might with some justification feel themselves better qualified than the mufassirūn to study the original meaning of the Qurʾānic passages.”

Looking at a wide range of tafsīr from different centuries and milieus, one must agree with Reynolds that one will have trouble finding the original meaning of Qurʾānic passages therein. But the original meaning is also not what the mufassirūn were looking for. In fact, Norman Calder, who aimed at identifying the formal characteristics of tafsīr, suggests as an important criterium that any tafsīr must allow for polyvalent readings. Walid Saleh affirms,
“There was never one meaning for any one verse.” In addition to the sheer number of different interpretations of the same verse, a meaning that was accepted or prevalent in a certain period could disappear in another until one day it would appear again if a scholar saw it as fitting. The character of tafsīr is anthological. As Saleh notes, “Tafsīr did not mean consensus by dropping things out. It meant consensus by including things.” In contrast, for Reynolds, the search for the “original meaning” is the “most fruitful method of reading the Qurʾān.”

For our discussion, Reynolds' emphasis on “the original meaning” of the Qurʾān is especially relevant since it presupposes a particular understanding of what constitutes the most valid meaning of a text (i.e., the “original”), and he uses a distinctively analogical method to determine that meaning (i.e., understanding the text in light of material that allegedly came chronologically before it). The question is whether Reynolds is actually concerned here with “meaning” or rather simply with how the Qurʾān came to be, that is, with its historical emergence. He rejects the latter by explicitly refraining from using a historical method or contextualizing the Qurʾān in its original milieu. Instead, he “subtextualizes” the Qurʾān by drawing on a wide range of mainly Syriac material in which he finds parallels to qurʾānic narratives and terms.

Reynolds assumes that there ought to be one clear meaning of each qurʾānic term, phrase, verse, and sūra. His main argument against tafsīr is its anthological nature and the apparent “confusion” of the mufassirūn that shows in their general disagreement about many meanings

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363 Saleh, Formation, 20.
364 Ibid. See also ibid., 18: “A verse could have conflicting interpretations, each of which could be adduced as part of the meaning of the word of God without disrupting the notion of the clarity of the Qurʾān. […] A polyvalent Qurʾān was seen as the norm.”
365 Reynolds, Biblical Subtext, 1.
and retreat to speculation. However, rather than providing one clear meaning for each verse or term, most classical tafsīr enumerated several possible meanings, often without giving precedence to one particular interpretation. For Reynolds, the multiplicity of meanings the mufassirūn provided is a sign of their loss, because if they had known the right one, they would have said so. In his view, finding the clear meaning of the Qur'ānic passages was the aim of the mufassirūn. As he states, “They did see the importance of achieving a clearer, more accurate understanding of the text. In fact, this enterprise seems to be called for by the text itself, which asks, 'Will they not contemplate the Qur'ān?’ (4:82)”

Such a reading of both the Qur'ān and the mufassirūn is only possible if he declares his own objective of analyzing the Qur'ān to be synonymous with theirs. One must understand that this statement results from an implicit comparison and an inherent vision of history. His reiterated “like them” plays down difference in this moment and belies a belief in the contemporaneity of the past, consonant with Voltaire's statement that “Man, in general, has always been what he is.” The contemporaneity of the past does not make it equal, however, but leads to judging this past on the basis of criteria taken to be universal. Thanks to recent research by scholars such as Calder, Rippin, Saleh, and Kristin Zahra Sands, we have come to better understand the nature, characteristic, and purpose of tafsīr. We have thus gained a better grasp of the hermeneutics seen as proper by Muslim scholars for centuries to interpret the Qur'ān. Recent scholarship has helped to overcome the view, still uttered by Gilliot in 2001, that traditional Qur'ānic exegesis found itself in a state of “sclerosis” after al-Ṭabarī (d. 923).

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366 Reynolds, Biblical Subtext, 19.
368 For Voltaire's quote see Elmarsafy, Enlightenment Qur'ān, 28.
Several scholars have argued that clarity and non-ambiguity are central features of western modernity.\(^{370}\) Bauer applies this premise to cultural studies and examines its importance for the Islamic context. He argues that the pre-modern Islamic discursive tradition (like other pre-modern cultures) was highly tolerant of ambiguity. In linguistics, ambiguity is “a characteristic of expressions of natural languages, to which several interpretations can be referred, or respectively, [expressions] that can be specified in various ways through the linguistic description in regard to their lexicographic, semantic and syntactic, etc. aspect.”\(^{371}\) While ambivalence means an undetermined plurality of meanings, ambiguity can be precise in its production of meanings and systematically be discerned. Bauer defines cultural ambiguity as follows:

The phenomenon of cultural ambiguity occurs when, over a longer period, an expression or action conveys two or more meanings that may be opposite, compete with or at least deviate strongly from each other. Cultural ambiguity exists when a social group derives norms and meanings (Sinnzuweisungen) for individual areas of life simultaneously from discourses that deviate strongly or even oppose each other, or when a group accepts various interpretations of a phenomenon, while none of those interpretations can claim complete prevalence.\(^{372}\)

Cultural ambiguity should not be confused with tolerance in the socio-ethical sense of the term.

Classical Arabic culture aimed at curtailing ambiguity but did not want to eliminate it.\(^{373}\) In many a scholar's view, the Enlightenment put an end to the joy in ambiguity, being incompatible with the project to produce a radically clear thought. Enlightenment thought aimed at gradually

\(^{370}\) period after al-Ṭabarî is especially understudied. Saleh, Formation, 2. Further, “The erroneous scholarly assumption that what is published is also the most representative of the genre led to a clouding of the actual vastness of the literature and the wrong conclusion that nothing significant can be added to what's already been published.” See idem., 3. Herbert Berg offers an extensive overview of secondary works on early tafsîr: Herbert Berg, The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period (London: Curzon, 2000).


\(^{372}\) Bauer, Kultur, 30.

\(^{373}\) Ibid., 27.

\(^{373}\) Ibid., 20-31.
recognizable definite truth that could also be clearly formulated without room for obscurity. The ideal for any science became math and geometry that produced clear and unambiguous results. Importantly, ambiguity does not mean that “anything goes.”\textsuperscript{374} It also does not amount to a complete chaos without any method or precision. Rather, “Ambiguity is an excess of meaning, a multiplicity of too many meanings, so that we are drawn toward different directions.” Because ambiguity rejects the idea of monovalent explanations, it helps to “capture the complexity of the world.”\textsuperscript{375} According to William Empson, not only is there no language without ambiguity, but ambiguity also creates “room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.”\textsuperscript{376} Despite the enthusiasm for ambiguity among some scholars, artists, and literary people, Bauer and others find that we live in an age that is hostile toward ambiguity. The process of bureaucratization and technologization calls for unified standards that undergird how we view life and texts.\textsuperscript{377}

There were doubtlessly Islamic scholars in pre-modern times who were also hostile to ambiguity. Two famous figures are Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn Taymīya. It is yet interesting to note that their claims of absolute truth when it came to judgments in either philosophy or jurisprudence were met either with incomprehension or rejection from their contemporaries. This is to say that a strand in traditional Islamic thought strived at clarity and the elimination of ambiguity; this strand, however, was by no means the dominant one.\textsuperscript{378} Moreover, even someone like Ibn Taymīya, who intended to produce the “clear explanation” of a verse through reference to the

\textsuperscript{374} This famous utterance was framed in Paul Feyerabend's “Consolations for the Specialist,” in \textit{Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge}, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 229. Feyerabend's “anything goes” should not be understood as in any way anti-science, either. Importantly, Feyerabend was concerned with forms of intellectual or ideological hegemony of certain methods. See Ian Hacking, “Introduction,” in Paul Feyerabend, \textit{Against Method} (New York/London: Verso, 2010), xiii.

\textsuperscript{375} Bauer, \textit{Kultur}, 31-32.

\textsuperscript{376} Empson, \textit{Seven Types}, 1. Quoted in Bauer, \textit{Kultur}, 34.

\textsuperscript{377} Ibid., 35. The literature on this topic is vast. For a good overview of the problems that arise from taking clarity and distinctness as highest standard of truth, see Bardo, \textit{Flight}, 71.

\textsuperscript{378} Bauer, \textit{Kultur}, 31.
Prophet and the companions, accepted that there existed variations of meaning in the Qur'ān.379 Pre-modern Islamic cultures characteristically accepted a plurality of discourses that existed simultaneously side by side, even if the norms collided with each other.380 According to Bauer, the decisive factor for tolerance of ambiguity is that competing norms and discourses are being accepted as valid, even if there are individuals who fight the other normativities and would prefer a hegemonic discourse. Basically, all fields in classical Islam were the result of a compromise between competing discourses. Those compromises did not eliminate the original positions that remained to compete and yet co-exist with the other positions. Tolerance of ambiguity is evident in the Qur'ānic text as well as in its interpretation. Being far removed from a dogmatic narrowness, Islamic Qur'ān exegetes developed methods that allowed them to capture a wide range of interpretations for the same passage.381 Sands, who surveyed Sufi commentaries, comes to a conclusion like Bauer’s: “The most basic question addressed in these works, and the question from which all other questions are derived, is how to best approach the Qur'ān in order to discover its richness and transforming possibilities […] Interpretation is seen as an unending process.”382 Sufi scholars started their hermeneutical process on the premise that the Qur'ān has several levels of meaning and that human beings are capable of interpreting them.383

The premise of the Qur'ān's polyvalence is not confined to Sufi interpreters. Again, the room Muslim exegetes left for various interpretations never meant that anything goes. Each interpretative tradition applied their own exegetical (in today's jargon we may say hermeneutical)

380 Levine, Social Theory, 197-206.
381 Bauer gives several examples of these symbioses: Al-Shāfīʿi (767-820) succeeded to integrate rational procedures into a legal discourse. Al-Ash'arī integrated rational methods from Greek philosophy into Islamic theology. Al-Ghazâlî incorporated Sufism into mainstream Islamic religion. The aforementioned scholar al-Sūyūṭî composed a whole work on the hadīth “ikhtilāf al-ʿulamāʾ rahma li-ummaṭī” (the differing opinions of the scholars are a mercy for my umma). Bauer, Kultur, 42-45.
382 Sands, Śūfī Commentaries, 3.
383 Ibid., 7.
procedures. Besides an openness of the text for meaning, the interpreters also followed what one may term “hermeneutics of humility.” Al-Ghazālī, for example, pondered how to deal with verses whose literal meaning seems to contradict reason: “The first is not to aspire to fully know the meaning of these verses. The second is to accept that interpretation is unavoidable because reason does not lie. The third recommendation is to refrain from specifying an interpretation when the [various] possibilities [of interpretation] are incompatible.”  

This short quotation elucidates that leaving space for ambiguity in interpretation is a means to safeguard truth and not to rush into monovalent judgement that may or may not be true. The beauty of qur'ānic interpretation, for many scholars, consisted in finding the richness and plurality of meaning, not in discerning one (original) meaning. Thus, for al-Kāshānī, “It was as if continually, morning and evening, meanings were being unveiled to [him] in every verse such as would fatigue [his] tongue to describe.” Many eminent scholars interpreted the endless possibilities of meaning in the Qur'ān as a sign of its divine character. In Ibn `Arabi's view, to assume that some of the possible meanings were wrong would have entailed to accept that God could not have foreseen the various ways in which the Qur'ān could be read. Limiting the Qur'ān to mono-dimensional meanings would hence entail the limiting of God's knowledge.

To view these varying opinions in a positive light expresses one of the most important characteristics of classical Islam and did not provoke a crisis among the scholars. Rather, as Bauer concludes, “The difference in opinion now appears as a constructive element of the system instead of a situation that has to be erased.” In his view, the Qur'ān is the ambiguous text par

385 Ibid., 32.
386 Ibid., 41.
387 We see a similar attitude when it comes to the classification of aḥādīth operating within a system that could be
excellence that includes not only varying meanings, but also, from early on, variant readings.\(^{388}\)

Missing this characteristic of taṣfīr, Reynolds comes to rather harsh and disparaging judgments on parts of the mufassirūn. Thus, “Even the earliest mufassirūn, [were] unable to understand basic elements of the Qurʾān,” such as the accurate meaning of the so-called disconnected letters that appear at the opening of twenty nine sūras.\(^{389}\) The treatment of al-Ṭabarī's taṣfīr by Reynolds may serve as an example of his judgment of the mufassirūn's method. Reynolds summarizes the latter's interpretation of the mysterious letters:

Al-Ṭabarī [...] opens his discussion of this topic with the admission that “the interpreters of the Qurʾān differ over the meaning” of the disconnected letters and offers up to five traditions for each interpretation. [...] In all, al-Ṭabarī's discussion of the first three disconnected letters takes over nine pages in the standard Beirut edition of his taṣfīr. He concludes this discussion with his own view, that each letter is an abbreviation for more than one word. This is a perfectly logical deduction, since it explains why the Qurʾān might use a letter instead of a word.\(^{390}\)

Reynolds' judgment of the failure of the mufassirūn results from equating their concern with his. His sense of clarity and an original meaning lead him to appropriate what al-Ṭabarī and other exegetes were doing. He is right in that they did not detect the “original meaning” of Qurʾānic passages, but that does not mean that they were “confused” and “totally failed to understand these letters.” One cannot jump to the conclusion that the mufassirūn, “totally incapable of remembering exactly what the Prophet said” about certain matters “were dealing with a text that was fundamentally unfamiliar to them.”\(^{391}\) Reynolds, and with him many others, such as

\(^{388}\) There exist in western scholarship completely opposing views in view of the purpose, form, and development of the qirāʿāt of the Qurʾān. For example, according to Wansbrough, the qirāʿāt are not the product of remembering actual variant readings that differed from the ʿUthmānic text. Instead, they must be understood as part of the tradition of exegesis. They are in any case minor, in his view. See Wansbrough, Qurʾānic Studies, 44, 225. Anton Spitaler shares this opinion. Since then, new research has been undertaken on the qirāʿāt, especially by the group around François Déroche in Paris. We are still awaiting the results which requires patience.

\(^{389}\) Reynolds, Biblical Subtext, 19.


\(^{391}\) Ibid., 20-21.
Lawrence Conrad and Crone, simply assume that for the *mufassirūn* to interpret the Qurʾān meant to look for a supposedly “original meaning,” rather than for a cluster of significances that all add meaning to the Qurʾān instead of creating confusion. By prima facie aligning the *mufassirūn’s* concerns with his, Reynolds achieves to not be surprised by what could be characterized as the unfamiliar. Instead, he recognizes the unfamiliar and assimilates it to the familiar (concepts, vocabulary, textual structure and intention). *Tafsīr* cannot but fall far short when compared to the standards of the particular ideal type of interpretation Reynolds has in mind.

Such categorical assimilation becomes obvious when he equates the approach to text of the medieval *mufassirūn* with that of older western Qurʾān scholars, such as Nöldeke: “By sorting through the traditions in *tafsīr*, [western Qurʾān scholars] hope to spot a valid tradition that preserves ancient material. This approach to the text [...] is essentially that of medieval Muslim scholars.” Reynolds rightly highlights that Nöldeke built his chronology of the Qurʾān on Islamic material. His caution concerning a more critical treatment of *tafsīr* that has often been equated with the meaning of the Qurʾān is justified, and is also, as we will see, a concern of Muslim contemporary scholars. Reynolds draws attention to a critical question, namely, to which extent an interpretation of the Qurʾān should be based on its chronology, Islamic tradition, and read in context with Muḥammad's life. This is not an easy question to answer and will concern us in the next section. The problem in Reynolds' statement is not his critique of Nöldeke but his equation of the latter's approach with those of the medieval *mufassirūn* whose core assumptions about the Qurʾānic text differed considerably from Nöldeke's.

Without providing his reader with a theory of text or theory of reading that Reynolds assumes in his approach, it remains unclear what an “original meaning” may be. Without a theory

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of text, this could refer to God as author, Muḥammad as writer or orator, the first generation of Muslims who redacted the Qurʾān, or indeed an arbitrary collection of foreign and obscure texts, mixed together whimsically. Historically speaking, every text has a history. In some specific historical moment, it becomes materially palpable. Dispensing with the historical context of the Qurʾān and referring to an alleged subtext of the Qurʾān saves Reynolds from speaking about “influences,” a charge leveled against earlier orientalists and western Qurʾān scholars. Yet, Reynolds holds on to the myth of an original meaning for which one needs at least a vision of how the particular text came into being. Otherwise, where does the original meaning reside, in the mind of the author, the original sources of the text, or its redactor(s)? When and where does the “text begin”? Paradoxically, Reynolds explicitly examines the “canonical text of the Qurʾān.”393 By “canonical text” he means the 1924/25 Cairo edition to the exclusion of other qirāʿāt, which, for him, belong to the history of the text.394 According to his own logic, he might after all be dealing with the wrong text. To read the Qurʾān as a whole coherent text is not possible without putting some trust into the Islamic faith community that was in the end responsible for the shape and constitution of the Qurʾān. This is the same faith community that Reynolds deems unfit to “understand basic elements of the Qurʾān anymore.”395

Reynolds has contributed greatly to qurʾānic studies in retrieving an Aramaic and Syriac archive that may have constituted part of the ideational context for the reception of the Qurʾān. This rich material can certainly shed light on qurʾānic passages and add new meanings to the Qurʾān for those readers who are open to it. To read the Qurʾān “in light of its conversation with earlier literature, in particular biblical literature”396 is not in itself problematic. This was even, at

393 Reynolds, Biblical Subtext, 13.
394 Ibid., “Introduction,” 2, 12.
395 Ibid., 19.
396 Ibid., Biblical Subtext, 2.
some point in Islamic history, a valid and fruitful approach within a certain strand of *tafsīr*. Reynolds can be seen as one of the main proponents for reviving this tradition. What is debatable are some of the assumptions Reynolds makes to justify his focus on that material. Producing an artificial break in the continuity of Muslim understanding of the Qurʾān serves to warrant his own critical approach, which strives *ad fontes*. He dismisses the whole of Muslim tradition as useless for critical scholarship not because the *mufassirūn* had an altogether different purpose in mind with their exegesis. On the contrary, by aligning their concern with his, and translating the unfamiliar into the familiar, he judges the *mufassirūn* on the basis of their failure to achieve the alleged aim of finding the original meaning of a passage.

He is not dismissive of Islamic tradition per se. As he asserts, “Such traditions (i.e., the *sīra* material) […] can be a proper guide for a pious reading of the Qurʾān. But to the critical scholar they should suggest that *tafsīr* is a remarkable literary achievement to be appreciated in its own right.”397 Just as Kropp and Lawrence, Reynolds declares Islamic Qurʾān scholarship irrelevant to critical academic studies. Logically, if the *mufassirūn* aimed at the same result as historical-critical studies, and the latter are able to provide better results, one would have to conclude that historical-critical studies should gradually replace *tafsīr*.

To be clear, Reynolds does not draw this conclusion. He also by no means expresses the expectation for Muslims to follow the historical-critical method. Perhaps, he simply wants to demarcate his own approach from “pious readings” of the Qurʾān. Linking these readings to a certain practice in western qurʾānic studies (i.e., chronological approaches), one may assume, serves to delegitimize the latter. The topos that we, the contemporaries, are in a better place than previous generations to understand an ancient text is not confined to western academic studies

but can, as we will see, also be heard among Muslim thinkers. Similarly to Kropp and Lawrence, Reynolds would reject a unification of the perception of the Qur’ān in East and West in Neuwirth's sense.

An interesting aspect in Reynolds' account is his understanding of “critical” that he inherits from Enlightenment treatment of the Bible and that is linked to a concept of the text whose meaning rests in its allegedly original significance. It ought to be noted that this theory of text and meaning is one among many. According to Reynolds, “the Qur’ān – from a critical perspective at least – should not be read in conversation with what came after it (tafsīr) but with what came before it (biblical literature),” constituting the Qur'ān's subtext. In Ricoeur's words, Reynolds is less concerned with the text-world “in front of the text,” and more with the text-world behind it. The world behind the text refers to the world that generated the text. With his emphasis on the text-world behind the text, Reynolds means to make those voices in interpretation heard that have come to be neglected in mainstream Islamic exegesis. As he explains, “The mufassirūn used tafsīr to claim the Qur'ān as their own. In so doing, they tended to distance it from the narratives and doctrines of Jews and Christians.” Reynolds wants to bring these traditions closer together again and open up the unthought in Qur'ān interpretation.

There is no doubt that tafsīr was shaped by the politics of its times, and that the biblical tradition came to be gradually marginalized in the course of this exegetical history with the crystallization and strengthening of Muslim identity. Reynolds' plea for taking the biblical tradition more seriously for situating the Qur’ān is warranted. In fact, the archive of Syriac and

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Aramaic sources Reynolds provides for reading the Qurʾān can enrich its interpretation significantly building even on a previously well-established strand of scholarship in *tafsīr* itself. Dismissing the entire Islamic tradition for a critical reading of the Qurʾān, however, seems to throw out the baby with the bath water. Such a step seems to suggest that “critique” is only critique when it is secular (i.e., not pious), circumvents tradition, and searches for the original meaning of a text. Analogy and speculation tend to override here the logically causal. We can only know by analogy that the Aramaic stories have a relation to the Qurʾān, while we know with certainty that *tafsīr* deals directly with the Qurʾān. Resemblance alone is not empirical evidence.

Of course, Reynolds is not the first to stress that the Qurʾān addresses an audience familiar with biblical traditions. His attempt to introduce anew biblical literature for interpreting the Qurʾān could enhance both Islamic and western academic Qurʾānic studies. In the course of Islamic exegetical history, Reynolds is right to state, the Qurʾān's relationship with biblical texts was gradually ousted, as can be seen in Ibn Kathīr, who developed “a fundamentally antagonistic attitude to the Qurʾān's biblical subtext.”\(^{402}\) Reynolds' work on the Syriac intertexts of the Qurʾān are a promising corrective to this exclusion of valuable material.

Yet, as Madigan states carefully, “Behind the justifiable insistence on the importance of the biblical subtext for understanding the Qurʾān, there can be a privileging of the world that generated the text at the expense of the world generated by the text.”\(^{403}\) Making the choice to privilege the world behind the text is an act of authorial self-positioning that tends to devalue the world created by the text. Prioritizing the world that created the text and locating its meaning in these subtexts rather than in the text, tends to strip the text of its agency. Some scholars argue that

\(^{402}\) Reynolds, *Biblical Subtext*, 207.

the text consciously transformed those earlier texts to create new meaning.\footnote{Sidney Griffith, “Al-Nasārā in the Qurān. A Hermeneutical Reflection.” In New Perspectives on the Qurān. The Qurān in its Historical Context II, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 301-303.} Reynolds himself in his later work has adopted such an approach that seems overall more fruitful. In that case, it is still the text that creates meaning and, therefore, one must look for meaning in said text. Comparing the text to other familiar texts can be productive in drawing out their differences. Reducing the text to its subtexts, which are won by means of resemblance and analogy, renders the text itself mute. The mere citation of parallels is insufficient. Without a theory of the text one builds “a house not made by hands.”\footnote{The expression is taken from Jonathan Z. Smith, “A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religion’s History,” Numen 48 (2001): 140.} One does well to recall J.Z. Smith's call for a substantial and intellectually rigorous mode of comparison:

> It is axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity. Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting, and a methodical manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end. The questions of comparison are questions of judgment with respect to difference: What differences are to be maintained in the interests of comparative inquiry? What differences can be defensively relaxed and relativized in light of the intellectual task at hand?\footnote{Jonathan Z. Smith, To Take Place: Theory in Ritual (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 14. Referring to resemblance theory, J.Z. Smith states: ‘The statement of comparison is never dyadic, but always triadic; there is always an implicit ‘more than’, and there is always a ‘with respect to’.’ See Smith, Drudgery Divine, 51.}

As stated earlier, no text can be read simply as text. Reynolds, in the end, implies as what to read the Qurān: as a homily, i.e., a religious exhortation on biblical themes that “developed independently from but parallel to Christian [Syriac] homily.” Reynolds here risks to forfeit the Qurān's distinctiveness, not just its uniqueness; for example, when he states, “The Qurān does not seek to correct, let alone replace Biblical literature, but instead to use it for its exhortation.”\footnote{Reynolds, Biblical Subtext, 249.}

In the end, he sees Qurān and Bible “in harmony” with each other. This could be interpreted as a concession to the Islamic idea that the Qurān affirms earlier scriptures – an idea, however, that
also entails that those scriptures were misread or falsified (taḥrīf). Although Reynolds avoids talking about “influences,” classifying the Qurʾān as a probably homiletic text lends itself to dispensing with the Qurʾān's autonomy as an Islamic text. The meticulous accounts of Syriac apocryphal material at times gives the impression that there is nothing new in the Qurʾān, in which case the reiterated “like them” has assimilated the differences.

Some might object that it is easy to attack those who write revisionist history, which challenges how communities choose to remember their ritual and story, for their presuppositions. Analysis of hermeneutical presuppositions can be useful, but it can also be a cheap way to dismiss a work when it might yield valuable insights. There is no doubt that Reynolds provides us with such valuable insights. Instead of focusing on hermeneutical presuppositions, Tilley suggests, one should focus on whether those authors meet “the role-specific responsibilities of historians.” The right question to ask, for Tilley, is what ethics of judgment an author applies. The problem with many historical claims is that they “go far beyond those which can be supported by the proper practice of history. They fail not because they have value-laden presuppositions, but because they allow such beliefs to warrant claims that are not warrantable by the practice of historical investigation and reconstruction.”

Tilley's suggestion with reference to “historical-Jesus-research” can be a helpful corrective for claims on the Qurʾān as well:

Historians cannot responsibly claim to introduce us to the “pre-Eastern Jesus,” but only to offer a hypothesis about the way the actual Jesus might have been, a hypothesis which has some warrant, but can never be certain. [They] cannot claim to refute church practice on the grounds of hypotheses. [They can however] show us, with a high level of probability and strong textual warrant, extensive diversity [about a tradition].

Reynolds' studies definitely contribute to the “extensive diversity” of Qurʾānic interpretation. Yet,
when history stands in judgment over the “original” meaning of a *sūra*, verse, or term in the Qurʾān that is simultaneously posited as its “actual meaning,” one does more than stating a hypothesis. Suggesting that the original reading of much of the Qurʾān can be traced to Christian homilies and *should* in fact be read as such raises the question whether this claim presents still only a historical hypothesis or a normative theological “dogma.” That being said, once one loosens the grip of method, and acknowledges it as one among many ways of reading, the results can be included into other approaches that may or may not depend on different presuppositions about text and meaning.

**Disppossessing the Qurʾān: Christoph Luxenberg**

The magic of comparison carried to its fullest can be seen in Christoph Luxenberg's *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran* (2000). His approach has caused much furor and academic output in Qurʾānic studies. In the following section, I suggest that it is expedient to read Luxenberg's work against the Lebanese background and as a Christian polemic instead of situating him in the field of western Qurʾānic studies. My argument will be substantiated in chapter VI, where I examine so-called “Christian readings” of the Qurʾān. Whoever is familiar with western Qurʾān scholarship may wonder why one should include Luxenberg's work at all in discussing this discipline. To that effect, one has to note that his work, despite being contested, was by no means rejected unanimously in the field and has excited much new research, particularly on the Aramaic influences on the Qurʾān. Usually, when asked in panel or podium discussions, Luxenberg seems exclusively interested in his studies and refrains from political claims. Reynolds even comes to the judgment, “His reading of the text is not done in the shadow of a grand religious vision.”

Contrary to that view, I argue, Luxenberg's project is inherently

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political in that it aims at a reformulation of what constitutes the Qur'ān and Islam.

In a nutshell, Luxenberg argues that the basis of the Qur'ān is a Christian Syro-Aramaic
*ur-text*, written in an Aramaic-Arabic mixed language (*Mischsprache*). This presupposition
which Luxenberg reaches by means of arguments based on resemblance, overrules not only any
previous philological approach but at times his own methodology which he has to bring in line
with his pre-conceived assumptions. On the basis of etymological comparison between the
Arabic and Syriac script, he establishes the “original text” of the Qur'ān that now appears to be in
harmony with what Luxenberg identifies as Syriac tradition. 411 This re-constitution of the Qur'ānic
text renders it abruptly a veritably foreign text that has no use for an established reading tradition
since such reading traditions obviously failed to even discern the actual character and indeed the
text of the Qur'ān. The fact that Luxenberg has written under a pseudonym indicates that he is
aware of the potential explosiveness of his work. 412

A reform-oriented persuasion underlies his approach, namely that the historical-critical
approach will liberate the Qur'ān and guide it out of the alleged congealment of tafsīr. 413 Given
the richness of the tafsīr tradition, one can only speculate that Luxenberg’s *muflassirūn* do not
lack in creativity, but in the interpretation he wishes to see. In his view, neither Muslim exegetes
nor western Qur'ānic scholars have come to terms with much of the Qur'ānic meanings, since they
have been missing the “code” this work requires – that is, Syriac. Similarly to Reynolds,
Luxenberg starts from the premise that Arabic commentators were often at a loss when
explaining Qur'ānic expressions. He bases this judgment mainly on al-Ṭabarī’s *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*,

411 For a summary of his own approach and results, see Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramäische Lesart*, 299-307.
412 François De Blois, among others, criticized in particular the use of a pseudonym for publication. See François De
the *mufassir* he predominantly references. Al-Ṭabarī's often-used formula “the people of *ta'wil* (exegesis) disagree on that” serves Luxenberg as main proof for his claim.\(^{414}\) While in Reynolds' theory, the *mufassirūn* lack a certain semantic and literary background that would have been helpful for discerning the Qur'ān's meaning, in Luxenberg's approach, they lack an entire language necessary to understand the Qur'ān, namely Syriac. They approach the text with the wrong prerequisite – Arabic philology.\(^{415}\) Luxenberg's second major claim is that the Qur'ān emerged in an Aramaic-Syriac social and scriptural culture and has to be considered as its product. Most of these Syro-Arabs were Christians. The Qur'ān should be understood as Christian Syro-Aramaic recitation or lectionary, which is indicated by its self-ascription as *qur'ān*. While the Qur'ān references other scriptures, it cannot be considered itself scripture.\(^{416}\)

Luxenberg thinks that Arabic had only been developed two hundred years after the issuance of the Qur'ān, which made it impossible for later commentators to understand it properly. Consequently, one fourth of the Qur'ān has remained “unclear and mysterious.” Luxenberg frequently uses the terms “obscure” and “dark” to highlight just how confused the Qur'ān, and with it the Muslim interpretive tradition, are. But even those passages that seem clear were probably erroneously interpreted.\(^{417}\) His presupposition that the Qur'ān was written in a “mixed language” lets him play with the diacritics-free script at will and take any term “that vaguely resembles something in Syriac [...] to determine its meaning not from the Arabic but from the Syriac lexicon.”\(^{418}\) Resemblance thus serves him as empirical evidence and leads him to claims of identity instead of “judgement with respect to difference.”\(^{419}\)

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\(^{415}\) Ibid., 1-22.

\(^{416}\) Ibid., 84, 113, 116.

\(^{417}\) Ibid., 117.

\(^{418}\) De Blois, “Review,” 95.

\(^{419}\) Smith, *To Take Place*, 14; See also Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51.
His statements on the Arabic script are ambiguous and give the impression that Arabic was not yet a written language.\(^{420}\) Although there exists disagreement concerning the exact development of Arabic, scholars agree that it existed in the seventh century, Arabic script (even though “defective”) included.\(^{421}\) Luxenberg does not provide any form of historical context, besides a few comments about the spread of Syriac as the region's lingua and cultura franca. Despite the wide range of literature on the Late Antique context, we do not yet have a clear picture of the language situation of the region during said time. The historical accords that are available do not warrant Luxenberg's hypothesis of the pervasiveness of Syriac culture in the Near East, much less Arabia. He chose to ignore the rich cultural tapestry of the area in the sixth and seventh centuries and omits Arab paganism, Rabbinic Judaism, and Roman and Hellenistic cultures.\(^{422}\) Given Luxenberg's aim to “place the Qur'ān in its actual historical context,”\(^{423}\) this oversight is dubious. Saleh and François De Blois affirm the obliquity of Luxenberg's approach.

Saleh rightly calls him out for not providing historical evidence that would substantiate his claims of the presence of Syro-Aramic in the Hejaz. Luxenberg uses neither historical, paleographic, nor linguistic sources; he further neglects to situate himself in the scholarly discourse on the Qur'ān.\(^{424}\) He is either unfamiliar with both Qur'ānic and late Antique scholarship

\(^{420}\) Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramäische Lesart*, vii-ix, 68.


\(^{422}\) The literature on the subject is abundant. For a good introduction see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Averil Cameron, “The Eastern Provinces in the 7th Century A.D. Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam,” in *Quelques jalons pour und histoire de l'identité grecque*, ed. S Said (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 287-313. A good overview over the literature can be found in Saleh, “Etymological Fallacy,” 32-33.


\(^{424}\) De Blois, “Review,” 95.
or he diligently chooses to ignore it. Saleh concludes that Luxenberg's work lies outside of scholarly consensus.\footnote{Saleh, “Etymological Fallacy,” 30-32. Saleh lists an impressive number of works that have dealt with Late Antiquity and its complexity.}

One of Luxenberg's favorite phrases to explain what happened to the Qur'ān is that later commentators “misread” (verlesen) the Qur'ānic masora.\footnote{On the masora, see James Bellamy, “Some proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,” \textit{JOAS} 113 (1993): 562-573; Bellamy, “More Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,” \textit{JOAS} 116 (1996): 196-204.} Luxenberg never elaborates on how this process is to be imagined. Allegedly, the Qur'ān was written (by Muḥammad?) in Syro-Aramaic script. This text was copied through the generations, but the Arabs did not know anymore what they were copying, which led to mistakes in the reading.\footnote{Luxenberg, \textit{Syro-Aramäische Lesart}, 132-136.} Luxenberg leaves open how and when the Syriac text came to be transformed into an Arabic text. His “approach assumes that the Arabs lost early on the understanding of their scripture and transmitted it faithfully, all the same, and then, later on, clothed it with an invented diacritical system that obfuscated it.”\footnote{Saleh, “Etymological Fallacy,” 39.} When it serves his interpretation, Luxenberg accepts the \textit{masora} of the Qur'ān; otherwise, he rejects and in the process jettisons his own suggested methodology.\footnote{Ibid., 40-47.}

For a person not trained in Syriac, it is difficult to follow Luxenberg's argument, a facet of his work that makes it seem more sophisticated than it is. As Reynolds rightly states, “Luxenberg turns from orthography to phonology and back again, according to the exigencies of any particular argument.”\footnote{Reynolds, “Introduction,” 16. He further states: “One might add a third criticism: Luxenberg’s use of Syriac is largely based on modern dictionaries, especially Payne-Smith’s Thesaurus Syriacus (1879–1901), Manna’s \textit{Vocabulaire Chaldéen-Arabe} (1900) and Brockelmann’s \textit{Lexicon Syriacum} (1928). While some definitions therein are based on early Syriac texts (and thus conceivably could explain the original meaning of Qur'ānic words), others are based on later Syriac (and could even be influenced by Arabic); only Payne-Smith consistently provides citations that could act as safeguards against this trap.”} After this strong judgment, Reynolds, nevertheless, does not understand why scholars reacted in such a hostile way to Luxenberg’s work. In response one must emphasize

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that De Blois is a Semitist and an expert in Syriac and Arabic. One can trust his judgment when he attests to Luxenberg's "shaky knowledge" of Syriac and "passable knowledge of Arabic." De Blois concludes that the *Syro-Aramäische Lesart* "is a reading that is potentially attractive only in its novelty, or shall I say its perversity, not in that it sheds any light on the meaning of the book or on the history of Islam." Tilman Nagel similarly noted that Luxenberg's work is a "whimsical mixture of Semitic basic knowledge (for example he knows about the consonants) and long-winded phantasies." Luxenberg's selective reading of the Qur'an also becomes obvious when he grants priority to Qur'ānic statements that affirm the earlier scriptures and confirm their message. Of course, the Qur'an does both; on the one hand, it affirms its congruence with the earlier scriptures and revelations; on the other, it interprets and reforms biblical content and sees itself as a correction and fulfillment of the religions of the book. It also often polemizes against Christians and Christian doctrines, such as the trinity and Jesus's divinity. For Luxenberg, only those statements count that agree with Christian doctrine. While he takes these statements at face value, any other passage that conflicts with these promulgations must be false.

This method goes back to earlier orientalist scholarship in which any derivation of the Qur'an from the Bible was judged as being derivative at best and wrong at worst. Luxenberg thus disregards the axiom "that comparison is never a matter of identity, [...] and that questions of comparison are questions of judgment with respect to difference." He, in effect, denies the

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431 De Blois, "Review," 95-96. This point seems necessary to emphasize because Reynolds remarks in response to De Blois that "he is still dazed by his palpable hostility to this book." See Reynolds, "Introduction," 16.


435 Smith, *To Take Place*, 14. See also Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51.
Qur'ān any originality. According to Saleh, “The claim that the Qur'ān tallies with Christian Scriptures is certainly one of the least substantiated claims about the Qur'ān and the nature of the relationship to previous scriptures ever to be stated.”436 The question of the relationship between the Qur'ān and former “scripts” occupies much of Qur'ānic scholarship today. The Qur'ān's own contradictory statements in regard to this topic have occupied Christian thinkers, polemicists, clerics, and contemporary scholars alike.437 At this point, Saleh himself gets carried away. True, Luxenbg misses the complexity of the Late Antique religious discourse, and he surely exhibits an adulterant, selective reading of the Qur'ān. But he is not the first and only one to state that the Qur'ān “tallies with Christian scriptures.”

In fact, Christian thinkers have always felt they had to make sense of Islam. There existed different Christian theologies and explanations early on. For example, already in the eight century, the anonymous Christian author of the Tathlíth appealed to the Qur'ān in order to prove that its content was in harmony with (true) Christianity.438 Approaches like this have come to be called “Christian readings” of the Qur'ān.439 We will deal with some of the thinkers who perform a Christian reading of the Qur'ān when we examine the Lebanese context. For example, Georges Khodr pursues such a Christian reading, demonstrating the presence of the logos in the Qur'ān.440 But Khodr does so as a theologian, not as a philologist or historian. For him, the theological import of the Qur'ān is an existential question rather than a mere intellectual exercise.

In that respect, Luxenbg's book can be interpreted as the attempt to lend philological

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437 For good bibliographical overview of this question as it relates to Christology, see Oddbjorn Leirvik, Images of Jesus Christ in Islam (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 1-18.
backing to such theological considerations and betrays Luxenberg's own grappling with the Qur'an and Islam. In contrast to those theologians who have tried to interpret the Qur'an from a Christian perspective, Luxenberg claims to study the Qur'an “on the basis of philological principles alone (rein philologische Analyse).” Those principles, assumed to be objective and detached from any kind of dogma, lend his approach scientific validity and imbue his work with the superior air of a dominant authoritative knowledge tradition.

His authorial self-positioning, so one may contend, serves to clear him from any accusations of religious polemics and places his work above doctrinal quarrels. Factually, he deconstructs Islam on several grounds. By constructing Islam as the outcome of a linguistic misunderstanding he creates a new ur-mythos for Islam. Crone and Cook argued that the geographical space in which Islam emerged was to be looked for in the fertile crescent rather than in the Arabian peninsula. Luxenberg does not only remove the Islamic origins from Arabia but also removes Arabic from the Qur'an. With this philological move, he disassociates Arabic from Islam which is political at its core.

Luxenberg is probably the first one (scholar or polemicist) to question the Arabness of the Qur'an – a strong polemical argument since much of Islamic identity and collective memory hinge on Arabic as Islamic and qur'anic language. First, denying Arabic its function to understand the Qur'an means that no Muslim has ever grasped the Qur'an correctly. Second, this complete lack of understanding the Qur'an gives Luxenberg the unique role of decoding its meaning, which renders the Islamic scripture unfathomable for anyone not versant in Syriac. The “expert” comes to stand in authoritative judgment not just above Muslim exegetes and the inexpert, the vast majority of the faithful, but also above western academics who study the Qur'an by dint of

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Arabic. Luxenberg even stands above the text itself, insofar as it is his expertise that unlocks its definitive composition and meaning since the text we have is deceiving of the actual Text.

Third, to negate the Arabness of the Qurʾān muzzles the central claim of ʾiʿjāz (inimitability of the the Qurʾān). One may, of course, acknowledge ʾiʿjāz as a later dogma, probably developed in the ninth century. This does not deter the fact that Arabic as the language of revelation played a crucial role in the Muslim imaginaire and scholarship. For example, Ibn Rushd, who is often referenced by proponents of a modernist reform of Islam and the application of a historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān, placed strong emphasis on the Arabic character of the Qurʾān. In his famous Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl, he presents a catalogue of rational criteria for interpreting the Qurʾān. One of these criteria is that the interpreter has to follow strictly the rules of the Arabic language.

This is also one of the criteria established in the qirāʿāt literature for determining their soundness. Ibn al-Jazarī considers “any qirāʿa that conforms to Arabic grammar – even if this happens in a way that is controversial, yet accords with the ‘Uthmānic codex, and whose ʾisnād is absolutely sound – as a right reading that no one can reject.” Moreover, any Qurʾānic term must be contextualized with other passages in the Qurʾān, a task Luxenberg sets up as a rule but casts at will. Through reciting the Qurʾān in Arabic, Muslims feel connected to Muḥammad and the early Muslim community. Luxenberg's approach radically severs this link. While the previously mentioned Lebanese theologians, like Khodr, genuinely look for a Christian testimony in the

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442 Luxenberg's approach, as Neuwirth notes, implicitly presents an attack on the western discipline of Arabic and Qurʾānic studies that had held until then, in the western academy at least, the monopoly over Qurʾānic interpretation. See Neuwirth, Der Koran, 100.


446 Needless to say, he also disregards Ibn Rushd's dictum that any interpretation of the Qurʾān has to confer with the fundamental Islamic religious principles. See Ibn Rushd, Kitāb, 14:20.
Qur‘ān, they keep the integrity of the Qur‘ān and Islam intact. In fact, Khodr sees the Arabic nature of the Qur‘ān as its fundamental and most original feature.\footnote{Khodr, Afkār, 140-144. For Khodr, the presence of the logos in the Qur‘ān is an existential theological query for his own Christian faith. He is convinced of the presence of the logos in the Qur‘ān.}

Luxenberg introduces a new form of polemics into the discussions over the identity of Arabs and Muslims. On the basis of the following observations, I believe, it will be plausible to locate his work within the Lebanese context and in debates over Lebanese identity. Whether one accepts nineteenth-century philological assumptions about the relation between a people and their language,\footnote{For example, Wilhelm Humboldt, On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species, ed. Michael Losonsky, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 21-27.} Arabic has played a crucial role in Islamic history writing and in the modern context of Arab political thought. Arabity and Islam have always been closely linked. For Christians in the Middle East, the Arabic language and assimilation into an Arabic milieu has often been mired in tensions. As Kenneth Cragg remarks, “This unilateral relation of Arabic and the Qur‘ān is peculiarly the burden of Arab Christianity. [The] self-sufficiency of the Qur‘ān, and its corollary in respect of Arabic as essentially identified by it, questions the warrant of Arabs to be Christian and of Christianity to be Arabic.”\footnote{Kenneth Cragg, The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991), 32. Carole Dagher states similarly, “The association of the Arabic language with Islam is probably the real drama of Eastern Christians.” See Dagher, Bring Down, 19.} The problem of an Arab Christian identity has been discussed especially in the Lebanese context out of which Luxenberg writes.

While Arab and particularly Lebanese Christians were pivotal in the founding of Arab nationalism, some Lebanese Christians were convinced that Arabic was always linked to an Islamic identity. For example, Syrian Arab nationalist Michel Aflaq wrote, being an Arab also entailed being associated with the Islamic milieu, almost with being a Muslim culturally. Michel Hayek similarly viewed Arabic as “the genitor of Islam” and Islam as shaping Arabism or
Arabity. As he explained further, “For Muslims, the Arabic language is not merely a tool, it is the key that gives access to history, to the understanding of human destiny, to paradise, to real dialogue with God. The Arab and the Muslim man dwells in his mother-tongue, his language is his castle and his incline altogether.”\textsuperscript{450} This ideology can be traced back to a philological romanticism à la Humboldt, who considered “language […] the organ of inner being […]. It therefore strikes with all the most delicate fibers of its roots into the national mentality; and the more aptly the latter reacts upon it, the more rich and regular its development.”\textsuperscript{451}

As a counter-ideology to Arabism, seen as uniting band between Christians and Muslims, ideologies emerged that stressed the non-Arabic character of Eastern Christians, such as Coptic (the ur-Egyptians), Phoenicians (ur-Lebanese), or Aramaic-Syrians (the true followers of Jesus). Maronite thinkers extensively propagated Phoenicianism to assert the distinct and separate identity of Lebanon and to fight Pan-Arabism. The founding of the \textit{Phoenician Review} gives evidence of such propagation. The emphasis on a non-Arab identity helped articulate the Lebanese claim to independence from the surrounding Arabic environment.\textsuperscript{452}

When Luxenberge de-Arabizes the Qurʾān, he solves the problem of the identification of Arabic with Islam. In his reading, “truly Qurʾānic” is really Syriac and, therefore, Christian. The claim of a non-Arabic Christian Qurʾān affirms the legitimacy of Christianity and the Christian truth claim. Islam, in this case, loses its basis, while the Syriac identity becomes strengthened and gains in importance. To trace Christianity in the Qurʾān and posit a Christian ur-Qurʾān belong to a certain strand in Lebanese polemical scholarship that we will examine in more detail in chapter VI. For now, it may suffice to indicate that Luxenberg's thesis seems to give philological backing


\textsuperscript{451} Humboldt, \textit{On Language}, 21.

\textsuperscript{452} See Dagher, \textit{Bring Down}, 20-22.
to the historical thesis of another Lebanese Christian, namely, Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī (Pseud.).

Irrespective of his scholarly shortcomings, Luxenberg still publishes in academic forums and presents at conferences. His claims of a non-Arabic Qurʾān may remind the reader of nineteenth century philological quarrels about the Greek/Arian/Jewish Jesus. Identifying the character of the Qurʾān as Syriac dispossesses Muslims of their holy scripture and ritual core and amounts to the dismantling of Islam. At the same time, it also empowers Christianity since the Qurʾān is rendered nothing more than an affirmation of Christian scripture and dogma. In that sense, Luxenberg's analysis is a theological statement and a reinterpretation of history in favor of a Christian reading. Any difference Luxenberg detects between the Qurʾān (or Islam) and Christianity must be re-interpreted in line with Christian dogmas and concepts.

Several Arab scholars, who are versant in German, conceive Luxenberg's approach and those that assume similar premises, as an extension of missionary work. For Riḍwān al-Sayyid, Luxenberg is clearly writing from the perspective of a Lebanese Christian with hardly concealable missionary intention. Al-Sayyid has long been writing on western orientalism and aimed to familiarize an Arab audience with its theories, methods, and authors. While he attests to what he calls the “classical orientalists' sincere will to understand,” he unmistakably dismisses the revisionist writings, among them Luxenberg, as untenable. In his eyes, these works damage western Qurʾān scholarship more than they affect Arab Islamic work on the Qurʾān. While he holds that academic qurʾānic studies were and can be profitable for many Muslim scholars, the

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455 This becomes clear in Luxenberg's discussion of the concept of paradise in the Qurʾān. See Saleh, “Fallacy,” 43.
latest revisionist scholarship denigrates much of the serious work achieved in the field.\(^\text{456}\)

It may be noted that Luxenberg's theses were presented to various Lebanese audiences, which once more highlights his ties to that context. It is worthwhile to bring in another Lebanese voice. In an article in *al-Ḥayāt al-Ṭayyiba*, Shi'ite Shaykh Muhammad Ḥasan Zarāqīt responded to Luxenberg's thesis presented at a conference in Lebanon in 2003. Zarāqīt addressed both the scholarly premises of Luxenberg's work and the politicization of the thesis through the media.\(^\text{457}\)

He starts by dismissing Luxenberg's contention that Arabic script only emerged 150 years after Muhammad's death, listing several documented works that were written before that time. Zarāqīt further questions the diffusionist model of various Syriac scholars who view Arabic – its structure, syntax, and script – as deriving from Aramaic. In that context, he asks, “Why do we assume that Arabic is the language that derives from Syriac regarding its vocabulary so that we trace words in Arabic back to Syriac, but not the other way around?”\(^\text{458}\) What Zarāqīt asks for is evidence based on historically established causality, not on analogy.

In his view, one cannot positively determine whether Arabic derived from Syriac or vice-versa. Which one of these diffusionist theories one chooses owes more to scholarly preference than to scientific findings. Arabic and Aramaic belong to the Semitic languages which accounts for the many shared synonmys and their common grammatical and morphological structure. Oftentimes, languages adopt a vocabulary from other languages due to cultural proximity, even when they belong to entirely different language families (e.g., Turkish, Persian, and Arabic).

Identifying resemblance, Zarāqīt is right to state, does not account for a scientific method.

\(^{456}\) ROIDWĀN AL-SAYYID, “al-Iṣṭishrāq al-Almānī.”


\(^{458}\) ZARĀQĪT, “Qirā‘at armānīya līl-qur‘ān,” 316.
As long as no historically reliable evidence is available that would prove that one language derived from the other, Luxenberg's method remains questionable since it relies on these assumed historical developments. As Zarāqīṭ contends, “Resemblance of vocabulary and words between and among languages is often misleading. The sounds and words in a particular language may indicate one thing in one language while something different in another.”\(^{459}\) Instead of explaining a word by means of its etymology, Zarāqīṭ insists, one has to understand it from within the social and textual context in which it was used.

Another argument Zarāqīṭ brings forth concerns the transmission of the qur'ānic text and the history of the Qur'ān. He finds it inconceivable to assume the complete foreignness of the Qur'ān that Luxenberg's thesis posits. The Qur'ān is not an unknown text “dug out of the ground,” but a text that Muslims referenced constantly and that abides by strict transmission rules. Zarāqīṭ substantiates his argument by pointing to the documentation of the varying qirāʿāt. Muslims were never shy in recording, dismissing, or attesting the qirāʿāt. If there had been an Aramaic reading of the Qur'ān, he asks, would there not be some kind of documentation or at least a hint in the Muslim sources?\(^{460}\)

Not everything in the Islamic early sources might be historically factual, yet to assume that Muslims omitted major developments, such as the language of the Qur'ān or its “Islamicity,” borders on conspiracy theory and only makes sense if one approached the Muslim sources with a mentality of absolute doubt. Zarāqīṭ does not deny that there are non-Arabic words in the Qur'ān; he even quotes a ḥadīth reported in al-Ṭabarī that claims that “every language is represented in the Qur'ān.”\(^{461}\) The “foreign vocabulary”\(^{462}\) in the Qur'ān does not constitute a problem for him.

\(^{459}\) Zarāqīṭ, “Qirāʿat armānīya li'l-qur'ān,” 317.
\(^{460}\) Ibid., 318.
\(^{462}\) The term refers to Arthur Jeffrey's pioneering study The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
However, one cannot reduce this foreign vocabulary to any one language. In Zarāqīt's view, the early fixation of the Qur'ānic text is indeed a contested matter. Islamic historiography provides many contradictory accounts on how exactly Muslims arrived at the ‘Uthmānic codex.

It is equally unclear when exactly the diacritical dots were introduced. The ambiguous textual situation led to various qirāʿāt. It may be noted that Zarāqīt seems to accept the orientalist view that the varying qirāʿāt developed because of the character of the scriptia defectiva or the unequivocal textual structure of the Qur'ān. Differing from some scholars, such as François Déroche, Zarāqīt argues that the rasm of the Qur'ān is mutawātir, i.e., free from error and reliable in its transmission, while the qirāʿāt are aḥād and less sound. The differences among the qirāʿāt, albeit meaningful at times, are usually minimal and enforce the veracity of the rasm.

In an analysis of two examples from Luxenberg's book, Zarāqīt demonstrates first that the passages Luxenberg chooses are not at all contested in tafsīr literature and hence not “obscure.” Second, he argues that even if a word was common in both Arabic and Syriac, it seems far-fetched to assume that the entire Qur'ān was written in Syriac or that the Syriac meaning should overrule the Arabic one. Finally, Zarāqīt questions Luxenberg's hermeneutic accuracy when he slightly ironically faults him for misquoting al-Ṭabarī, “the only tafsīr he refers to.” Zarāqīt suggests to refer to other tafsīr first before making claims about the whole tafsīr tradition and concluding prematurely the loss and error of all mufassirīn.

The “foreign vocabulary” in the Qur'ān has occupied a strand of western scholarship and

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465 Ibid., 320-321.
inspired some rather speculative theories. Tracing Hebrew, Syriac, and Ethiopian words in the Qur'ān is not a futile endeavor per se. Yet Saleh sees many scholars falling into what he calls the “etymological fallacy of the Qur'ān.” Similarly to Zarāqīt, Saleh contends that one is philologically at fault when one understands and explains a word by means of its etymological cognates in other languages rather than understanding the word in the context of the language in which it is used (i.e., Arabic in the case of the Qur'ān). Biblical scholar James Barr has indicated the pitfalls of letting one's fascination with comparison dominate semantics:

The comparative emphasis, like the historical, tended to make appreciation of semantic realities rather more difficult. We all know the type of philologist who, when asked the meaning of a word, answers by telling us the meaning of its cognates in other languages. This over-etymological approach is the result of excessive reliance on comparative thinking. The meaning of a word is its meaning in its own language, not its meaning in some other. [...] But the characteristic procedure of many scholars has been to start with comparative data; and the attempt to state the meaning in the actual language under study [...] has often been biased by a striving to fit this meaning into a possible derivation process starting from the comparative material. Thus comparative emphasis [...] has often tended to confuse the field of semantics.466

Barr identifies two remarkable characteristics in many a philological work: the magic of comparison and a theory of inherent diffusionism, where invention always originates in one particular place and diffuses to other locales. The problem Saleh identifies in such philological reasoning is that the etymology one chooses for a word often coincides with the genealogy one determines for the Qur'ān. Which etymology one discerns for certain words in the Qur'ān decides whose offspring Islam is. The rationale behind many of the speculations on the foreign vocabulary goes as follows:

The medieval philologists were unable to give a unanimous meaning to a term and hence one has to conclude that it is foreign. Having found the putative foreign origin of the qur'ānic term, the modern scholar looks back on the Qur'ān to discover that the new

meaning given to the word does not make sense there, hence Muḥammad must have misunderstood the word and misused it. That Muḥammad misunderstood words he used would become the refrain of a whole scholarly literature.467

This rationale is obviously a circular argument that emphasizes the mediocrity of the Qurʾān. Instead of being highly self-referential and self-conscious, the Qurʾān becomes arbitrary and confused to the point that it does not know anymore what it is talking about; it is being placed under disability. Obviously, Luxenberg's approach holds that there is only one true meaning of the Qurʾān for which he presents the hermeneutical key, leaving no room for a multiplicity of meanings of one passage or for ambiguity. Lacking historical evidence he lets comparison work its speculative magic.

The reactions to Luxenberg by established qurʾānic studies scholars were predominantly negative, even hostile, as we have seen. Yet, he is far from consistently dismissed. For example, Harald Motzki groups Luxenberg's work under “sophisticated piece[s] of scholarship.”468 Fred Donner similarly lists him among “more sophisticated approaches” to the Qurʾān.469 Reynolds notes with regret that Luxenberg's thesis caused a flood of hostile and “polemical reactions” by colleagues in qurʾānic studies and cognate disciplines. He is aware of Luxenberg's scholarly weaknesses, yet finds his approach not “entirely fruitless” and “worthy of consideration.” Above all, he warns against dismissing Luxenberg's work on ideological grounds.470 How can one

467 Saleh, “Fallacy,” 5-7. He points to scholars who held this point of view. Nöldeke entitled the third section of his study of the language of the Qurʾān as “Willkürlich und missverständlich gebrauchte Fremdwörter des Korān.” He also stated that Muhammad had changed the meanings of the supposed loanwords “either as a rule or out of sheer arbitrariness;” see Nöldeke, Neue Beiträge zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft (Strassburg: Verlag Von Karl J. Trübner, 1910), 23. Arthur Jeffery has a special category of words that Muhammad invented or misunderstood: “It has been remarked that not infrequently the Prophet had a penchant for strange and mysterious sounding words, though frequently he himself had not grasped correctly the meaning, as one sees in such cases as āriqūn, and sakīnah. Sometimes he seems even to have invented words.” See Jeffery, The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 39.
account for these very different responses?

Reflecting on the reactions to Luxenberg reveals struggles over the identity of Qur’ānic studies as well as inner-academic power struggles. I suggest we can account for the agitation surrounding Luxenberg’s work by understanding the challenge his approach poses for a small academic discipline that has yet gained new relevance for politics. The academic debate about Luxenberg’s thesis that displayed strong emotional reactions (both negative and positive) can be understood as a discursive contest between differing parties competing for control over the rhetoric of Qur’ānic studies and the public authority that comes with such control.

One can only agree with Reynolds that new methodologies should not be dismissed prima facie because they do not fit into established theories. Certain advancements in science only occurred because some scholars decided to ignore or consciously break with established methodological rules. “Anarchistic moves” sometimes bring about new valuable insights.471 Reynolds appeals to the intellectual and methodological openness of the field that has, as any other academic discipline, a tendency to reproduce its self-declared privilege by means of dismissals and condescension for alternative viewpoints and to affirm what can be termed “orthodoxy.” One can argue that at times an academic discipline needs unconventional theories that think “outside-the-box;” even if they prove to be wrong, they may give an impulse for new ways of thinking; in short, they provide alternatives in order to advance new theories.472

As valid as the call for alternative theories is, if a method collapses under its own methodological criteria, and in addition is highly tendentious, one does well to remain skeptical. In general, suspicion is in place when theories are claimed to provide the master key for

471 Feyerabend, Against Method, 7, 11.
472 Ibid., 17.
unlocking the meaning of the Qur'ān once and for all. The hostile reactions to Luxenberg, one can assume, were the heartfelt defense of the scholarliness of the discipline and the wish to shield it from bizarrely speculative hypotheses. Academic Qur'ānic studies has to defend its own standards, particularly in a time when the media enthusiastically take up any theory that sounds sensational and when Qur'ān hermeneutics have become a matter of policy. In that respect, one does well to keep in mind that arguments often have an effect or credibility not because of their semantic content but because they have been repeated often enough, as can be seen in the wide media circulation of Luxenberg's theory that the hūr al-ʿāyn (the maidens of Paradise that Muslim believers are promised upon entering paradise) are really white grapes.

Saleh demonstrated the Christian bias of Luxenberg's approach on the basis of this example, stressing that this passage is not at all contested in Muslim traditional scholarship. Yet, Luxenberg takes issue with the, in his eyes, “worldly pleasures of paradise.” Despite the erroneousness of the claim, the theory has become common sense among certain circles. The media even echoed the Schadenfreude that imbues Luxenberg's analysis of this aspect of Islamic eschatology, gleefully noting that Muslim martyrs are promised grapes upon entering paradise instead of virgins.

Michael Marx attested contemporary public opinion fascination with the mysteries surrounding manuscripts. This fascination, one must add, is not limited to the public but is also at work in academic Qur'ānic studies. It is my conviction that responsible academic Qur'ān

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473 Feyerabend, Against Method, 8.
474 Saleh, “Fallacy,” 44.
475 Ibid. As an example for such media attitude, see Stefan Theil, “Challenging the Qur'an,” in Newsweek July 28, 2003. [http://www.newsweek.com/challenging-quran-139447](http://www.newsweek.com/challenging-quran-139447) (last accessed September 13, 2014). Luxenberg's tone when he deals with the hūr al-ʿāyn is ironic and condescending: His philological findings will shatter the “dreams” of Muslims to see virgins in heaven for their pleasure, and that if they are looking for beautiful youth there, they will be disappointed, too. See Luxenberg, Syro-Aramäische Lesart, 260.
scholarship should be careful to not serve as a stage for approaches such as Luxenberg's. The harsh rejection Luxenberg met by eminent qur'ānic studies scholars can be seen as a reaction to the adoption of his theses not only by the media but also by anti-Muslim organizations. To clarify, it is not some sort of political correctness or moral incentive that drives scholars who are critical of his Aramaic reading.\textsuperscript{477} Rather, the awareness of the Qurʾān as \textit{politicum} and the reality that the public discourse on the Qurʾān plays a significant role in political life, make it imperative to assert the methodological standards of the discipline that is still in the process of establishing itself. The critics of Luxenberg counter his claims by defining their object of study and themselves as experts by means of explicit theories, evidential criteria, and rational arguments, rooted in the tradition of western qur'ānic studies that necessarily exclude others.

At stake is not simply a revisionist theory that lends itself to political purposes but the underlying assumptions that are often reflected in revisionist theories, which seem in particular to rebound in the public, perhaps because it shares those assumptions. It is no coincidence that the contest over who polices the rhetoric of qur'ānic studies falls into a time in which Islam has come to be portrayed as posing a problem for national security, freedom of religion, social coherence in Europe, etc. Contests over the discipline of qur'ānic studies should be understood in the light of the demands placed on the growing nation-state to manage highly diverse people and to respond to international economic, social, and political developments.

In other words, the new popular and academic interest in the Qurʾān and the flourishing of the discipline of qur'ānic studies are not owed to a timeless historical curiosity or the desire to answer to an obviously relevant question but to political configurations. Qurʾānic studies figure

within these politics; the method chosen to approach the Qurʾān, the claims made about and on its “body of text,” its localization in either Late Antiquity, or an isolated Arabian jāhiliyya, claiming the Qurʾān's filiation with either Christianity or Judaism help to negotiate identity and spatial and temporal imaginations of the “other” as well as of “oneself.” How one answers these questions positions one in debates about religious autonomy and the role, place, and legitimacy of Islam in society and world politics. By revising the history, text, and hermeneutics of the Qurʾān, one also partakes in a social discourse over how Islam is to be imagined.

Imagination does not imply that it is unreal or does not effect reality. Rather, imagination is the basis for social formation, as Benedict Anderson has forcefully argued in his analysis of nationalism. Qurʾānic studies aid in constructing images of Islam and are, in turn, influenced by social imagination, which we will examine in more detail in the next chapter on the basis of debates over Qurʾān hermeneutics in the media. Imagination (what a society makes thinkable or unthinkable, one's presuppositions, and vocabulary to make sense of the world, etc.) also plays a crucial role in how one approaches and conceptualizes the Qurʾān, which often rests on specific biased assumptions. As Saleh states,

If, on the one hand the Qurʾān is taken seriously and fully analyzed, as Wansbrough admirably did, then its complexity is deemed as too sophisticated to be the work of Arabs of the early 7th century of the C.E. On the other hand, given what we are supposed to know about the Arabs of the seventh century – based on early Islamic propaganda, I should add – then a Qurʾān coming out of such isolated nomadic tribes should not be worthy of sustained analysis. Only the German school, best represented in the works of Nöldeke-Schwally-Paret-Neuwirth, has been willing to deem the Qurʾān both a seventh century document and one worthy of serious study. Saleh calls for taking the Qurʾān seriously as an aesthetically complex Arabic text, a task that has often been hampered by reason of the scholars’ (cultural/racial) presuppositions about Arabs.

do so successfully, he agrees with Hawting, one should not take accounts of an isolated seventh
century Arabia at face value but understand the Qurʾān as addressing an audience steeped in Late
Antique culture. Indeed, scholars such as Donner have taken Luxenbrg’s thesis as an incentive to
further study the “broader context of near eastern religion in late antiquity to find the Qurʾān's
historical and intellectual setting.”

While the Late Antique context is significant, Neuwirth cautions against neglecting the
Qurʾān's Arabic milieu that seems to have come out of view in more recent scholarship. Both
(Late Antiquity and Arabia) should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Classical orientalists, by
reason of their rigorous philological training in various ancient languages, were to a certain
extent better positioned to take both contexts seriously than contemporary scholars who often
either know the Greek/Syriac or the Arabic heritage. The invitation to look closer at Late
Antiquity to better grasp the semantic and aesthetic content of the Qurʾān has resonated in Qurʾān
scholarship and has in particular been promoted by Neuwirth and the circle around the Corpus
Coranicum (in the following quoted as CC). It is to this tradition that we now turn, drawing out
the link between quʾānic studies and society's culture in more depth and examining an approach
to the Qurʾān that positions itself consciously in relation to the political discourse on Islam in
Europe (and its extension America).

480 Donner, “Historical context,” 34.
III. Germany: Europeanizing the Qurʾān

_Taming Fire by Man: The Qurʾān and the Media_  

In Europe, debates over the Qurʾān today often indicate a larger discomfort about the place of Islam and Muslims in Europe; they point to either the futility or possibility of a “European Islam.” The Qurʾān as a _politicum_ – a contested space – serves to discuss farther-reaching social and political questions; reference to scriptural hermeneutics helps to negotiate identity and spatial and temporal imaginations of the “other” as well as of “oneself.” In short, the historical-critical approach partakes in discussing the place of Islam in Europe.

As outlined before, politics of scripture take place on different levels. So far, we have mainly been concerned with the second level, namely with works that implicitly convey political meaning by dismissing claims central to the place of the Qurʾān in the Islamic discursive space: works that challenge Islam as coherent religion (e.g., Luxenberg, Reynolds, Crone), works that use the Qurʾān as a shibboleth for discussing broader questions of Islam (e.g., Carra de Vaux, Renan), and finally those who negotiate a certain vision for Islam or their own religion by means of qurʾānic studies (e.g., Geiger, Weil). The CC and the work of Neuwirth epitomize the valences of what I call the European Qurʾān. The CC was launched in 2007 under the auspices of Neuwirth, Michael Marx, and Nicolai Sinai and aims to acquire, classify, and reconstruct the material important for qurʾānic textual history. It has received financing for seventeen years by the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie. Eventually, this work may lead to a critical edition of the Qurʾān – or at least, this has been one of Neuwirth’s aims.

In what follows, I understand the CC’s goals as a way of producing a European reading of the Qurʾān that is significant for both the academic and social discourse. We will start by examining the reception of the CC and other western qurʾānic studies by the media and embark

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on the third level of politics of scripture, scrutinizing how academic work is received and used by
the media. Surveying how the media and public debate take up and process Qur’ānic studies
elucidates that discussions about the Qur’ān and historical-critical scholarship are part of a social
discussion over the place of Islam in Europe. Thereafter, we will move on to the first level of
politics of scripture, i.e., work that is outspokenly political in that it addresses politics or claims
to have a political agenda, by examining Neuwirth's work. This will allow us to unravel the
unavoidability of politics when dealing with the Qurʾān. Different from other scholars, Neuwirth
is aware of the political nature of Qurʾānic studies in the contemporary context and made the
decision to actively participate in these politics. She urges Qurʾānic scholars to take on social
responsibility. Given the general ethos of impartiality in the discipline, this step is a courageous
move that, albeit, comes with its own problems and promises.

Let us start with an article from 2007, taken from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
(FAZ) by Frank Schirrmacher (d. 2014), a well-known essayist, journalist, and co-editor of the
FAZ. His article “One Book is missing” (Ein Buch fehlt), written on the occasion of the Frankfurt
Book Fair in reaction to the launching of the CC, proclaimed enthusiastically:

Among all the books at the Book Fair, one book is missing that will have the power of
starting a reformation, […] capable of toppling regimes and overthrowing rulers: this book
is the historical-critical edition of the Qurʾān, about to be produced in this moment […] It is
in Berlin that has always had an ill-reputation as godless city where we will see emerging
the project of a historical-critical commentary under the title Corpus Coranicum – a critical
edition that will be explosive and exciting, although it merely busies itself with the good
old textual critique that has come to be viewed as almost old-fashioned. The application of
this method will be the equivalent of taming fire by man. 481

The quote is exemplary for the attention the media has given to the Qurʾān and historical-critical
approaches to it. In the article, Schirrmacher speaks of the return of religion in society – a

See http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/zur-frankfurter-buchmesse-buecher-koennen-berge-versetzen-
1492808.html (accessed August 10, 2016). Newsweek named him one of Germany's leading intellectuals
scenario which, as the author implies, may be frightening to his readers – which makes a critical reading of any religious tradition the more necessary. Schirrmacher's contention that such a reading is “explosive” echoes the aim of historical critique to debunk and uncover myths and errors. At least, he seems to expect that historical critique of the Qurʾān will change things.

He does not mention Islam or Muslims but leaves no doubt that he has Islam and Muslims in mind when he writes, “We cannot talk those out of their conviction who pretend to still be living in a time when the Qurʾān was written. What we can do, however, is to show them, alas to prove to them […] that time has passed between then and now, that history has happened, that what they believe to be the definite word of God carries the echo of centuries.” ⁴⁸² In effect, Schirrmacher implies that history has not yet happened for all people; or, more precisely, history (which, similarly to nature, is assumed to simply exist) has happened, but Muslims are in the majority not aware of this fact. Schirrmacher's article bears a clear dichotomy between “them” and “us” – between them “the Muslims” and “us” modern citizens, who have a healthy fear of religion. It is not religion that separates “them” from “us,” rather it is how they view religion and its foundation and whether they have historicized their “book.” Islam and Muslims have not even to be mentioned by name, it suffices to talk about the Qurʾān that becomes a symbol for both.

It is historical time that for Schirrmacher creates a corridor between them and us. Those who have not accepted historical studies yet remain in a somewhat archaic state. Assistance to overcome this a-historical stage, which locks people in a certain time, comes once again from Europe, ironically by means of its own “old-fashioned” method – the historical-critical approach. This rationale became even more trenchant in works drawing on Luxenberg. Newspaper articles especially picked up his thesis that the ḥūr al-‘ayn in the Qurʾān (often translated as black-eyed

⁴⁸² Schirrmacher, “Bücher.”
virgins) were really white grapes. Books such as Pressburg's *What the Modern Martyr should Know: Seventy-Two Grapes and not a Single Virgin*, or John Updike's *Terrorist* play with the idea that one can change Muslims' convictions once they are taught Islam's original message. Philological findings can even change terrorists' attitudes of sacrificing their life for their religion once philological results can convince them that they will only receive grapes, instead of virgins, upon entering heaven. Philology here becomes a tool to not only fight terrorism but to force Muslims into a critical reading of their religion.

Schirrmacher is not the only one who assigns enormous political power to the Qur'an. The *Spiegel*, for example, titled one of its magazines “The Qur'an: The most Powerful Book in the World.” Schirrmacher depicts the Qur'an as a key to either bring about change (“toppling regimes and overthrowing rulers”) or to lock in Muslims in their adherence to a literal sense of the Qur'an and, therefore, in the past. He links a specific form of scriptural hermeneutics, namely the “good-old” historical-critical approach, to modernity. Schirrmacher thus not only assigns power to the Qur'an but to a specific treatment and understanding of the text. By comparing the application of the historical-critical method to “taming fire by man,” he suggests that this form of scriptural hermeneutics is a means of containing something dangerous and unpredictable, in short, of exerting control and power. This notion of a patronizing dealing with the Qur'an and Muslims led to rather defensive, albeit differentiated, reactions to the CC in the Muslim German

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press. Perhaps more concerned with the media coverage of the CC than with its actual work, the
*Islamische Zeitung* stated, “One cannot but feel that one of the aims of the CC is to exert a form
of intellectual authority and control over Muslims.”486

The assumptions of many media representations foster the picture of “the Muslim” as *homo
religiosus*. The underlying rationale of many portrayals of Islam in the media seems to be that the
Qur'ān offers the “software” that programs thinking and acting of the “hardware,” namely
Muslims – a metaphor used by Stefan Weidner.487 To alter the hardware one must modify the
software, a pattern we saw already formed in nineteenth century writers. This rationale plays out
in mainly two different ways. On the one hand, especially since 9/11, Islam has been represented
in the western media as being essentially violent. Islamic violence goes back to its “origins” or
“roots.” The theme that religion unchecked is dangerous has, of course, been well-established in
European discourse since the Enlightenment. The reason why Muslims are particularly violent,
according to many “experts” on Islam, is their form of religiosity that is allegedly resistant to
secularism and modernity. A crucial reason why Muslims cannot break out from such behavior is
the Qur'ān that they conceive as uncompromising and static.

On the other hand, there are those who declare Islam a peaceful religion. They often
equally argue on the basis of qur'ānic verses.488 A common theme in the media is the suggestion

486 Musa Bagrac, “Ein Abriss der bisherigen Geschichte der deutschen Koranforschung,” *Islamische Zeitung*,
September 24, 2010 [http://www.islamische-zeitung.de/ein-abriss-der-bisherigen-geschichte-der-deutschen-
koranforschung-von-musa-bagrac/](http://www.islamische-zeitung.de/ein-abriss-der-bisherigen-geschichte-der-deutschen-
Revolutionen*, (Bonn: J.H.W Dietz, 2011), 45-60. I am thankful to Michael Marx for directing my attention to
Weidner’s work.
488 Articles following this line of argument abound. I limit myself to a few examples. The reader will be familiar
with the debate. Ruud Kopmans, “Der Terror hat sehr viel mit dem Islam zu tun” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*
July 1, 2016 [http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/hass-im-islam-terror-hat-mit-der-religion-zu-tun-
14317475.html](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/hass-im-islam-terror-hat-mit-der-religion-zu-tun-
14317475.html) (accessed October 10, 2016); Nabeel Kureshi, “The Quran’s deadly role in inspiring Belgian
slaughter: Column,” March 22, 2016, *USA Today*
[http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/03/22/radicalization-isil-islam-sacred-texts-literal-interpretation-
column/81808560/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/03/22/radicalization-isil-islam-sacred-texts-literal-interpretation-
column/81808560/) (accessed October 10, 2016); Allam Shawki, “There is no place for Terror in the Teachings of
that Islam and the Qur'an itself need a reformation.489 Every new “liberal” approach to the Qur'an raises the hope that, finally, Islam has found its Muslim Martin Luther – a rather misleading analogy.490 Both camps have in common their aim to find the argument whether Islam is violent or peaceful in the Qur'an. With regard to the link between Islam and violence, Asad observes that the focus on Islam's founding texts to solve this problem rests on the assumptions “(a) that the qur'anic text will force Muslims to be guided by it; and (b) that Christians and Jews are free to interpret the Bible as they please.” Asad points to the inconsistency of this view in regard to the role of reader and text and how they interact. The Qur'an is assumed to be “determinate, fixed in its sense,” and to have “the power to bring about particular beliefs (that in turn give rise to particular behavior), among those exposed to the text.”491 This model of interaction between text and reader presupposes a passive reader. In the second case, the religious reader is actively engaged in interpreting the text, having control over it. She is capable of adapting the meaning of the text according to the changing circumstances of time and place.

The Qur'an is seen as both powerful and responsible for driving believers to action. In Asad's words, “A magical quality is attributed to Islamic texts, for they are said to be both essentially univocal (their meaning cannot be subject to dispute, just as fundamentalists insist) and infectious (except in relation to the orientalist, who is, fortunately for him, immune to their dangerous power).” Such reasoning ignores the complicated history of the interpretation of

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491 Asad, Formations, 11.
religious texts and conceives of Islam as something static and easily definable.\textsuperscript{492}

The paradigm of linking violence directly to the interpretation of scripture has its precursors in Enlightenment discourse on religion and the interpretation of the so-called “Wars of Religion” in the sixteenth century by political theorists. The myth tells the story of a Europe that escaped endless wars caused by the fighting of religious actors over differences concerning obscure doctrines after the Protestant Reformation. Inherent to the myth is the saving role of the rising secular (nation) state. Only a secular state that neutralized religion (and was at the same time perceived to be neutral toward religions) could bring peace to Europe. Under the sovereign and “neutral” nation state, religions could still flourish in the private realm. Cavanaugh argues that, on the contrary, the rise of territorial states was a crucial cause for the wars and not its solution.\textsuperscript{493} The narrative of the “Wars of Religion” or “religious violence” has, nevertheless, entered European political philosophy and the commonsensical view of religion, and has become an important factor in domestic and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{494}

The fuzzy memory of religious violence, whether accurate or not, still informs public discourse about religion and is an important argument in favor of a secular state (neutral toward religions) and a secular mode of thinking of the population. Characterized as self-critical, objective, transparent, interested in truth, rational, able to self-reflect, and free from any kind of pre-commitment, secularism pits itself as the opposite to religion, dogmatism, and fanaticism.\textsuperscript{495} It may be remarked that in the past years, the self-image of European states as neutral toward religion has increasingly been challenged. Usually, secularism even contributes to disseminating

\textsuperscript{492} Asad, \textit{Formations}, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{493} Cavanaugh, \textit{Myth}, 122-124.
\textsuperscript{494} Ibid., 181-230.
a hegemonic religion or version of that religion. As Wendy Brown affirms,

Religious strictures, sensibilities, and ordinances appear in law, commerce, social norms, and state-subject relations. […] Given the post-Reformation European origins of modern law, politics, and the nation-state, this religious content is, unsurprisingly, often Protestant in character and carries related sensibilities and values. 496

Despite the bias of European secularism, the faith in its neutrality consists stubbornly and successfully. The belief in the necessity of a secular state and population (both neutral toward religion) are part of what Mahmood has called “normative secularity,” which reduces religion to a set of symbols that provides a general framework of meaning. Only such a curtailed form of religion that prioritizes inward spirituality over “outer forms” of religion is seen to be functional for a liberal democratic polity. 497 This form of secularism is concerned with shaping religion according to its ideals and suppositions not simply with separating religion from a secular sphere. As such secularism is not simply an organizing principle of society, but also an ideology that “stipulates what religion is and ought to be, assigning its proper content and generating religious and secular practices and self-understandings accordingly.” 498 Historicizing hermeneutics are part of the ideological narrative of how to arrive at such an understanding of religion. 499

Schirrmacher does not mention violence. However, he does reference reform and modernity which he links to the historical-critical approach, that is, to the historicization of the Qur'ān. His “taming-of-fire” metaphor is not made up out of thin air but coheres with the Enlightenment rationale that unchecked religion causes problems for society and possibly leads to violence. The necessity of the “taming of scripture” was, as we have seen, one of the Enlightenment convictions. 500 The solution to this problem is hence the reconstitution of the

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496 Brown, “Introduction,” x.
500 See also José Casanova, Europas Angst vor der Religion (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2009).
original Text and its interpretation in order to effect a change in the mind-set of its adherents.

In recent years, various articles have related revisionist scholarship of the Qurʾān to these societal debates, hoping that new research on the Qurʾān will reform the qurʾānic text and with it Islam. In these articles, western Qurʾān scholarship is presented as the helper in time of need able to remedy the situation once Muslims are convinced of the real nature of the Qurʾān, i.e., its historicity. Secularism thus understood carries a normative impulse to bring those societies and communities into judicious and societal line with its principles believed to be lacking in allegedly “traditional” communities. Inherent to such a view is a sense of the superiority of secularism that grants it its normative impetus.

The excitement for historical-critical qurʾānic studies in the media is quite astonishing considering the self-understanding of the discipline that was for a long time called a Stiefmütterchenfach (a discipline that was a little weird and insignificant) and perceived of itself as purely scholarly affair. Importantly, popular discourse links secular scriptural hermeneutics to the reform of Islam, a theme that has even been translated into U.S. foreign policy, as we will see in the next chapter. In this context, one can understand the defensive attitude Kropp displays and his insistence on the neutrality of the field. The discipline does not only have to deal with inner-academic quarrels and reluctance from many Muslim intellectuals mainly in non-Europe, but equally with an oftentimes (not always) sensationalist media.

The attention that the media has given the CC, and historical critique of the Qurʾān more generally, is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it can be positive to carry academic debates to a broader audience. Scholars who participate in the public debate and function as

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public intellectuals are a valuable contribution to the democratic system. In general, the social involvement of scholars of Qur’anic and Islamic studies should be perceived as a move against the isolationist attitude of academia. Since the public very often finances academic production, particularly in Europe, academic scholarship should be made transparent to everyone. On the other hand, scholarship (no matter its intentions) can easily be vulgarized and turned into political arguments once it leaves the academic context. Scholars have yet very little control over what is being publicized. In Germany, the media have contributed to painting the discussion on Qur’anic studies as taking place between two poles: on the one side, the Berlin group around Neuwirth, and on the other, the Inârah group in Saarbrücken. This picture is certainly overdrawn, but the scholars of these two camps do indeed follow very different forms of scholarly ethics and criticize each other. Yet both are involved in the politics of scripture.

Religious studies scholar Karl-Heinz Ohlig organizes the Saarbrücken group. In 2007, in cooperation with the University of the Saarland and the European academy Otzenhausen, Ohlig founded an association with the telling name Inârah, which literally means “illumination” or Enlightenment. Ohlig wanted to provide a group of scholars who work on early Islam with an institutional framework. The intention of the group is similar to other contemporary Qur’ān scholars, namely to contextualize the Qur’ān in Late Antiquity, an aim that can yet mean very different things. Inârah has published six volumes of article collections, including further articles on the Syro-Aramaic urtext (as propounded by Luxenberg). They argue for the thesis that the Umayyad dynasty was still Christian. On the basis of numismatic findings and middle-Persian sources, some articles in these collections contend that the person of Muḥammad was a fictional

product of the late eighth century and that Islam originated in Eastern Iran. Muhammad is merely a mythological founding figure.\textsuperscript{504} The historical phenomenon of Islam thus comes to be reduced to a great misunderstanding of the sources. Once again, Muslims got it all wrong. Although the members of \textit{Inârah} emphasize that their efforts are merely scholarly in nature,\textsuperscript{505} this statement seems misleading. Given that \textit{Inârah} means Enlightenment one can understand this designation as programmatic – either as the wish for reform of the Muslim world or as a “wake-up” call for Europeans, who have so far allegedly failed to produce truly scientific scholarship on this major religious tradition. Statements that point in this direction regularly accompany the conferences organized by the institute.\textsuperscript{506}

It is no coincidence that \textit{Inârah}'s first conference in 2008 was financially and “morally” supported by Sam Harris and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science.\textsuperscript{507} Sam Harris, author of \textit{The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason}, considers religion in general, and Islam in particular, essentially to cause violence. He faults the West with ignoring what is at the root of the problem with Muslim violence: the literal understanding of the Qur'ān, Muslim “infatuation with Koranic eschatology” that makes them “eager to murder infidels for God's sake,” and Islamic faith in general, that separates Muslims from infidels. For Harris, Islam


\textsuperscript{505} See \textit{Inâra}, Institut zur Erforschung der frühen Islamgeschichte des Koran. See inarah.de


and secular liberalism are irreconcilable; in his words, they “are at war.” Moderate believers are part of the problem because they fail to question the absurd beliefs. Muslims cannot be convinced by rational arguments. Their faith renders them “immune to reason.” For him, Islam has to change fundamentally to be at peace with “the West.” Given his support of the Inārah conference, it is reasonable to conclude that he considers critical Qur'ānic studies as a possible solution. As he argues, “Unless Muslims can reshape their religion into an ideology that is basically benign – or outgrow it altogether – it is difficult to see how Islam and the West can avoid falling into a continual state of war on innumerable fronts.”

In his view, the problem does not merely rest with Islam but also with the reluctance of the West to realize his truth, that is, the inherent violence of religion. Harris' views are not merely prejudiced but lead to a fatal political logic. For him, it is legitimate to kill people who hold certain propositions. Framing his ideas within an “us” versus “them” binary leads him to consider a nuclear strike against “them” out of “self-defense.” The reason for such drastic measure is the “unreasonableness of religion” – completely absurd ideas that cannot be controlled. I am not suggesting that the authors of Inārah share Harris' radical views. His support of their conference, however, suggests that he sees their endeavor in line with or conducive to his own convictions. To say this differently, Harris recognizes the political potential of Qur'ānic studies. His opinions, far from being a fringe view, lend support to those who argue that Islam has to be radically reshaped and secularized, and that one means to do so are critical Qur'ānic studies.

509 Ibid., 147.
510 For an analysis of Harris' views, see Cavanaugh, Myth, 113-117.
511 Harris, End of Faith, 152.
512 Ibid., 128-129.
513 The End of Faith won the 2005 PEN award for nonfiction and made it into the New York Times bestseller list. His work has been endorsed by several renowned academics. Compare Cavanaugh, Myth, 216-217.
One of Inārah's regular contributors, writing under the symptomatic pen name Ibn Warraq, is the founder of the Institute for the secularization of Islamic Societies, whose acronym is ironically ISIS. In a lecture given at Yale, Ibn Warraq argued that the West was engaged in a war against Islam as an ideology. This lecture is a good example for the link between normative secularism and scriptural hermeneutics. Ibn Warraq echoes the views of Samuel Huntington, Sam Harris, and Bernard Lewis. The latter sees the strained relationship between the United States and the Muslim world as the continuation of a millennium old mutual hostility, pitting “our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present” against an “irrational” Muslim world. Ibn Warraq knows the cause for this problem that is not economic, social, or, as he frames it, “sexual,” and also provides the answer:

The ideology of the terrorists is religiously based and derived from Islam and its founding texts, the Koran, hadith, and the sunna. […] One way we can fight jihadist ideology is to undermine their certainties, and one can accomplish this with Koranic Criticism. In the West, Spinoza hastened the Enlightenment by his Biblical Criticism. Ibn Warraq's solution to Islamic violence is hence hermeneutical and modeled after the European paradigm. Muslims have to travel the same path Europe has already trod. Sounding reminiscent of Renan, for Ibn Warraq, it is not the western military, economic, and political strength that makes the West superior. Instead, resorting to the myth of the European miracle, it is the other way around: “Western values – the basis of the West’s self-evident economic, social, political,

514 The name was used throughout Islamic history for dissidents. It refers to the Islamic ninth century skeptical scholar Abū Isa al-Warrāq. Ibn Warraq has published several book, among them The Origins of the Koran (1998); The Quest for the Historical Muhammad (2000); What the Koran Really says: Language, Text and Commentary (2002); Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism (2007); Which Koran?: Variants, Manuscripts, and the Influence of Pre-Islamic Poetry (2008); Why the West Is Best: A Muslim Apostate’s Defense of Liberal Democracy (2011) and Sir Walter Scott's Crusades & Other Fantasies (2013).
scientific, and cultural success – are clearly superior to any other set of values devised by mankind.” In a rather ahistorical way, he states that “It is the West that has liberated women, racial minorities, religious minorities, and gays and lesbians, recognizing and defending their rights.” The West inherited from the Greeks the value of “liberating doubt” that is also the basis for historical-critical scholarship, the only form of hermeneutics that qualifies as critical. All in all, Ibn Warraq paints the picture of an autonomous West that does “not need lessons in spirituality from societies whose vision of heaven resembles a cosmic brothel stocked with virgins for men’s pleasure.”

While a certain form of polemics is part of the academic discourse, one would think that Ibn Warraq's strong and inappropriate language has no place in academic forums. But this is obviously not the case since he gave this particular talk at Yale University.

Colleagues in Islamic and Qur'anic studies have mainly dismissed his work, but again, disqualification in these fields does not prevent his opinions from being used and congratulated in other disciplines. Ibn Warraq understands the rejection of the Inârah group by mainstream academia as a conspiracy against science and as concession to Muslims. This suspicion reflects a minor trend among certain academics, seemingly tired of political correctness, who are happy that someone has the courage to “finally say it how it really is.”

Journalist and Islamic studies scholar Maria Kogel described this kind of atmosphere during an Inârah meeting. Any approach that follows Muslim historiography in any way easily comes to be seen as “unscientific.”

Writing under pseudonyms is a further indication not only of an awareness that Inârah is

519 Kogel, “Darf man behaupten.”
engaged in amendatory scholarship oriented toward social reform, but that these scholars feel an imminent threat of expressing this newly found truth. Ironically, hegemonic secularism here parades as a persecuted minority that speaks “truth to power” for the greater good. The Inārah group can be seen as an oppositional pole to the Neuwirth circle. Indeed, Neuwirth frequently fights verbally against them. \(^{520}\) In return, they accuse Neuwirth and the CC of dispensing with “scientific accuracy” in favor of wanting to please Muslim conservatives. Inārah charges Neuwirth with a conciliatory stance toward Muslims and with ignoring research on early Islam mainly undertaken by their group. They are convinced to pursue a search for scientific truth that meets resistance not only by Muslims but by the majority of western Qur'ānic studies, both of which are marked as “believers:”

It is unacceptable that scientific reflection on the Qur'ān chains itself to Muslim tradition. Respect for the book demands a careful and independent evaluation and the search for a plausible solution if philological or other insights exist that were not available to traditional exegetes – even if 'believers' (of all shades) do not like it. \(^{521}\)

A cooperation with Muslim Qur'ān scholars is suspended from the outset since the Inārah scholars do not expect Muslims to agree with them. Their emphasis on “independent scholarship” aims to derive hypotheses by ignoring the entirety of Muslim scholarship that is prima facie untrustworthy. Since they perceive themselves as working with empirical evidence alone, they identify critique against their research as emotionally motivated. \(^{522}\) In general, one can state that the CC is concerned with archival work and urges for patience in positing scientific hypotheses,


\(^{522}\) Groß, Ohlig, Puin, “Anmerkungen.”
while the *Inârah* group is a scholarly association, a highly productive one, that publishes one revisionist thesis after the other. *Inârah*’s intention of “enlightening” Islam, academic scholarship of the Qur’ân, and the public belie that influencing society is prudent for them as long as one's goals cohere with theirs. The tensions between the CC and *Inârah* are indicative of the state of contemporary Qur'anic studies that is still in the process of finding and defining its place, ethos, and methods in academia and beyond.

The above mentioned article from the *Islamische Zeitung* describes German Qur'ân scholarship as an endeavor full of exciting, even if disturbing, intrigues – a judgment the author Musa Bagrak shares with the *Inârah* group. Indeed, the events surrounding the pioneers of a historical-critical edition of the Qur'ân, namely Bergsträsser and Pretzl, excited speculations and even made it to the front page of the *Wallstreet Journal*.\(^{523}\) The two scholars, students of Nöldeke, worked toward a philological-critical study of the Qur'ân. Bergsträsser travelled to various Arab countries and took pictures of Qur'ân manuscripts. He was well versed in Arabic texts and in constant contact with Muslim scholars, particularly in Cairo. Bergsträsser died in a mountain expedition in 1933. His photo archive was passed on to Anton Spitaler, who, for unknown reasons, never shared it with the public. Instead, rumor had it that the archive was destroyed in 1944 by a British air offensive in Bavaria. However, “Mr. Spitaler was lying,” Andrew Higgins writes in good lurid newspaper jargon, “the cache of photos survived, and he was sitting on it all along. The truth is only now dribbling out to scholars – and a Qur'ân research project buried for more than sixty years has risen from the grave.”\(^{524}\)

Higgins associates mysteriousness and excitement with the old manuscripts, writing in a


\(^{524}\) Higgins, “The Lost Archive.”
tradition that is fascinated with debunking corrupted religion and falsified scriptures, as can also be seen in debates over the Da Vinci Code, apocryphal gospels, or the Qumran scrolls. Rumors and facts about leading German Qur'ān scholars working for the Nazis or respectively in the resistance, and their mysterious deaths are images that are, of course, more intriguing and make for more exciting journalism than dry philological work. In response to the article, Marx stated aptly that the attention of the Wallstreet Journal “seems to be due to the myth of 'textual wars' taking place in the world. Labelled as a clash of civilizations or war of religions, conflicts today in the Middle East and Europe involving Christians, Muslims, and Jews are likely to be perceived in isolation from their economical, social, or political preconditions.”

The politicization of Qur'ān scholarship has increased since 9/11, and so has the funding for projects working on the Qur'ān. Most scholars working in these ventures, like the CC in Berlin or the French-German Coranica Project, under direction of François Déroche, started their work as Qur'ānic studies scholars long before the media rekindled their interest in the Qur'ān. While these scholars are not necessarily driven toward the media, they might feel the need to counter more sensationalist coverage about Qur'ānic studies. Thus, they have contributed to a more even image of the Qur'ān in European media that can, for example, be discerned in a recent documentary on historical considerations of the Qur'ān by French-German channel Arte, in which both Déroche and Neuwirth's views are featured. That there exists a documentary on the German-French Qur'ān projects and philology is another indication that Qur'ānic studies partake in public discussions about Islam.

Bagrac's was not the only opinion expressed by the Muslim media in Germany. There were

525 Marx, “Lost Archive.”
526 “Der Koran und seine Entstehung” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuQ0q-8r_B4 (October 26, 2016).
also voices that did not take any issue with the project and did not see it as threatening to

This courtesy has its reason in the descriptive neutral work of the CC that does not jump
to hasty conclusions. Manuscript work and historical research of the Qur’ān do not have to be in
conflict with religious conviction. Today, many Muslims are, of course, also engaged in the
academic discipline of qur’ānic studies. However, these snapshots from German media capture
well the expectations and feelings that are linked to the Qur’ān and the historical-critical method.

\textit{The Corpus Coranicum}

Sinai, Marx and Neuwirth consider it naïve to assume that philology can change the world.

Marx's words on revisionist scholarship in this context are very clear:

In the 1970s, [revisionists] suggested a new perspective on the Qur’ān. […] Neither
theory is in harmony with results of research of the last two decades. […] In a field like
Qur’ānic studies, [those] works were often seen by Muslim readers as revealing the true
aims of Western scholarship, thus to a certain extent they can be said to have destroyed
mutual trust. The study of old manuscripts and Muslim oral tradition requires a lot of time
and patience. Until today, each and every hypothesis of a “new text”, a “different text” or
a completely new historical scenario of the genesis of the text remains a hypothesis based
on scarce material evidence and looks very unlikely. This is valid for the hypotheses of

Thus, Marx, director of the CC, calls for patience when it comes to arriving at hypotheses about
the Qur’ān. The work of sifting through the manuscript material must come first. Ironically, while
these scholars dismiss revisionist Qur’ān scholarship, it may have been the rather radical
revisionist theses (which dominated the public debate) that helped the CC to receive funding.

State- and government funding for long-term projects in Germany are linked to their relevance
for society, but also to political considerations in which Muslim lobby groups do play a role, and for which Muslim concerns are important.

Statements of the CC and Neuwirth about their goal bespeak a tension between publicly asserting the relevance of qur'ānic studies for integrating Islam into the European imaginaire as well as for Islamic reform, on the one hand, and alleviating Muslim fears of the historical-critical approach to the Qur'ān, on the other. History writing with an audience in view that exceeds academia falls in line with Yerushalmi's reflections on writing history with the group in mind that this history concerns. The intention of the CC to contribute to a scholarly dialogue with thinkers of Islamic qur'ānic sciences ('ulūm al-Qur'ān) has led their critics, for example the Inārah group, to accuse them of compromising pure “science” in favor of conciliatory neutrality.

The goal of the CC is to provide the international public and scholarly community with an online archive of qur'ānic manuscripts and texts that constituted the qur'ānic intertexts. The project is descriptive and consists of assorting, screening, and describing material relevant to its overall project. Moreover, the website provides the various qirā'āt for qur'ānic passages and commentary literature. The scholars involved in the CC, both Muslims and non-Muslims, do not exercise text-critique in the traditional sense out of a desire to not jump to hasty conclusions. Instead, they produce a historically documented edition, noting all variants from the more than 10,000 manuscripts. The project also provides the reader with Ethiopian, Greek, Syriac, and old-Arabic texts that might have constituted the intertexts of the Qur'ān. In other words, the work of the CC seeks to create an empirical qur'ānic studies archive of early texts that were meaningful for the emerging Muslim community. They systematize and arrange them in order to make them accessible to the public. This will not be a new edition of the Qur'ān.\(^5^{29}\)

\(^{529}\) See the official website for the project of the Corpus Coranicum: [http://corpuscoranicum.de/about/index](http://corpuscoranicum.de/about/index)
the CC is a historical-critical edition or the creation of a textual documentation of the Qurʾān is not entirely clear, given the divergent statements by Marx and Neuwirth. As Marx explains, “The academic endeavor [of the CC] pursues the documentation of texts, not a critical edition.”530 Neuwirth, on the other hand, claims that they “will develop a documenting edition and a historical-critical commentary.”531 Given that Marx is the director of the project, his statement should perhaps be taken as the more official position.

The archival production of the CC is the necessary “work on the ground” needed in Qurʾānic studies in order to start from actual historical material and develop well-rounded theses on the emergence of Islam on the basis of material evidence. Their work is an answer to the much-needed desideratum “of paleographic, archeological, epigraphic, and historical evidence from before the rise of Islam in the Hejaz area.”532 Significantly, the term Corpus Coranicum is Latin, which indicates its European identity. This orientation in name is intended and highlights the CC’s affinity to other projects that are equally concerned with aspects of the Late Antique context. The CC is situated in an umbrella institution of other projects dealing with the Late Antique context, such as the Corpus Medicorum Graecorum, and the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. One of the aims of the CC is to open these other historical disciplines for considering the Qurʾān anew in their research.

Marx underlines that the project accepts the general framework of Islamic historiography concerning the genesis of Islam, that there was a charismatic figure in the Arabian peninsula and an audience with whom he interacted. In several interviews, Marx, in agreement with Robert

Hoyland, reproved revisionist approaches to the Qurʾān, criticizing that they are often based on very thin historical evidence.\(^{533}\) Thus, the CC foregrounds the element of history (instead of critique) in the historical-critical approach. Marx's stance on revisionist scholarship demonstrates his caution \textit{vis-à-vis} premature scientific theses. The humbly formulated research goal is to reconstruct the presuppositions of the Qurʾān's audience that were necessary to understand its message. By producing this archive of Qurʾān-related material the CC underlines its premise that the Qurʾān emerged in an “exegetical age,”\(^{534}\) an expression that indicates the intellectual involvement of the emergent Muslim community with its Late Antique context, in which scripture, religious formation, and dogma were intensely debated.

A central aim of the CC is to rehabilitate the Qurʾān as part of the greater religious and theological discussions of the Late Antique context. As Marx explains, “Our concern is to say that the Qurʾān is part of Europe because of its intense contact with church history, Jewish history, and with the history of religions generally.”\(^{535}\) Another carefully formulated aim is to “countermand (a little) the geographic partition between the West and the Orient”\(^{536}\) by reviving authors; for example, the Islamic \textit{qirāʾāt} scholar al-Dānī, who lived and taught in Andalusia. Neuwirth formulates it thus:

> We suggest a realignment of the Qurʾān with a joint European-Near Eastern Late Antiquity. This suggestion forces us to bid farewell to our stereotypical picture of Europe, in which only Jewish-Christian heritage has a place. Muslims have not only arrived in the midst of Europe, their heritage is part of our own.\(^{537}\)

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534 Ibid.

535 Interview, Marx. See footnote 576.

536 Ibid.

537 Nelißen “Die Islamwissenschaftlerin.”

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The ideological import of the CC is similar to Richard Bulliet's thesis of an “Islamo-Christian civilization,” a term that connotes “a prolonged and fateful intertwining of sibling societies enjoying sovereignty in neighboring geographical regions and following parallel historical trajectories.” Bulliet hopes that his historical narrative can help overcome current inquiries into “whether Muslims are capable of rising to the level of Western civilization, or of civilization at all, in the minds of some.” Against binary Islam/West constructions, he argues that neither the Muslim nor the Christian historical trajectory can be fully understood outside of the relation with the other. Bulliet's approach is historical-sociological, and he does not mean to suggest that cultures are similar because of their scriptures. Nevertheless, the ideological direction of Bulliet is similar to that of the Neuwirth group. Marx is careful not to predict the outcome of the project. Yet, situating the Qurʾān in a Late Antique context does bespeak a position in broader historical debates over the periodization of Late Antiquities and, inherently, over what forms Europe's heritage. The project suggests that the Qurʾān is relevant for Europe and its intellectual formation.

The extent to which the CC aims to make its research goals, and even the personal motivations of the scholars involved, transparent is remarkable. Since its founding, scholars affiliated with the CC have shared their results not only online but have sought active interaction and conversation with scholarly communities in Turkey, Iran, and North Africa. Since Neuwirth can be seen as the initiator of the CC and is one of the most acclaimed scholars in the field, we will now turn to her work. She is a scholar, who, deviating from the general attitude of the field, recognizes the political nature of Qurʾān scholarship. In her view, qurʾānic studies scholars have to take on the role of public intellectuals. Overall, her approach is open enough to leave room for

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539 Ibid., 11-12.
540 Marx, “Ein Abriss.”
the transcendent as an epistemological category.

**Neuwirth’s Diachronic Approach**

As stated above, Neuwirth consciously articulates the political implications of her own approach to the Qurʾān. Her political objectives, which will become apparent in the following delineation, move in a matrix of various political, social, cultural, and scientific positions, and can be summarized as follows: 1) To familiarize non-Muslim European readers with the Qurʾān; 2) to constructively and consciously include the Qurʾān in Europe's collective memory by emphasizing its embeddedness in the Late Antique context; 3) to prepare a unification or at least a rapprochement of non-European Muslim and western hermeneutical approaches to the Qurʾān, and to bridge the polarity and outright “distrust” between them; 4) to argue in favor of the application of historical-critical methods to the Qurʾān (only by means of a “hermeneutical equalization,” so Neuwirth claims, can the equality of Bible and Qurʾān be achieved); 5) by ruling out approaches that she connects with the American academy and stressing the German (especially the German-Jewish) scholarly tradition, she grants German academic scholarship an important place in the international discourse on the Qurʾān; one can carefully, and with qualification, call this “German national concerns;” 6) by dismissing harshly approaches as those of Luxenberg, she affirms the determinative authority of Arab studies (Arabistik) for interpreting and approaching the Qurʾān.

These last three points demonstrate inner-academic struggles over power. They affirm Arabic philology and literary studies as the best approaches for qurʾānic scholarship in the West and establish historical-critical scholarship as its cornerstone. Neuwirth is aware that any method

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543 For example, Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, 31-33.
carries the baggage of its own history. Therefore, she begins her magnus opus with critically (and really self-critically) discussing individual, historically problematic premises that are maintained in western Qur'ān scholarship. Her aim is to arrive at a much more complex understanding of the Qur'ān. Before we examine some of her political objectives and their implications more closely, it is necessary to trace her most important scholarly hypotheses. In particular, we have to examine her call for a diachronical reading of the Qur'ān that is contested in qur'ānic studies. It is in her arguments in favor of a diachronic approach that her view of the Qur'ān's history crystallizes.

Neuwirth focuses on the emergence and development of the Qur'ān before its canonization, i.e., on its pre-canonical form, which she sees reflected in the Islamic notion to differentiate between mushaf and Qur'ān. Similarly to Reynolds, she critiques that many scholars rely heavily on tafsīr material to understand the Qur'ān. Differing from Reynolds, in order to apply a successful literary approach to the Qur'ān, she argues, the scholar must combine two tasks; first, incorporate insights from inner-Islamic hermeneutics (classical Arabic linguistic sciences), and second, modern literary exegesis (tafsīr adabī). In these points, Neuwirth's conviction becomes obvious that no qur'ānic scholar should outright dismiss Muslim traditional scholarship, even if she ascribes to a historicist framework of analysis. Islamic traditional scholarship is simply too rich to be ignored.

Nevertheless, her own approach is in so far archeological as it is concerned with the nascent state of Islam and the Qur'ān. Her approach means stepping back from the text that is given and to imagine and reconstruct the oral communication process underlying the final qur'ānic version. Neuwirth wants to present the “not-yet-Islamic” character of the Qur'ān that

545 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 57.
complements its character as a founding document of the Islamic religion\footnote{Neuwirth, \textit{Der Koran}, 18-24.} – the \textit{qur'ān} that is still “open-ended,” because not yet canonized.\footnote{Ibid., 185.} She clarifies that her approach should not be mistaken as the search for the ur-text and emphasizes that the subtext of the Qur'ān cannot be reduced to any one confessional source and can also not be separated from its Arabic “pagan” environment.\footnote{Neuwirth, \textit{Koranforschung – Eine Politische Philologie? Bibel, Koran und Islamensstehung im Spiegel spätantiker Textpolitik und moderner Philologie} (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 17.}

Before the Qur'ān became \textit{mushaf}, it was drama – the drama between the promulgator and his community. The Qur'ān should not be understood as a “literary production,” a view held for example by Nöldeke. Neuwirth attributes the theory of Muḥammad as the author of the Qur'ān should be attributed to Romanticism and Enlightenment thought that conceived of authors as geniuses. Instead, Neuwirth views the Qur'ān as representing a communication process between God, a promulgator, and the emerging Muslim community. The Qur'ān, read diachronically, gives historical witness to the formation of the Islamic community.\footnote{Ibid., \textit{Der Koran}, 60, 78, 96, 107-111, 197-198.} To salvage the pre-canonical text of the Qur'ān, and to take seriously that the Qur'ān has a history, one has to focus on the Qur'ān itself, not on its pre-texts and not on later Islamic tradition. Neuwirth emphasizes that her approach is not meant to lead the reader to “the truth,” but that she adds a new dimension to the discourse on the Qur'ān, a “\textit{tafsīr} Neuwirth,” so to speak.\footnote{Ibid., 86.}

One of Neuwirth's often-repeated demands is to take the diachronic character of the Qur'ān seriously that is connected to her emphasis on the dialogical and self-referential character of the Qur'ān. Its dialogical character can, for example, be discerned in the rhetorical formula of “they ask – answer” (\textit{yas'alūna – qul}) or the paradigm of “they say – say” (\textit{qālū – qul}). For
example, “One asks you about the new moon. Say: They are fixed times for the humans and for the pilgrimage” (Q 2:189). In her view, the Qur'ān lost its dialectical tension once it was understood through the lens of later Qur'ānic exegesis: “The Qur'ān developed from a polyphonic oral text, a document giving witness to a process of exchange, toward a monologic text, representing divine transcendental speech.” The full dimension of this break’s impact, she explains, can only be captured by means of diachronic analysis. In her view, it is in particular the emphasis either on a diachronic or synchronic approach to the Qur'ān that separates European from American treatments of it. While European scholarship mainly follows diachronic approaches, American scholars mostly read the Qur'ān synchronically. Reading the Qur'ān diachronically also does away with an older stereotype that the Qur'ān is not interested in history. On the contrary, Neuwirth argues that, when read diachronically, the historical dimension of the Qur'ān crystallizes, since it addresses realistic situations.

To read the Qur'ān diachronically is a well-established theme in Islamic Qur'ān exegesis that divides the sūras into Meccan and Medinan, allows for abrogation of earlier by later verses (which presupposes that one knows the chronology), and has the concept of asbāb al-nuzūl, or occasions of revelation. Neuwirth considers the chronology of the Qur'ān crucial for discerning its meaning. In her view, the Qur'ān reflects a communication process, in which older traditions

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551 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 71.
552 Ibid., 32, 189-190.
553 Ibid., 183-184. She in particular references Fred Donner who stated, “The purpose of stories in the Qur'ān, then, is profoundly different from their purpose in the Old Testament; the latter uses stories to explain particular chapters in Israel's history, the former to illustrate- again and again- how the true Believer acts in certain situations. In line with this purpose, Qur'ānic characters are portrayed as moral paradigms, emblematic of all who are good or evil. Moreover, as stories, they are not imbued with much, if any, development-which is why they can appear as detached fragments. In this sense, the Qur'ān can be seen to be profoundly ahistorical; it is simply not concerned with history in the sense of development and change, either of the prophets or peoples before Muḥammad himself, because in the Qur'ānic view the identity of the community to which Muḥammad was sent is not historically determined, but morally determined.” See Fred Donner, Narratives on Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Historical Writing (Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press, 1998), 84.
have come to be discussed and formulated anew. She places particular stress on the Qur'anic community, whose presence she sees (passively) reflected in the Qur'ān.\textsuperscript{554}

For Neuwirth, from a historical perspective, not to take the chronological order of the text (that reflects its historical development) into consideration is insufficient and has serious consequences. In her view, especially in American scholarship the synchronic approach led several scholars to consider the Qur'ān as a kind of update of the Bible by preserving and refashioning biblical memories and heritage for its recipients. In this context, she criticizes those approaches that treat the Qur'ān as a kind of Christian apocryphal, an approach that is almost always subject to a preconceived textual intention.\textsuperscript{555} Ironically, the first scholar who read the Qur'ān systematically as a Christian text was Günther Lüling, a German scholar, a fact Neuwirth neglects.\textsuperscript{556} In her view, a synchronic approach to the Qur'ān also involves the idea of one author who authored the Qur'ān. The synchronic approach has the advantage to circumvent the problem of the complex history of the developmental process of the text.\textsuperscript{557}

In contrast, Neuwirth strives to historically locate the Qur'ānic pronunciations in order to elucidate the process-character of both the text and the emergence of the Islamic community. One has to investigate the distinction between the pre-canonical text that was communicated to the first listeners and the later canonized official text of the Muslim community, the \textit{mushaf}.\textsuperscript{558} The emergence of Islam, Neuwirth argues, has to be analyzed in analogy to the other religious traditions that Islam addresses, refutes, and disputes. The Qur'ān is not an arbitrary post-biblical text, whose conditions of emergence are irrelevant. It can scientifically only be understood when

\textsuperscript{554} Neuwirth, \textit{Der Koran}, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{555} Ibid., 32, 188-189; Neuwirth, \textit{Politische Philologie}, 6.
\textsuperscript{556} Neuwirth herself is very aware of Lüling's work and critiques it consequently. See Neuwirth, \textit{Der Koran}, 96.
\textsuperscript{557} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{558} Neuwirth, “Orientalism,” 116.
it is placed in its proper intellectual, religious, and social context. Its textual development gives
witness to the “argumentative drama” that took place between sects, churches, and synagogues in
Late Antiquity and thus grants new perspectives for interreligious dialogue. It has to be
understood as recourse to the questions of its time and as antithesis to premises that were
prevalent. The Qur'an's dialogical and self-referential style suggests to view it as a drama in
which several actors are to be heard or at least discerned. As Neuwirth explains,

The oral Qur'an – to use a simplifying metaphor – structurally may be compared to a
telephone conversation where the speech of only one party is audible, yet the (unheard)
speech of the other is in no way totally absent, but roughly deducible from the audible
part of the exchange. Indeed, the social concerns and theological debates of the listeners
of the Qur'an are widely reflected in the text pronounced through the prophet’s voice. [...] The Qu'an [is] a communication to listeners, one would therefore be best to speak of a
dramatic text.560

The Qur'an, in its oral form, before it became a mushaf, was a divine discourse (or couched as
such) directed to a particular audience with which it interacted. The Qur'an's interlocutors are
reflected in this text: either when it references them directly and addresses their queries, or
indirectly, when the Qur'an assumes that its audience knows what it alludes to and can thus leave
crucial information aside, or alters known formulas or facts. For example, when the Qur'an calls
Jesus "Son of Mary" (instead of "Son of God") it consciously introduces its theological view,
which, one can only assume, was obvious to its audience.561 Neuwirth works out the particulars
of this communication on the basis of structural and literary analysis. The Qur'an in its oral
existence (before it became mushaf) has to be understood differently than the Qur'an as mushaf
because their textual configurations differ. Interestingly, we will encounter a very similar

559 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 33.
560 Ibid., “Structure and the Emergence of Community,” in The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an, ed. Andrew
561 Ibid., Der Koran, 198-200. On Mary in the Qur'an, see also Neuwirth, “The House of Abraham and the House of
Amram: Genealogy, Patriarchal Authority, and Exegetical Professionalism,” in The Qur'an in Context, ed.
approach in the Lebanese context, developed independently from Neuwirth, namely that of Wajīh Qânsū. It may be noted that Neuwirth's carefully worked out theory of a communication process leaves room for divine authorship. Qurʾān, as opposed to mushaf, is divine discourse – or, at least can be affirmed as such. However, this does not mean that the text itself has no history. To work out that history is Neuwirth's goal. The text's pre-canonical shape can provide insight into the formation and development of the early community. In return, reading the Qurʾān on the basis of its chronology aids in unraveling the various dimensions (or layers) of the text and unfurl hitherto hidden aspects of the text.

Neuwirth's plea for a diachronic approach, however, also has its problems. Differing from Qânsū, she is concerned with the pre-canonical stage of the Qurʾān and, therefore, does not lay out a theory of reading the text as corpus (or canon) as we now have it. Her main point is that to merely accept the text of the mushaf leads to an ahistorical understanding of the Qurʾān. The once relational and conditional qurʾānic texts are being lined up undifferentiated and come to be seen as a transhistorical entity in which any verse is as good as the other. According to Neuwirth, the Qurʾān as qurʾān was a (mainly oral) text that interacted with its audience and opponents in a dynamic manner. Since the phenomenon of qurʾān entered history when the concept of scripture was already well established, it had to negotiate its constitutive elements of both orality and reference to the category of a written scripture. The various stages of the development of the Qurʾān's self-consciousness can still be traced in the canonical text. Only in the Medinan period, all messages to the community were seen as formative for scripture – as manifestations of a divine discourse. But even at that stage, the differentiation between the heavenly source and the earthly message was kept intact, according to Neuwirth.562

562 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 134-137.
This point serves Neuwirth to emphasize that the Qurʾān sees itself in conversation and in genealogy with the other scriptural religions of Late Antiquity. Only in the Medinan period, the communication medium of the Qurʾān was critically pondered, and the scriptures of the other religions came to be viewed as rivals. The recited text as well as the Arabic language came now to be seen as a divine sign or sign system, its smallest elements being the “mysterious letters' that often introduce self-referential revelations” (e.g., Q 12:1-2). Once the Qurʾān was canonized, it lost its dynamic nature: “After the passing of the intermediary, the historical-dialogical character of the Qurʾān – a polyphonic religious conversation with and about others during the time of the Prophet – comes to be a mono-vocal text, a divine monologue.” Along with its canonization, the Qurʾān lost its situational character. The recitation of the Qurʾān as a ritual that evokes the original revelation became constitutive of an exclusively Islamic identity.

Neuwirth’s conceptualization of the genesis of the Qurʾānic text seems at times closely modeled after the Islamic concept of the asbāb al-nuzūl. To be clear, she does not rely on the actual asbāb al-nuzūl and views them as hagiographic Heilsgeschichte (salvation history), but her communication scenario comes close to the concept of the asbāb al-nuzūl. It is in any case necessary to discuss some aspects that factor into establishing a chronology within the Qurʾān. For example, Richard Bell took the concept of the asbāb al-nuzūl at face value. He also accepted Islamic traditions that report the collection of the Qurʾān from bones, parchments, and palm leaves, which led him to the conclusion that the text of the Qurʾān had to be completely rearranged. Bell divided anything possible in the Qurʾān that seemed slightly disparate. He based

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563 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 235-237.
564 All late Meccan sūras, except six, start with an introduction that affirms the revelatory character of the Qurʾān. See ibid., 144-147.
565 Ibid., 136.
566 Ibid., 179.
567 Ibid., 49.
his conclusions mainly on aspects of content and theme and less on structural observations.\textsuperscript{568}

It is worth pointing out that the expression \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl} is not a Qur'ānic term. Instead, we have two mainly two relevant contradictory passages in the Qur'ān that the \textit{mufassirūn} tried to bring into a synthesis.\textsuperscript{569} The first passage states that the Qur'ān was revealed as a whole (\textit{jumlatan}) in the month of Ramadan (Q 2:185). The second claims that it was revealed gradually and in pieces (Q 25:32) throughout the life of the Prophet: “And those who disbelieve say, ‘Why was the Qur’ān not revealed to him all at once?’ Thus [it is] that We may strengthen thereby your heart.”\textsuperscript{570} This verse suggests that there were people who objected to the way the Qur'ān was being gradually revealed, piece-by-piece.

As Tillschneider has recently demonstrated, the concept of the \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl} was a latecomer within the Islamic scholarly disciplines. The term probably came into use in the late ninth and early tenth centuries.\textsuperscript{571} It is a later literary genre than \textit{tafsīr}, \textit{sīra}, and \textit{fiqh}. In fact it is in the field of \textit{uşūl al-fiqh} that the concept of the \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl} was first articulated,\textsuperscript{572} which explains why \textit{tafsīr} only very scarcely referred to the concept.\textsuperscript{573} More importantly, the \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl} often conflict with the Qur'ānic context, in which they are embedded. For example, in the \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl}, the grammatical persona of speaker and addressee, as well as the tense, \textit{gestus}, and style often do not match those in the respective Qur'ānic verse. The context of single verses in the Qur'ān is often more plausible.\textsuperscript{574}

\textsuperscript{569} Abū Zayd, \textit{Maḥām}, 113-114.
\textsuperscript{570} Neuwirth emphasizes the latter of the two Qur'ānic passages. See Neuwirth, \textit{Der Koran}, 140.
\textsuperscript{571} Tillschneider, \textit{Typen}, 15.
\textsuperscript{572} Ibid., 367.
\textsuperscript{573} For example, Rippin states, “Extensive discussions on the role of \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl} material in Qur'ānic exegesis are far more infrequent in medieval Muslim literature than one may have hoped or [...] expected.” See Rippin, “al-Zarkashi and al-Suyūṭī on the 'Occasion of Revelation' Material,” \textit{Islamic Culture} (1985): 255.
\textsuperscript{574} Tillschneider, \textit{Typen}, 296.
Neuwirth is aware of these challenges and acknowledges that the *asbāb al-nuzūl* are historically not very valuable.\(^{575}\) Therefore, her chronology mainly rests on literary reflections. However, no chronology of the Qurʾān can be established on literary assumptions alone, for which reason Neuwirth relies on a broad framework dictated by Islamic tradition. Neuwirth's concept of the emergence of the Qurʾān, on the one hand, posits the *sūra* as holistic unit, while, on the other, affirms that the Qurʾān reflects a conversation. The term conversation could, of course, also be understood metaphorically. In the end, every text is in conversation with other texts. To not confuse what Neuwirth is arguing, she does not suggest that the audiences of the Qurʾān are actually “speaking” in the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān remains the voice of God, Who, however, addresses and replies to the acute needs of the community. Thus their voices and concerns are reflected implicitly in the divine discourse.\(^{576}\)

In her earlier study on the Meccan *sūras*, Neuwirth demonstrated that the *sūras* were units in themselves and not disparate fragments, as Nöldeke, Bell, and Watt had argued. Despite her emphasis on the holistic literary character of the *sūras*, she simultaneously concedes that some fragments might have emerged due to the *asbāb al-nuzūl*. One may note at this point that this apparent contradicting view of the authorial formation of the Qurʾānic text does not pose a problem for a view that entails God's providence in this textual process. In a way, she

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575 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, 49.
576 Ibid., 189-201. Neuwirth, “Structure,” 146. She states: “Considering the oral Qurʾān one has to distinguish [...] between an exterior and an interior 'level of communication.' On the exterior level, the divine voice – mediated through the address of the prophet and fixed in a sequence of communications determined to a great extent by the redactors of the text – confronts the readers of the written Qurʾān. In contrast, on the interior level of communication, the speaker, Muhammad, and his listeners are interacting. There is a third agent, the divine voice, who on the interior level continuously speaks to the prophet, but only rarely directly to the listeners. The divine voice, through his speech, stages the entire scenario, thus acting as both a protagonist and the stage director at the same time. On the exterior level of communication, the divine voice has merged with that of the prophet; the entire drama no longer matters since the book is received as God's immediate speech. The former listeners have disappeared from the stage, reduced to mere objects of the sole divine speaker's speech. Their active role in the communication process has been shifted to the readers of the *mushaf*. The scenarios of the Qurʾān as a communication process and as a scripture are, thus, essentially diverse.”
circumvents the whole problem when she states, “For the literary question […] the external situations do not matter, but what matters is the composition of the theme and how it is integrated into the overall composition.” This is an apt supposition that also has its precursor in Islamic scholarship, namely the munāsābāt literature that examines the connections of texts within the Qur'ān, scrutinizing by which principle certain verses follow other verses, or certain sūras other sūras, and how they are structured.

As we have seen, in her later work, Neuwirth develops the theory of a communication scenario further. In accord with the asbāb al-nuzūl, she focuses on the communicative character of the verses, while she simultaneously affirms the unity of a sūra. Again, she emphasizes that verses are directed toward particular groups of people: “Islamic tradition deriving the genesis of the Qur'ān from a scenario of communication is in many respects extremely plausible.” As Tillschneider notes, Neuwirth oscillates between accepting and rejecting the asbāb al-nuzūl concept, depending on which aspect she emphasizes. At times, she speculates about the possibility that certain texts in the Qur'ān were enhanced and adapted under the impression of responses to new situations. This assumption echoes al-Zarkashi’s view that “the Qur'ān contains answers to questions, which is one of the reasons that revelation [descended] piecemeal; moreover, because some of it was abrogated, and some of it was abrogating.”

579 Tillschneider, Formen, 244. Angelika Neuwirth, “Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon. Zu Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus,” in The Qur‘ān as Text, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1996), 76. Neuwirth, “Structure,” 148. She states, “In other instances, for example Q 70:36-7, the stage director’s comment singles out particular listeners from an otherwise obviously well-behaving public. After the recitation of a catalogue of virtues ascribed to the God-fearing that certainly was meant to address a more general public, the behavior of the unbelieving listeners is criticized: […] (“What ails the unbelievers, running with their outstretched necks towards you? […]). The immediacy of the reaction to their behavior allows us to conclude that entire sections of the early sūras originated in the very situation of performance.” Madigan similarly assumes the composition of the Qur'ānic text in analogy to the emergence of oral poetry “in the very act of declaiming it.” Madigan, Qur‘ān’s Self-Image, 70-71.
himself seems to have hinted to the contradiction between the *munsābāt* and *asbāb al-nuzūl.*

Concerning the use of the *asbāb al-nuzūl* for creating a historical context, one must note that traditional Islamic scholarship provides reports for only about ten percent of the Qur'ān.\(^{581}\)

According to Tillschneider, the revelation reports that are found in collections such as al-Wāḥidi's *Kitāb asbāb al-nuzūl* neither establish a causal relationship between historical event and verse nor do they aim at bringing both into a temporal-spatial relationship. This becomes especially apparent when the historical content of a *sabab al-nuzūl* refers to the time before the prophet received revelations or even before he had been born. Sometimes a report says why a verse was revealed but not where and when, and sometimes it merely suggests to what kind of situation a verse might be applied.\(^{582}\) Ibn Taymīya elucidated this latter function: “The expression

\[ n-z-lat al-āya fī \] sometimes denotes the occasion of revelation, but sometimes also only that this belongs to that verse, as one would say 'this and that is meant by that verse.'\(^{583}\)

*Asbāb al-nuzūl* (identified as such by the term) only in a minority provide actual occasions of revelation that inform the reader about when, where, and why a verse or several verses were revealed. The *sīra*, itself written teleologically, is not concerned with placing verses in particular occasions of revelation, but mainly uses Qur'ānic material to tell a story.\(^{584}\) It is

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\(^{582}\) Ibid., 32-33. This understanding was already elucidated by R. Marston Speight: “So many texts which might be classified as *asbāb al-nuzūl* by virtue of their formal characteristics might better be considered as examples of an application to life of the Qur’ānic verse.” See Speight, “The Function of hadīth as Commentary of the Qur’ān, as seen in the Six Authoritative Collections,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 69.

\(^{583}\) Jalāl al-Dīn Al-Sūyūṭī, *Al-Iqān fi ’ulūm al-qur’ān I-II*, ed. Sa’īd al-Mandūḥ (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-kutub al-thaqāfiyya, 1416/1996), 93. Quoted in Tillschneider, *Typen*, 32-33. Rather than providing a clear definition, Tillschneider teases out the function of *nuzūl* reports which is a term that seems more applicable than the highly suggestive term *asbāb al-nuzūl*: “Nuzūl reports show: The verse alludes to a particular event; the verse was applied to a particular event; the verse solves a particular problem; the verse was part of the event, its revelation correlates with it. This way the verse interprets the event as a sort of divine commentary. Therefore, from the perspective of the exegete, the event is allowed to interpret the verse.” Ibid., 37.

\(^{584}\) Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, 185-186; Tillschneider, *Typen*, 30-45.
therefore equally difficult to establish a chronology of Qur’anic verses based on the sīra. This excursus into the ḥab al-nuzūl demonstrates the predicament of establishing the chronology of the Qur’ān. It seems impossible to arrive at such a chronology based solely on the text, while Islamic tradition itself is also not clear on the chronology, which may best be exemplified in the naskh genre. Neuwirth overcomes this difficulty partly by basing her analysis on stylistic and literary aspects. Yet her approach can in a way be understood as a translation of the ḥab al-nuzūl pattern into a communication model.

She emphasizes that the Qur’ān’s Sitz im Leben is its usage in cultic activities and ritual. Any historical critical approach that is only concerned with the text as a written text will miss the aesthetic dimension of the Qur’ān’s sound and recitation. Its visual (calligraphy), audio, and textual dimensions should be studied together. Her approach is successful in accomplishing these tasks and her literary analysis is convincing. Nevertheless, future research will have to work out the chronology of the Qur’ān further and substantiate the diachronic approach beyond literary analysis. Whether this task is indeed possible remains a question. The diachronic approach demands much more erudition than any synchronic approach, and this may be partly the reason why many scholars refrain from it.

One cannot emphasize enough in this context that the diachronic approach will also depend on the further examination of Islamic scholarly disciplines since the history of early Islam, in the end, depends on Islamic accounts. From a historical perspective, any synchronic approach will necessarily flatten the dimensions (or layers) of the Qur’ān. Both work under different assumptions of how the Qur’ān emerged. For Neuwirth, a diachronic approach to the

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586 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 34.
Qur’ân is not merely the historically responsible thing to do but is part of her political objective to bestow relevance to the Qur’ân for a European audience.

**The European Qur’ân**

For Neuwirth, due to its Late Antique legacy, the Qur’ân is also a European text. With this statement, she does not mean to dispossess Muslims of the Qur’ân but indicates that scripture qua scripture depends on the community that refers to it. Texts have different meanings for multiple audiences. She wants to make the Qur'ân relevant beyond a Muslim audience. As she writes,

The Qur’ân has two faces […] From one perspective, the Qur’ân is the founding text of Islam, from another perspective, it is an ‘Oriental-European’ text that had a role in the development and formation of the later Europe […] Thus, by virtue of its historical effect, the Qur’ân is the exclusive heritage of Muslims – it is, at the same time, also an important legacy of Late Antiquity to Europe.  

In this context, she refers to Naria Teodorova's “Europe as palimpsest” in which Teodorova distinguishes between “legacy (Vermächtnis) as continuity” and “legacy by means of perception.” The former can be applied to the relationship of Muslims to the Qur’ân, whereas the latter represents a rather latent linkage, which can be claimed for the relationship of Europeans with the Qur’ân, since they have still to become aware of this relationship. More than anything, Neuwirth is concerned with rooting the Qur'ân in the western *imaginaire*.

The politics of scripture in Europe are closely linked to the question where in the European *imaginaire* the Qur’ân and Islam are to be situated. There exist different strategies to deal with this question. Some scholars want to convince us that the Qur'ân symbolizes the eternal “other” of Europe, some that Islam is entirely missing from European literary and historical memory. Northrop Frye, for example, states in his popular book *The Great Code*, “It is the Christian Bible

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588 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, 67.
that is important for English literature and the Western cultural tradition generally.” Frye is not the only western academic who assumes a deep bond between western literature and the Bible, and rightly so. This does not mean, however, that the Qurʾān was completely absent from western literature. Recently, Taştêkin has drawn attention to the fact that western literary criticism seems to ignore the Qurʾān and its body of commentaries, unless “they are considered relevant to discussions of postcolonial or subaltern identities.”

As of lately, several scholars, such as Taştêkin, Elmarsafy, Bulliet, and Humberto Garcia have undertaken to explore the traces the Qurʾān has left in western literary, religious, and theological studies. They have actively written Islam back into Europe. Taştêkin, for example, undertakes to include the Qurʾān via the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* into the western literary canon. Bulliet has done so from a historical-sociological point of view. These works demonstrate that Islam, and with it the Qurʾān, did have a place in the European *imaginaire* beyond just being Europe's “other.” Garcia highlights the importance of a sympathetic account of Islam for the formation of eighteenth century English political and social thought.

Neuwirth's work can be understood in this line of scholarship as a form of citizen history writing, in the sense of how Ricoeur uses the term. Ricoeur urges to take the social and political function of historiography in the modern era seriously. According to him, the discipline of history is not simply concerned with a reconstruction of the past as “it really happened.” Instead, he envisions a “citizen historian,” who responsibly seeks out the most useful and trustworthy historical construction that can educate the present and future generations. As other authors we

592 Ibid., 107, 278, 322, 332, 234-281.
have encountered so far, Neuwirth views Qur’anic studies as a tool for reform. However, her
reform does not so much aim at the Muslim world than at European society. As she explains,

Western Qur’anic studies is [...] aware of its cultural and political role even if not for the
Islamic world itself, then still for the European perception of that culture: It is imperative
to readjust the view on the Qur’an, to acknowledge it as a genuine and historically
documented evidence of the genesis of a new religion, once the third Holy Scripture of
monotheism finally is lifted on par with the others. 593

This “lifting up” of the Qur’an is to be achieved through the literary and historical-critical
approach. Neuwirth is concerned with identity politics and the formation of the collective
memory in Europe that stresses its Judeo-Christian identity (in itself a rather new hyphenation),
while the place of Islam in Europe is still contested. Anne Norton has even argued that the
Muslim Question has come to replace the Jewish Question. 594 Rather than presenting the Qur’an
as a merely Islamic document, Neuwirth claims that the Qur’an is of “European heritage” because
“it forms a voice within a concert of traditions in a time that is usually perceived as a formative
period for the later Europe.” 595 This is active history construction.

According to Neuwirth, reading the Qur’an as a Late Antique legacy to Europe can offer
the western reader a new view on her own theological and intellectual history. The Qur’an can be
read as an innovative answer to Jewish and Christian challenges of Late Antiquity and as their
counter model at the same time. The Qur’an sheds light on the Late Antique discourse and
simultaneously makes Late Antique debates relevant for the Islamic tradition that can claim the
Late Antique context as its own heritage. 596 It goes without saying that this view dispenses with a
meaningless pre-Islamic jāhilīya. The question, though, arises: could the Qur’an not be a
significant text for Europeans as an (purely) Islamic text? It seems that Neuwirth first has to

593 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 119.
595 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 15.
596 Ibid., 66-67, 113.
Europeanize the Qurʾān epistemologically and hermeneutically (by applying historical critique) in order to make it suitable for a European audience. This rationale adopts implicitly a picture of center and periphery, in which the periphery has to adapt epistemologically to the center and thus reproduces the “not-yet” attitude criticized by Chakrabarty; or, in case the periphery does not adapt, its scripture must at least be translated into the language of the center in order to gain relevance. To not be unfair to Neuwirth, she does not state that her approach is the only possible one. The fact remains that she sees history as the key to integrate Islam into Europe.

The methodology of Neuwirth's book is historical-critical and literary which, of course, is in line with a western tradition of scriptural hermeneutics. For Neuwirth, the historical rehabilitation of the Qurʾān is crucial for the hermeneutical “equalization” of the Qurʾān with the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. She, in parts, responds here to Aziz al-Azmeh, who argued that the lack of historical-critical treatment of the Qurʾān indicates an orientalist and exoticizing attitude toward the Qurʾān that sees it as exceptional and “other” to an extent that it cannot be treated like other “scriptures.” According to Neuwirth, to excavate the Qurʾān from the context of the essentially “other,” which always remains arbitrarily interpretable, is the necessary prerequisite for all further steps of solid Qurʾānic studies. To realize this practically also means to treat the Qurʾān methodologically equal.597

According to Neuwirth, the equation of religious identity with geographic entities hinders an integration of Islam into European history beyond apologetics or polemics. This may easily happen when one classifies whole civilizations or cultures (the western Judeo-Christian, the Islamic, etc.) as originating in their respective religions and their scriptures. It also ignores the presence of Christians and Jews in the so-called Middle East, and the presence of Muslims in so-

called Europe – a lack that is reflected in anthropological work that seems to overlook these populations entirely. The conceptualization especially of Islam as Middle Eastern and oriental makes it all too easy to define Islam as the static “other” of Judeo-Christian Europe. To exclude the Qurʾān from the modern proto-European, such as through the historical-critical approach to scripture, means for both Neuwirth and al-Azmeh to “orientalize” it.

Islam and its “obscure book” served in parts as the external Other that was needed to construct a framework of western universal reference. The “orientalization” of Islam was crucial for defining the western path of modernity and was achieved by the essentialization of an Other – in and of itself inexplicable and exotic. The practice of essentialization is not only a mechanism for stabilizing identities; it is also an inherently modern tool for achieving self-understanding and self-confidence. To seriously posit the Qurʾān in its Late Antique context can be understood as a post-Orientalist move away from essentialism. Al-Azmeh laments that a thorough historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān and refined philological and literary methods to the text are still missing. He sees two reasons for this lack: the commonsense perception of the Qurʾān's “alterity” and the unwillingness to acknowledge its place among monotheistic scriptures. Al-Azmeh, in addition, critiques postmodernism for promoting such incommensurability when he comments,

The late capitalist, postmodern emphasis on self-referentiality and self-representation, the drift towards conceiving difference as incommensurability, the cognitive nihilism associated with post-modernism, the dissolution of objects of ethnographic study into “voices”: all this, to my mind, leads to ejecting the tools of the historical and social sciences implicitly, but in most cases inadvertently and unreflectively, in favour of an irrationalist and anti-historicist sympathetic sociology of singularity.

Al-Azmeh, of course, does not only call for an equalization of scripture or people but for


upholding the standard of the discipline of history, a history that has been, so far, dominated by a secular worldview. The difficulty with the universalizing tendency of history is to keep the particular intact, possibly even by entertaining to write history differently. To say that the Qurʾān should be historicized to make it more accessible for a European audience is one thing. To state that the same has to happen for Muslim treatments of the Qurʾān is another, partly because the assumption that this should happen is based on asymmetrical power relations.

Not everyone will agree with Neuwirth's political incentive for her Qurʾān hermeneutics, particularly not those who hold on to the impartiality of the researcher. Her approach is based on the conviction of the commensurability of the Qurʾān. In her view, Mecca and Jerusalem have reached a rapprochement in the Qurʾān. She sees herself in line with the nineteenth century scholars of the Wissenschaft des Judentums who, by means of historical critique, produced a counter-hegemonic discourse that strove to make Judaism meaningful for world history beyond religious variables. The religious variables are not left aside, however, in Neuwirth's approach.

On the contrary, hers is an appeal to take the Qurʾān also theologically seriously. In short, for Christians and Jews, the Qurʾān can function as an insightful dialogue partner, even where it disagrees with their own convictions. Neuwirth does not want to reduce the Qurʾān to merely reflecting a Late Antique debate but draw it into contemporary discussions. In order to achieve this aim, she makes it more familiar to the western reader. Her strategy of analogizing and drawing out resemblances does not lapse into identity. She achieves to keep the Qurʾān's distinctiveness intact, thereby allowing a reading of the text not reduced to European self-referential history. Neuwirth takes pains to convince her readers that such an approach will not compromise the Qurʾān's autonomy.

In view to the biblical books, historical-critical scholarship had far reaching consequences
for faith communities, the Bible’s metaphysical meaning, and Christian and Jewish theology. Certainly, the historicizing approach to the Bible helped to disenchant Christianity. It may also have led to a relativizing view of religion in general – a result welcomed by people like Schirrmacher, and feared by the religious faithful. Neuwirth considers such consequences to be unlikely in the case of the Qurʾān since it is a much more coherent text, developed over a period of twenty-three years. In this context, she underlines the importance of appreciating the continuity between the first listeners of the Qurʾān and the later Muslim community. The Muslim community did not experience ideological, political, and social upheavals comparable to those which the Jewish and Christian communities witnessed between their founding and the fixation and canonization of their scriptures.600

Nonetheless, the historical-critical method as applied to religious scriptures led to a rewriting of the histories of these scriptures and reconfigured religion. At least the former implication of historical critique is also the case for Neuwirth's approach as well. In that respect, she does not merely touch upon European collective memory but on the Islamic as well. Neuwirth is walking a thin line between the universalization of the Qurʾān (i.e., its Europeanization) and the Qurʾān's autonomy as Islamic scripture, which, from a Religious Studies perspective, is unavoidable. In this chapter, however, I have suggested that her communication model of the genesis of the Qurʾān does leave room for a transcendental category.

Finally, the question must be asked with whom Neuwirth seeks a dialogue and how she envisions a rapprochement between western and non-western Qurʾānic studies. Having taught and studied for years in various Muslim countries, Neuwirth is familiar with a wide range of Muslim scholarship of the Qurʾān. She positions her own work in a trajectory of thinkers, such as Amīn

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600 Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, 70-71.
al-Khūlī, Fazlur Rahman, Abū Zayd, Paşacı, and Ömer Özoğ. She sees so-called Muslim reformers as the “most promising cutting point between contemporary interpretations in East and West.” Concerning these authors, one must state that they already work under historicist epistemological assumptions, which leads to the question what kind of rapprochement Neuwirth actually envisions. If her envisioned scholarly dialogue is only possible with people who have to a certain degree already accepted a historicist epistemological framework, it risks to be a conversation with one's own epistemological reflection.

To clarify, Neuwirth refers to these authors to call upon western scholars to consult contemporary works written in non-European languages, which is indeed a desideratum. Nowhere do linguistic politics, fostering the dominance of English as universal language, become more apparent than in European and American conferences on the Qur’ān, where the majority of participants could not have a fluent conversation in Arabic or any other “Islamic” language. A precondition to succeed in western academic study of the Qur’ān is to be able to translate one's research not only into English but also into a conceptual framework and structure that the academic setting acknowledges. Recently, several initiatives have been undertaken to change this situation. One group, mostly students of Neuwirth, founded the project “Philologies in Changing Perspectives. Initiative for a New Form of Teaching and Research” – a cooperation between the Free University Berlin, American University in Beirut, and Cairo University. The initiative brings together scholars from various countries, who are urged to give their talks in the language with which they are less familiar. For example, an Egyptian would present in English and a German in Arabic. This method is a powerful tool to reverse power relations. Neuwirth

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601 Neuwirth, Der Koran, 74. Neuwirth herself calls these scholars reformers.
602 Ibid., 119.
herself, at times, lectures in Arabic. The aspect of language may seem trivial but must not be underestimated. Jürgen Habermas, for example, elaborated on language as a tool for domination. Habermas stresses the necessity of the dialectical nature of understanding and a fair power balance between the interlocutors.\textsuperscript{603} The asymmetry of language use is symptomatic of a deeper power asymmetry, in which one side is always expected to follow suit, while the other can comfortably retreat to her epistemological comfort zone.

Asad has indicated this asymmetry in his concern about a mode of speaking for the other and doing so within a framework that is assumed to appeal to universal reason. He concedes, “Everyone is allocated to a multiplicity of spaces – phenomenal and conceptual – whose extensions are variously defined, and whose limits are variously imposed, transgressed, and reset.”\textsuperscript{604} However, this dynamic process, in his view, does not lead to human homogeneity; the particular within the general has to be heard and cultural differences are not to be abrogated.

The position against which he reacts is Clifford’s elaborations the authenticity of culture which the latter sees crumbling under an advancing globalization: “‘Cultural’ difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence.”\textsuperscript{605} Asad does not necessarily object to this statement, but he sees an important point missing, namely that it ignores the power structures within the “discourse of mobility.”\textsuperscript{606} Anthropologists, Islamic studies scholars, and Orientalists in the colonial and post-colonial era could investigate data, objects, and peoples because they could, because they were allowed into the countries and had the means to travel. Similarly today not everyone can equally participate in a meta-cultural discourse. This is, in fact, an important point that is not easily resolvable.

\textsuperscript{604} Asad, \textit{Genealogies}, 8.
\textsuperscript{606} Asad, \textit{Genealogies}, 10.
Regarding the historical-critical approach to the Qur’an, this point means that one has to be aware of one’s position in a much broader discursive field than western academia and acknowledge that the power relations of the interlocutors are most probably not the same.

Neuwirth argues that inherent in refraining from dealing directly with the Qur’an by means of historical-critical studies because it belongs to “them,” not “us,” bespeaks a morality that privileges difference and incommensurability. To focus on the particular and working within an epistemological framework of difference based on historical identity, as Asad seems to suggest, creates a sanitary corridor between “them” and “us.” A problem in Asad's rationale is that identities of difference are often created through a binary logic. The strong emphasis on “othering” may be seen as a form of respect, yet, it can also lead to an indifference toward the other and confirm the irrelevance that her actions, thoughts, and writings have for “me.” Claiming the Qur’an for Europe seems laudable and given historical evidence it is correct to claim the permeability of ideas, concepts, and thoughts among originally Mediterranean religious traditions. However, the project of a historical-critical approach to the Qur’an can also seem to be grounded in a belated modernization project. To apply historical-critical scholarship to the Qur’an must not consist in finding the “true meaning” of the Qur’an, a fact Neuwirth affirms.

Rather, it can be seen as a contribution in a worldwide conversation. Otherwise, it can mistakenly result, once again, in an attempt to control the Qur’an to make it suitable for a “modern,” i.e., secular, Europe and to thereby domesticate it by means of representation. The Europeanization of the Qur’an in that sense is to be rejected. Addressing the problem of language is a step into the right direction, albeit epistemology is equally important. If Neuwirth's call for a rapprochement is to be taken seriously the rapprochement cannot simply consist in a dialogue that, in the end, chooses partners in which one finds a reflection of one's own approach.
IV. Western Qur'ānic Studies and Its Politics

Let us finally flesh out some of the problems involved in translating certain western methods and epistemologies into the non-western world, particularly as it pertains to the Qur'ān. The purpose of my deliberations here is not to posit an eternal “otherness” or incommensurability between the West and the non-West. Both of these imaginations and, if one likes, geographical areas have been closely entangled in the past two hundred years and have grown increasingly so in the past century. This interaction has been one of political, military, and economic asymmetry, an asymmetry that was reflected and produced in academic conceptions of Europe and non-Europe. My purpose in this chapter is to elucidate how a certain widespread rationale links historicizing hermeneutics to the development of Muslim societies toward an allegedly desired secular modernity. As we have seen, this conviction was prevalent in nineteenth century scholarship and is, to a lesser extent, still present in scholarly production and, in particular, in the media. The call to historicize the Qur'ān in order to alter Muslim societies has recently been revived and has been linked to international policy interests.

In a second step, I introduce the problematic of categorizing Muslim intellectuals who use historicizing methods to the Qur'ān as not being genuinely Muslim or indigenous, an issue raised by Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood. I will do so based on the example of Abū Zayd for three reasons: First, he is the main reference point of both thinkers; second, many of the authors in Lebanon refer to his work; third, he can be seen as the kind of scholar that Neuwirth envisions as a point of contact for a rapprochement of western and Islamic Qur'ānic studies. This chapter will also serve as a segue to the Lebanese context – as an œuvre for discussing the use of history in the Arab context and how such an approach might be applied to the Qur'ān.
Reforming the Qur’ân: Reforming Muslim Societies

We now turn to Rotraud Wielandt who, in 1971, presented a pioneering work on the relationship between history and revelation in the thinking of modern Muslims. Wielandt's work can be considered a landmark in the research on hermeneutical and historical approaches to the Qur’ân in the Muslim-Arab world. Her book is acutely informative and sensitive to crucial questions the Muslim authors raise. Hers is a good example of a convinced historicist who thoroughly and self-evidently links the historical-critical approach to the Qur’ân with the success of secularism in (and therefore flourishing of) Muslim societies, which she sees as the goal of historical development in the Arabic world. She wrote this book before the publication of Said's Orientalism, before the western academy was faced with post-colonial theory, and before Islam came into focus as an alleged problem for peace and pluralism. Therefore, her work provides us with an almost unfiltered European view of historicism and its universality and is more candid than works written with post-colonial critique in mind. Yet, Wielandt's position by no means represents an outworn perspective.607

While acknowledging that complete objectivity is an unattainable ideal, Wielandt defends scholarly work against accusations that see it as a parallel function of colonialism as long as it is pursued under the “right and honest premises.”608 In this respect, her view agrees with Edward Said, who distinguished between scholarship that aims at sincere understanding and scholarship

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607 Although postcolonial studies were not yet a discipline, there were some pre-Orientalism critiques even in the western academy, like Abdallah Laroui, Louis Massignon, and Walther Braune. The latter addressed the modes of representation of the Orient as forms of subjugation that worked parallel to colonial politics. In his view, historical-critical scholarship was a tool of the bourgeoisie. See Braune, Der islamische Orient zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft: Eine geschichtstheologische Analyse seiner Stellung in der WeltSituation (Bern: Francke, 1960), 24-26, 73. Wielandt dismisses their views on the basis of a firm belief in the validity and scholarly ethos of the historical-critical approach.

608 Wielandt, Offenbarung, 11.
that “is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war.”\textsuperscript{609} Both Said and Wielandt subscribe to a humanist ideal of scholarship that upholds the belief in the importance of a “historical and rational mind.”\textsuperscript{610} For Wielandt, an earnest scholarly approach entails being open to question and correct one's own assumptions and framework of inquiry. Yet, in her view, to link western Islamic studies automatically to colonialism belongs to Muslim apologetics and polemics but not to scholarly engagement.\textsuperscript{611} Simultaneously, she is aware of the potential power and effect of the historical-critical approach to the Qur'an, an effect she views as positive and necessary throughout.

According to Wielandt, the relationship between revelation and history has only become a pressing problem for some Muslim thinkers within the past one hundred years. This is, of course, no coincidence, and Wielandt is attentive to its causes. In her view, awareness of the problem of revelation and history emerged due to “increasing contact” between Muslim societies and Europe in the course of colonialism. Under western oppression, “Muslims found themselves shaken in their confidence in Islamic civilization [...]. At the same time, they were confronted with western modern historical sciences that principally questioned belief in any kind of revelation.”\textsuperscript{612} She thus recognizes a correlation between history (as modern science and regime of knowledge) and colonialism. History, represented by Wielandt as more of an innocent bystander in all of this, is yet not innocent enough for her to not also underline the social necessity for Muslims to adopt it.

However, these two practices, history and colonialism did not coincidentally occur as two unrelated phenomena, one military and economic, the other scholarly and scientific. Muslims

\textsuperscript{609} Said, \textit{Orientalism}, xix.
\textsuperscript{610} Ibid., xiii.
\textsuperscript{611} Wielandt, \textit{Offenbarung}, 11.
\textsuperscript{612} Ibid., 1.
were not merely “confronted” with alternative forms of knowledge and epistemologies. Rather, certain forms of knowledge gained universal legitimacy by being produced by groups (academics, travel writers, colonial administrators, anthropologists, sociologists, etc.) whose knowledge achieved validity through a position of power. Western science often precluded and replaced local forms of knowing. In Feyerabend's words, “'Progress of knowledge' in many places meant killing of minds.”

Because much of the information gathering and analysis took place in the framework of colonialism, it was interpreted in a number of ways that supported the existing colonial ideology.

For example, theories positing the naturalness of colonialism were crucial in building support for colonial activities and in convincing both Europeans and non-Europeans that colonialism was inevitable and progressive. History had an active part in this vision. Both liberals and Marxists categorized peoples on a scale of civilization by means of judging how far they had achieved historical progress. History served as both the measure of progress and justification for political action, that is, the colonization of yet “undeveloped people.” For many liberal thinkers (e.g., James Mill), representative political institutions could only be realized in a society that had “reached a particular historical maturation or level of civilization.” People moved toward that history with different speed and, therefore, did not qualify equally for political representation. History in all of this was never simply a view of the past. Rather, as Uday Mehta argues, “It is also a chosen battleground on which the Enlightenment carries out its multi-

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613 Feyerabend, *Against Method*, xxi.
614 A special place in this knowledge production was the “invention of religions” that was made useful for colonial administration. See on this topic, for example, Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 85-101.
pronged mission against religion, superstition, and ignorance and affirms its conception of progress.”\textsuperscript{617} History, and particularly historicism, actively shaped the world view and culture of subject populations.\textsuperscript{618} The modern European idea of history came, Chakrabarty notes, “to non-
European peoples in the eighteenth century as somebody's way of saying 'not yet' to somebody else.” The way history was written and theorized

Posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West. In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization and in Europe itself enabled completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, and Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{619}

Simultaneously, history also became the means by which resistance to imperialism was and has often been articulated, a paradox to which we shall return in the next chapter. While Wielandt does not discuss history in general but the history of the Qurʾān, the historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān takes on an ideological function in her argument. She detects mainly two distinct theories about revelation in the history of religions: Either both the divine and the human cooperate in shaping the revelatory message or the prophet is seen to passively promulgate verbatim what the divine has conferred upon her. Wielandt identifies this latter version as verbal inspiration. She explains that in the Christian context, verbal inspiration refers to a model of revelation in which the prophet is merely a passive recipient who transmits the dictated message

\textsuperscript{617} Mehta, \textit{Liberalism}, 84.


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as received from God (maybe through an intermediary) and imparts the message unaltered to the people. A relatively modern understanding of the concept and an inherent skepticism of tradition inform Wielandt's view of verbal inspiration. In the western context, verbal inspiration refers today to the understanding of scripture as being God’s eternal word. Such understanding usually equates revelation with scripture and posits its inerrancy and eternal validity.

A few words on verbal inspiration are in order since this doctrine is often blamed for a literalist approach to scripture. Most ancient Christian thinkers viewed the authors of scripture, not the text itself, as inspired. An important principle of interpreting the scriptures was the *regula fidei*. Entailed in the idea of *regula fidei* is the conviction that the Bible can only be interpreted if the interpreter shares the spirit in which it was written. Since the Reformation, allegorical interpretation gave gradually way to a literal reading that was now the proper sense, to be discerned with methods that conflicted with the worldview of the original authors. Two new developments accompanied Protestant exegesis after the Reformation: a *stronger emphasis* on verbal inspiration and a shift in the *regula fidei* that was adapted to Protestant convictions. The late Protestant anti-critique contended that even the masoretic text was divinely inspired. The attempt to absolutize the authority of holy scripture was a reaction to the new historical criticism rather than a clinging to tradition. One may cautiously claim that a similar development has also taken place in Islam, in which the Qurʾān has come to be seen more rigidly as eternally fixed

in its form. Islam, Josef Van Ess argues, does not have an accurate equivalent to the Christian theory of verbal inspiration. Yet, “Verbal inspiration was, subconsciously, the prevailing axiom.” The question for Muslim scholars was less whether God speaks in the Qurʾān, but how He speaks. They rejected above all the idea of God having a voice, not that God spoke in the Qurʾān. That the word and letters themselves were eternally determined and uncreated was only a minority opinion among Muslim scholars. The Hanbalites, who held this view, faced harsh opposition for their “literalism.” In contrast, modern Christian theology widely holds that the texts found in Scripture are to be understood as human speech about God, alternatively inspired by the Spirit, rather than the direct speech of God.

The idea of verbal inspiration has often been criticized for ascribing not only the content of the message, but also its language and formulation to God. According to Wielandt, verbal inspiration ignores the specifically human aspect of language. In her view, only when it is acknowledged that the religious text is speech about God and not God’s speech, will a historical-critical method applied to the Qurʾān be successful. Her main point is that language is “human and historical,” not divine, which presupposes a dichotomy between both. In this respect, it is important to note that there were medieval Muslim theologians, not only among the Muʿtazila, who were well aware of the “humanness” and particularity of the Qurʾānic language. For example, Ibn Kullāb, one of the most prolific opponents of the Muʿtazila, held that the eternal meaning of

626 For example, Schleiermacher argued that scripture reflects the experiences of the authors and communities that produced it. See Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Brief Outline on the Study of Theology, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond: John Knox, 1966), § 103-148.
627 Regarding this view, see Wielandt, Offenbarung, 156-160.
628 Ibid., 2.
the Qur'an resided in God's essence. When it descended upon prophets it would take on various forms and be embodied in different texts according to the respective needs of the people to which it was sent and in accordance to the language they spoke. According to Ibn Kullāb, this explains why the Gospel is in Greek, the Torah in Hebrew, and the Qur'an in Arabic. In his view, the Qur'an is God's word only metaphorically. Grammar, finite nouns and verbs, imperatives, and questions are something terrestrial and mundane. Language is consequently something finite, which is very similar to Wielandt's understanding of language. We will come back to the humanness of language that is ultimately linked to the conception of the human. For now, it suffices to note that Wielandt erects a dichotomy where it may not be necessary to do so.

The role scripture has played in Christianity certainly differs from Islam. Differences exist with regard to both the meaning and understanding of scripture. The concept of verbal inspiration emerged out of a scholarship in a Christian western academic context and is closely bound to theological discourse and today often conveys a derogatory meaning. This does not mean that it must be discarded right away to describe a process or event presumed to have happened in Islamic history. However, Navid Kermani has shown that verbal inspiration can be a misleading concept within the Islamic tradition. He alerts us to the danger inherent in making assumptions based on comparison and resemblance.

In Wielandt's view, the belief in verbal inspiration of the Qur'an in Islam is one of the main obstacles for new textual approaches that take both the context of the first addressees of the Qur'an and the comprehensive horizon of the contemporary interpreter into account, which, in

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629 See Ibn Taymiya, Rasā'il wa masā'il Ibn Taymiya vol. I (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1986), 322; Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 74-75.
631 Kermani, Offenbarung.
turn, is necessary for Muslim assimilation to the “modern context.” It is, in her view, the ontological status of the Qurʾān that hinders its historicization or new interpretations:

“Psychologically, [the belief in verbal inspiration] erects a higher barrier against the willingness to accept hermeneutically substantiated interpretative methods compared to other understandings of revelation.”⁶³² According to this argument, the belief in the divine origin of the Qurʾān leads to its perception as supernatural and, therefore, detached from reality. Moreover, in Wielandt's view, the concept of verbal inspiration tends to reduce both textual form and content to their divine essence. An understanding of revelation, in which the word uttered by a prophet is God's direct word unaltered, will lead to a sanctification of the utterance, ignore human involvement in this process, and conflate the human with the divine. Wielandt contends further,

It has especially grave implications when the revelation is seen as final revelation and fixated in a holy scripture. In that case, one is in possession of unchanging truths that must not be shaken. The book of revelation is additionally shielded against critique when popular legend or even theology endows the Prophet with miraculous abilities, for example, with the ability to transmit the divine word without an error, or with the power to do miracles that authenticate it. One can also increase the authority of the holy texts by diminishing the educational level of the prophet to come with yet greater conviction to the conclusion that he himself could have never produced what he taught.⁶³³

While she formulates all of this in rather general parlance, it is obvious that Wielandt has the Islamic tradition in mind. What she describes here is the erection of an unquestioned authoritative Qurʾān that cannot be critiqued, which, as she implies, should be the goal. The main problem for Wielandt seems to be that such a concept of scripture leads to the belief to possess “unchanging truths.” In her view, this becomes particularly problematic when scripture includes rules that are not only outdated but also incompatible with the “modern context.”

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⁶³³ Ibid., Offenbarung, 2.
She reviews several hermeneutical tactics that have been applied to overcome the anachronism of the Qurʾān in the modern context: allegory, the differentiation between several levels of meaning, or eclectic usage of the scripture that simply ignores certain passages that cannot be accepted anymore. Wielandt notes that when faced with major social and historical changes, so extreme that they cause an insuperable gap between scriptural content and society, new approaches are sought.634 She adds that historical-critical reconsiderations of scripture can also be triggered when adherents possess a strong belief in the superiority of their religion but find themselves in situations of economic, political, or social disadvantage. The historical-critical approach thus appears in Wielandt's account as a material solution to social problems.

I am less concerned here with the accuracy of her observations than with the conclusion she draws from them: “If the detailed rules in a book of revelation are too outdated but kept as valid, they may hinder the assimilation of a society to changing circumstances. […] Books of revelation that have only few of such rules do not pose a problem; their authority does not conflict with the establishment of a secular state.”635 In other words, the non-secularized scripture of a major religion constitutes an obstacle in the functioning of a secular (liberal) state when that scripture includes enough (political, legal, and economic) content that competes with the authority of the state in these areas. One can only speculate what other “books of revelation” she has in mind that do not pose a problem; probably those that emphasize the spiritual over the socio-political. Wielandt thus evaluates and measures Qurʾānic studies in the Middle East

634 The suspicion against allegorical interpretation of scripture is a well-established phenomenon in historical-critical scholarship of the Bible. According to Wilken, “for generations now, biblical interpreters have scorned allegory, anagogy, tropology and all their works. Only the literal or historical sense, presented to us by the tools of historical criticism, can claim the allegiance of modern exegetes.” See Wilken, “In Defense,” 197.
635 Wielandt, Offenbarung, 2-3. Italics mine.
according to their distance from a secular model which predicates a reformulation of religion.

In passing, she expresses here an “idea as belief,” namely that a secular state is the normalized form of governance, which, she takes for granted, the reader holds, too. In the range of different concepts of secularism, Wielandt's would fall into the separation-of-church-and-state model in which jurisdiction is transferred into the hands of the state. It is in this social realm, the realm of “rules,” where secular and religious competitions create a crisis when their different values clash. In Wielandt's view, these contemporary challenges that place the Qur'ān's absolute literal authority in question can and should lead to a historical understanding of the revelatory book. Once historical consciousness with regard to the Qur'ān is achieved, seemingly ever-valid propositions loosen their grip on the believers and become more relative. What follows is a religion that fits more smoothly into the workings of the secular state.

Wielandt explains that the historian, unable to question or confirm scripture's divine origin, considers it a production of the prophet and potential later redactors. Accordingly, those whose understanding of history is shaped by modern historical science see scripture as “testaments of faith” of those who produced them. They are “conditioned by history.” History properly exercised thus evacuates the divine from humanly known religion and leads to the disenchantment of the Qur'ān that can be understood as a “piece of literature” and against its historical background. As Wielandt argues, taking the circumstances of the emergence of the Qur'ān that owe their configuration to a particular and irretrievable situation seriously, “relativizes the claim to universal validity of the revelation.”

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636 An idea as belief means that a writer simply takes it for granted that the reader holds the same beliefs as she does. Sometimes instead of an explicit argument, implicit beliefs are being affirmed in statement as “given that,” “it is obvious,” “beneath notice,” etc. See Blaut, Colonizer's Model, 31, 36.

637 Wielandt, Offenbarung, 4-5.
problem of the Qur‘ān, which is not only its anachronism in the modern context, but its (legislative) authority that competes and conflicts with the state. Historical critique importantly is not simply useful to satisfy a historical curiosity. Rather, for Wielandt, “Historical critique remains the necessary tool for believers” to receive from the ancient prophets

What they actually wanted to say, and one may assume that this is their wish. What the prophets’ statements originally meant is often buried under later interpretations and has to be reconstructed by historical research. When historical critique is able to show that books of revelation are testimonies of the faith of humans conditioned by history, one does a favor to the adherents of prophetic religions: [Historical critique] safe-guards against conflating the human with the divine; [and thus] liberates them from the commitment to imaginations and propositions that [...] cannot claim eternal value.638

In this passage Wielandt runs into four theoretical problems. First, even if it were possible to discern the text’s “original meaning,” there is no guarantee that this meaning is more desirable for the modern person. There is no convincing reason for believers to privilege one alleged original meaning over the discoveries of other meanings by later Muslim interpreters if one accepts that the Qur‘ān is the living word of God that conveys meaning for all times. Postmodern literary theory would affirm that the Qur‘ān's meanings transcend its original issuance.

Second, history as a discipline brought about a new and unprecedented historical consciousness that is fundamentally secular and disenchanted. This poses problems for claiming access to the “prophet's mind” or “what he really wanted to say,” whether one posits Muḥammad as the author of the Qur‘ān or not. Recalling Chakrabarty, such claims are problematic because historical critique of scripture always consists in the meeting of two systems of thought, “one in which the world is […] disenchanted, and the other in which humans are not the only meaningful agents. For the purpose of writing history, the first system, the secular one, translates the second

638 Wielandt, Offenbarung, 13. Italics mine.
into itself.”639 In other words, historical critique of scripture is an “act of translation modeled on Newtonian science” and entails the ideal of objectivity. In this translation process the differences between (local) languages are “mediated by the higher language of science itself.”640

When we take scientific aspiration and modern historical consciousness as givens in scholarly conversations, we apply a universal on the particular that promises to unlock the text’s “real meaning” or at least its original constituents. History, the social sciences, and modern political philosophy all work based on “the idea of a godless, continuous, empty, and homogeneous time.” History thus belongs to a “model of a higher, overarching language. It represents a structure of generality”641 that subordinates certain (ahistorical) forms of relating to the past. To think of revelation as history was, one may say with approximate certainty, not the understanding of revelation by Muḥammad. To understand what he or the Qurʾān really meant, presumably in the time in which it was first uttered, can indeed be advanced by looking at the linguistic, cultural, and historical situation of its time. However, that a universal language, i.e., science, can translate the particular language of the Qurʾān – enchanted and full of jinn, angels, the transcendent, and, of course, God – is questionable because it assumes that the message must be secularized to be grasped correctly.

The fourth problem in Wielandt's account is the normativity with which she states her views. She does not claim that this is one possible translation among others, but the only method that can be ethically advanced on sound scholarly grounds: “Those whose understanding of history is determined by modern historical science […] must see [the revelatory book] as

639 Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 72.
640 Ibid., 75, 85.
641 Ibid., 75-76.
testaments of the faith of human authors, being conditioned by history.” ⁶⁴² In other words, historical-critical research cannot be determined by the metaphysical postulates of its research object. Its method is not able to verify those postulates. History may not yield absolute truth, but it is the method that comes closest to objectivity and a kind of plausible truth.

Importantly for Wielandt, acquiring historical consciousness is not simply a question of epistemology but a moral obligation: When Muslims “abandon themselves to delusions about the historical foundations of their faith and about what one can in fairness deduce from them, this should be considered irresponsible not only from a scholarly point of view but also in view of the ethical claim of the religion.” ⁶⁴³ Wielandt avers the historical-critical approach to be not one among other methods, but the most ethical and honest form to deal with the Qurʾān. Intellectual integrity should be the highest standard for modern Muslim scholars who deal with the Qurʾān. Such integrity implies, as if natural, the rejection of any non-secular variable.

Historical critique, in Wielandt’s account, seems to be final and radical: “Once one takes the step of historical critique,” she writes, “there is no turning back.” ⁶⁴⁴ With the acceptance of the historicity of the Qurʾān, it is implied, one leaves something behind, namely the claim to contemporaneity of the Qurʾān with “us.” Its particular past comes to be objectified in the scholar’s time. Wielandt is not dismissive of Muslim scholarship per se. Yet, non-historical scholarship of the Qurʾān can at best be a representation of pre-modern and, therefore, outdated intellectual and ideational practices. From the perspective of the scholarly discipline of history this stance is logical, particularly given the deep-rootedness of Higher Criticism in theology in

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⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 11-14.
the academy and church in Germany. Practicing academic historians are usually more concerned with telling good from bad history than with the question of who might use and own the past. Wielandt's position on the necessity to historicize the past comes close to Hobsbawm's view that “bad history is not harmless history. It is dangerous.”

Wielandt overlooks the point that European imperialism in both the Arab world and elsewhere, used “good history” to justify the subjugation of peoples who, according to European thinkers, had “stories” and “myths” but no sense of history. One important question Wielandt's work raises is how one can reconcile both the discipline and practice of modern history, now also part of the intellectual and public discourse in the Muslim world, with Islamic Qur'ānic studies.

When Wielandt published her book in 1971, discussions on Orientalism had not yet begun and criticism of a secular normativity not been voiced in the western context, at least not comprehensively in Islamic studies. One could assume that Wielandt's opinions represent an outmoded view. They may in fact not be representative of her own recent scholarship anymore. Yet, the core-assumption that the historical-critical approach is crucial for secular modernity and democracy is, as we have seen, a vivid theme in the media and can still be found in academic writings. Recently, this line of argument has even become a concern of U.S. foreign policy, as discussed in the next section. This common tenor concerning Qur'ān hermeneutics in these

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646 Wielandt's conviction that history writing is the most ethical way to treat the past is reflected in her indignant reaction to Abdallah Laroui's suggestion that mythological history writing is part of Arabic culture due to political reasons. In his opinion, Arabs might revert to myth in order to build their society. See Abdallah Laroui, L'idéologie arabe contemporaine: Essai critique (Paris: François Maspero, 1967), 104, 119-123. Trans. into Arabic as Al-idfyūlūfiya al-'arabiya al-mu 'āṣira (Beirut: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-'arabi, 1999).

647 In a later article, she concedes that the belief in verbal inspiration does not necessarily entail the rejection of textual interpretation since one can differentiate between the author of the text, i.e., God, and to whom it is directed, i.e., why the text was given the shape it has. See Wielandt, “Wurzeln,” 272-273.
various fields demonstrates the inter-connection between politics and intellectual production. Historical-critical scholars may see themselves as merely being interested in some aspect of the past out of historical curiosity. Yet, they move in a broader discursive and political matrix to which they contribute and on which their assumptions rest, whether consciously or not. The career of the historical-critical approach in U.S. Foreign policy gives evidence to this connection.

**U.S. Foreign Policy, Normative Secularity, and Historical Critique**

The view that Islam has to be reformed, i.e., that its secularization is necessary to bring about democracy, is wide-spread and has gained momentum since 9/11.\(^{648}\) Only institutional, cultural, and political secularization can further true democracy in this scenario. This conviction has become common in the political outlook of the U.S. State Department and has materialized in the project to transform “Islam from within.”\(^{649}\) In the course of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. increasingly faced criticism among Muslims.\(^{650}\) In response to these developments, the White House National Security Council (NSC) launched a new program in 2003, called the Muslim World Outreach. The program has since received at least 1.3 billion dollars in order to “reform Islam from within”\(^{651}\) by supporting those individuals and associations identified as moderate, tolerant, and receptive to democratic values.\(^{652}\)

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\(^{652}\) Kaplan, “Hearts.”

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The main financier of this project, USAID (Unites States Agency for International Development), provides funds to train Muslim preachers, promote schools seen to counter radicalizing tendencies, support so-called “Muslim moderates,” and modify public school curriculums and media production. For example, the State Department supported several talk shows that spread a certain “liberal” form of religion as well as several news TV channels. The aim is to reach Muslims described as “traditionalists” in a report by the Rand Corporation, an influential think tank, whose board members entail Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and Dick Cheney. The report, authored by Cheryl Benard, sees countering “traditionalist Islam” as crucial for tackling militant Islam.

Importantly, the report identifies the belief in the Qur’ân as the direct word of God to be a major obstacle to Islamic reform. Both “orthodox norms and values and conservative behavior” are seen as highly problematic for “international modernity.” The term international modernity, just as democracy, is left vague. In the course of the report it becomes clear that the term denotes western political modernity, i.e., the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and the capitalist enterprise, predicated on concepts that are ingrained in European liberal thought and presented as the universally ideal form of social organization. As the report declares,

The United States, the modern industrialized world, and indeed the international community as a whole would prefer an Islamic world that is compatible with the rest of the system: democratic, economically viable, politically stable, socially progressive, and follows the rules and norms of international conduct.655

International modernity is here hence a codeword for a specific “'Europe' as the primary habitus

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655 Benard, Civil and Democratic Islam, 9.
of the modern.” In harmony with the myth of the “European miracle,” the report sees traditionalism (not economic or military reasons) as the cause of “poverty, backwardness, and underdevelopment.” Traditionalism is responsible for “social and political problems of all sorts.” In Benard's view, the focus on ritual and the literal understanding of shari'a and Qur'an make traditionalist Muslims manipulable by religious fanatics and hinders “critical thinking.” Traditionalists demonstrate “a mentality willing to accept authority with few questions.” Ironically, while these Muslims are depicted as generally “uncritical,” the criticism they raise against western hegemony and capitalism does not count as critical thinking but as a “hallmark of fundamentalism.” The report concedes that “traditionalist Muslims” are not mainly militant. They are statistically not in favor of violence or terrorism and, in some cases, even fought fundamentalism. Often, they are involved in charitable and interfaith work. What is disconcerting about “traditionalist” Muslims is their aim to reform society and make it more Islamic.

The Rand report is thus not only perturbed by explicitly political acts but also by the mindset of Muslims that decides over their integration into capitalism, civil society, and, in general, the world order as outlined by western norms and enforced by military might. Reluctant peoples are to be integrated into these structures formally and mentally. What is needed is the conquering of religion by reason. Traditionalist Muslims, the report suggests, have not yet reached a secular-institutional logic of the political. They remain archaic, while the West shows the way. Remarkably, while the Rant report is on the surface concerned with “Islamic violence” and democracy, many of the Muslims it quotes as examples for being “anti-western” express a

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656 Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 43.
657 Benard, Civil and Democratic Islam, 32-34.
658 Ibid., 4-6, 26, 29-30.
659 Ibid., iii.
form of anti-capitalist critique, that is, they critique consumer choice and the sovereignty of the individual.\(^{660}\) This is no coincidence since economics and history as forms of knowledge conform “to the two major institutions that the rise (and later universalization) of the bourgeois order has given to the world – the capitalist mode of production and the nation-state.”\(^{661}\) The report's concern with Islamic dress, ritual, and an a-historical understanding of religion reveals that the author considers “other narratives of the self and community that do not look to the state/citizen bind as the ultimate construction of sociality”\(^{662}\) as a challenge, and indeed, as inadequate for modernity. Traditionalist Muslims produce collective memory differently. The report is predicated on a transition narrative (with its aims of development, modernization, and capitalism), in which subject positions and configurations of memory that contest the subject needed for capitalism and liberal citizenship have no place and are even considered dangerous.

The report identifies two main obstacles to viewing “traditionalist” Muslims as allies of the U.S. First, they are often anti-western or anti-American, and second, their worldview (beliefs, attitudes, and reasoning) and approach to scripture are incommensurable with the western way of life and “core Enlightenment values.”\(^{663}\) Beliefs that require reform are: 1) the conviction of the divinity of the Qur'ān and a failure to regard it as historical document; 2) failing to view Muḥammad as historically conditioned, thereby seeking solutions for the modern life in his model; and 3) the uncritical acceptance of the juristic Islamic legal system.\(^{664}\) The Rand report

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660 See, for example, Benard, *Civil and Democratic Islam*, 29, 31.
662 Ibid., 37.
663 For the report, “anti-American” includes, for example, the grievances of “fear and oppression” American Muslims after 9/11 expressed. See Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 16-17, 30-31, 34. See also Mahmood, “Secularism,” 333.
664 I am following Mahmood in the summary of these three points here. See ibid., 334.
concludes: “Modern democracy rests on the values of the Enlightenment: traditionalism opposes these values [...] Traditionalism is antithetical to the basic requirements of a modern democratic mind-set: critical thinking, creative problem solving, individual liberty, secularism.”

Mahmood points to the irony that the State Department now suddenly wishes to realize Enlightenment values in the Muslim world, while it favored and financed all kinds of non-democratic and terrorist strands of Islam prior to the 1990s. There is a clear change in foreign policy that now aims at battling militant Islam on ideological and theological grounds, ideally leading to secularism. Mahmood clarifies that secularism in recent U.S. foreign policy is not anti-religious but aims to reshape Islam along the lines of “a certain modality of liberal political rule. Secularism in this sense refers to both an analytical standpoint and a political field of intervention.” Mahmood affirms the previous findings that this form of secular policy is now generally echoed in the media by Muslims and non-Muslims who aim to historicize the Qurʾān.

The Rand report does not fall for the fallacy Asad pinpointed in regard to a general view of the Qurʾān as “essentially univocal,” “infectious,” and fundamentally different from the Bible. On the contrary, it acknowledges the role of the reader in interpreting the Qurʾān and recommends a certain practice of reading precisely because it is like the Bible:

The Old Testament is not different from the Qurʾān in endorsing conduct and containing a number of rules and values that are literally unthinkable [...] in today’s society. This does not pose a problem because few people would today insist that we should all be living in the exact literal manner of Biblical patriarchs. Instead, we allow our vision of Judaism and Christianity's true message to dominate over the literal text, which we regard as history and legend. That is exactly the approach that Islamic modernists also propose.

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665 Benard, Civil Democratic Islam, 33.
667 Asad, Formations, 11-12.
668 Benard, Civil Democratic Islam, 37. Italics mine.
The appeal to the contemporary ("today") renders certain forms of thinking and being that refuse historicization remnants from the past, somewhat displaced in the now. The notion of modernity, presented in the Rand report, is based on the self-conception of Europe vis-à-vis its own "traditional" outdated past and other "traditional societies," which creates a situation in which Muslims are placed in the position of constituting a previous stair on the ladder of linear history. For judging something to be anachronistic, and thus irreconcilable with political modernity, one needs to know what constitutes the actual present. The criteria to make this decision are deeply embedded in European concepts, whose genealogy derived from the Enlightenment. The "true message" of religion is an interiorized and private form of belief and worship, decoupled from politics, outside signs of religiosity, and law. What the traditionalist Muslim ought to embrace is a certain form of hermeneutics, religious sensibility, and subjectivity, all of which are predicated on historical consciousness that allows to distinguish between what belongs to the present and what does not. The belief that history will salvage the Qur'ān's essential meaning that is ideally in accord with a secular state or lead to religion's relativization, reverberates in the Rand report.670

Remarkably, many of the thinkers who have undertaken a somewhat historical approach to the Qur'ān are in fact anti-imperialists. That the U.S. State Department yet views them as "natural allies" has its reason in their historicizing Qur'ān hermeneutics. For the U.S. State Department, the original sources of Islam have to be historicized.671 As Mahmood states, the core problem from the perspective of U.S. analysts is not militancy itself but interpretation that "is regarded as the foundation of any religious subjectivity and therefore the key to its emancipation

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669 On the concept of anachronism, see Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 237-238.
671 Benard, Civil Democratic Islam, 5, 6.
or secularization.”

Mahmood's assessment coheres with the results of this thesis so far. Secularism is here less an attempt at separating religion from politics than to further certain religious subjectivities by means of a certain form of hermeneutics and theology.

The solutions, Mahmood asserts, are “aimed at the creation of an enlightened religious subject capable of realizing a 'religiously neutral' political ethic.”

History also comes into play in another way, namely, by recommending to further the study of pre-Islamic histories of Muslims. This proposal betrays the intention to diversify the collective memory of Muslims by offering non-Islamic pasts with which they could identify too, if they so chose. The Rand report thus echoes many of the views we encountered in western Qur'anic studies and crystallizes the link between knowledge production and politics. It considers the Qur'ān and its interpretation as the software that programs the hardware (i.e., Muslims) and retells the narrative that the political crisis, particularly in the Middle East, is neither social nor political but hermeneutical. In conclusion, the report advises secularism (however vaguely defined) and its attendant history as the political cure to the economic and social crisis in the Muslim world.

Of particular relevance in this context is the notion of secularism. According to Mahmood, secularism, as portrayed in the Rand report, is less the privatization or the decline of religion than a sort of ethos to transform religion itself, to ascertain a particular form of being religious (internalized private and historicized religiosity), and foster an epistemology that bans any authoritative claim to knowledge. In her view, the success of such a transformative “totalizing project […] depends on a variety of reforms and state injunctions. This has often

673 Ibid., 330.
674 Benard, Civil Democratic Islam, xi, 63.
meant that nation-states have had to act as de facto theologians, rendering certain practices and beliefs indifferent to religious doctrine precisely so that these practices can be brought under the domain of civil law”675 – a vision already formulated by Spinoza.676 One may object that this form of secularization is often not as deliberate as the formulations “the state imposes” or “totalizing project” might suggest. Much of the secularization in Europe happened “by accident,” when politics promoting a particular religion failed, not by deliberate politics aimed at secularization or separation of church and state.677 As stated earlier, the notion of the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis all forms of religion is historically false. Most nation states, within and without the West, have adopted some form of politics toward religion, be that in funding certain religious institutions and schools, teaching religion at school, or regulating public religious display.678

In response, Mahmood accurately remarks that secularism does not inevitably entail the state's neutrality toward religions, although this notion is often understood as inherent claim of a “secular state.” She acknowledges that many scholars have already questioned naïve conceptions of secularism as state neutrality toward religion. Secularism should also not simply be seen as the idea of freedom of conscience or toleration of religious diversity. Instead, she argues, secularism as a politically suggestive doctrine is predicated on a particular “kind of subjectivity that a secular culture authorizes, the practices it redeems as truly (versus superficially) spiritual, and the particular relationship to history it prescribes [. . .].” In other words, the secular ethos aims to

676 For Spinoza, “The political power, the imperium, must control religion completely (hence, no separate priestly class can be allowed); religion itself must be defined entirely by the morality that serves political order); and finally, that the best or original political condition is the one in which political and religious power are united in the many as sovereign.” See Hahn and Wiker, Politicizing the Bible, 386.
reform religious subjectivities to make them conform to a privatized form of religion and to liberal politics.679 Echoing Starret and Asad, Mahmood identifies a “normative impetus” inherent in secularism. Secular states usually do not start out as political entities that are neutral toward religion. Yet, once secularism is established as modality of political rule, the notion of “religiously neutral politics” becomes a standard verbiage. Mahmood views the normativity of the secular impetus as particularly problematic when it is being used as a form of foreign policy and for imperialist domination.680 In short, secular normativity works to homogenize different ways of being in the world and it does so with an aura of authority since it is based on “science” and military superiority.

In her analysis, Mahmood takes a second step that is immediately relevant to my thesis, and with which I only partly agree. She attests a concurrence between reformist Muslims and U.S. foreign policy that entails a common diagnosis of why the Muslim world is in crisis and a common suggestion for its cure. This form of theological foreign policy of the United States aims at influencing the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims by promoting so-called Muslim reform thinkers. These are thinkers deemed as most open to a “western vision of civilization, political order, and society.”681 In Mahmood's view,

The convergence of U.S. imperial interests and the secular liberal Muslim agenda needs to be understood [...] not simply as a fortuitous coming together of political objectives and an indigenous social formation, but [...] from the standpoint of normative secularity and the kind of religious subjectivity it endorses.682

In short, regarding their vision of religion, Muslim reformers and U.S. imperial interests

680 Ibid., 328.
681 Benard, Civil and Democratic Islam, 4.
harmonize. Mahmood even seems to suggest that they are allies in this endeavor. Since we will be concerned in the next chapters with Muslim treatments of the relationship between the Qurʾān and history, I will first address the question of what to make of the “new” theological impetus in U.S. foreign policy that aims at impacting the way ordinary Muslims view Islam by promoting so-called Muslim reform thinkers. Second, I will address her objection to calling people like Sorouch, Abū Zayd, and Ḥanafī “indigenous.” This latter question is particularly relevant for our discussion since those are also the scholars Neuwirth sees as a point of contact between western and Muslim Qurʾānic studies. To put this bluntly (and overdramatizing Mahmood’s claim), if these Muslim thinkers are viewed as simply having adopted an entire western framework of thinking and scholarship, then they cannot be a “point of contact” since they have simply switched over to western academic discourse. Moreover, Mahmood’s claim raises the question of how to label various social actors who are portrayed by the media, scholarship, and even by themselves as “traditional,” “secular,” “reformist,” “modern,” etc. In other words, should we adopt this vocabulary only because the social actors themselves, the Rand report, and the media use it?

Concerning the first point, namely, what to make of the alleged allegiance between so-called moderate Muslims and the “new” theological foreign policy of the U.S., Mahmood is well aware that the theological project of the U.S. is similar to anti-communist strategies during the Cold War. The difference she detects is that the new project is theological while the former was not.\(^6\) I agree that the current project is theological, but so was the former. To give an example, Mahmood quotes a State Department official who voiced his concern about the allegedly new theological course in U.S. foreign policy: “The Cold War was easy. It was a struggle against a

\(^6\) Mahmood, “Secularism,” 331. This judgment, of course, depends on how one defines “theology.”
godless ideology. But this [current one] has theological elements. It goes to the core of American belief that we don't mess with freedom of religion. Do we have any authority to influence this debate?" Mahmood interprets the official as expressing his discomfort about interfering in the religious affairs of others. It is interesting that she takes this self-ascription of a state official concerning theology at face value. I agree with Mahmood that the concern for neutrality toward religion is an element in his statement. There is yet another aspect that merits attention.

The State Department official is concerned not only with moral legitimacy but also with authority, that is, he wonders whether direct theological involvement would be effective if it comes from “outside” of Islam. Moreover, while theology was not at the core of anti-colonialist practice, to fight “against a godless ideology” is in fact a theological argument and was used as such in various conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. In the twentieth century, U.S. foreign policy has by no means been a neutral bystander in the creation of theological discourse, or discourse on religion in general. To give but one example, at the end of World War II, one of the first actions by the U.S. government in Japan was to remove Shinto shrine from public power to safeguard the “separation of religion and politics” in Japan and to neutralize the political influence of Shinto on the Japanese public.

Depending on how one understands theology, one can also argue that the financing and providing of madrasas in Pakistan with anti-communist textbooks had theological content and intent. In the wake of the Cold War, the U.S. State Department continuously interfered in inner-Islamic affairs, and mostly not on the side of secularists or liberals, who were primarily seen as

684 Kaplan, “Hearts.”
anti-American or as Soviet allies. Some of the alliances were based on the conviction that one could create affiliation by means of a theistic worldview. According to Mahmood Mamdani, the U.S. viewed the world in rather simple terms before the Iranian Revolution. On one side was the Soviet Union that backed nationalist movements in the Third world and on the other was political Islam that was considered an ally in the struggle against the (godless) Soviets.

For example, the U.S. supported the Muslim Brotherhood against Nasser in Egypt, and channeled financial resources toward the Jamaat-i-Islam in Pakistan. The Iranian Revolution effectively altered both U.S. foreign policy and world outlook. Revolutionary political Islam, characterized by organized Islamic social movements and mass participation promoting an Islamic state, came now to be seen in an unfavorable light.686 The U.S. was eager to reinforce elitist Islamist state projects (such as Saudi-Arabia) in order to contain the influence of the Iranian Revolution. Another example is the U.S. Engagement in Afghanistan where the CIA wanted to create a jihād front against the Soviets that could also appeal to Muslims worldwide. The rationale of the U.S. State Department at the time was to foster a particularly “Sunni jihād” that could be helpful in hampering the Iranian revolution by labeling it as essentially Shi‘ite. U.S. aid also entailed the sponsorship of textbooks used in schools that trained the mujahedeen, and in the process supported exiled Islamist factions who aimed to globalize jihād.687 In conclusion, the U.S. has de facto been involved in creating new religious subjectivities and forms of religion.

All of this shows that it can be misleading to draw premature conclusions about so-called moderate Muslims and their alleged “alliance” with American imperialism. Otherwise, one

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687 Ibid., 125-155.
would also have to conclude that certain radical Islamist movements and intellectuals had the same core intentions for society, as did the politicians in charge of U.S. foreign policy up to the 1990s. It is true, “moderate” Muslims, who often have leftist inclinations, are now seen in a more favorable light than “traditionalists.” However, this position may shift any day under a new administration. We will see many of Mahmood’s criticisms of a normative secularity to be relevant for explaining the current debate over historicizing approaches to the Qur’an.

One should, however, not jump to hasty conclusions that these so-called moderates are not part of an “indigenous formation,” which brings me to my second point. While I argue that historicizing hermeneutics are linked to a secular worldview, one cannot reduce Muslim authors who apply them to imitators of the West as opposed to “orthodox” Muslims. The problem with these labels is not simply that they tend to homogenize a picture that is much more complex.

Such a perspective also suggests a view of cultures that are autonomous (and binary) of sorts and does not leave room “for space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence,” as Homi Bhabha framed it.\(^{688}\) To be fair, Mahmood is concerned with the asymmetrical power structure that works in favor of a normative secularity and causes damage to ways of being in the world that deviate from this ideal type of secularism. One must yet be cautious not to fall into a morality of difference and incommensurability. The following section focuses on Abū Zayd, Mahmood's main point of reference. He is, moreover, important for several authors in this thesis. Abū Zayd's case gained popularity in the 1990s when he was first denied tenure at Cairo University, later on, charged by a court in Egypt with apostasy, and forced to divorce his wife, which prompted them to leave the country.

“Does God Speak a Word to Man?” History and Dissent: Abū Zayd

Mahmood mainly reads Abū Zayd through the lens of Hirschkind. The latter distinguishes between Abū Zayd, who aims to dismantle tradition, and traditionalists, who defend orthodoxy. The view of Abū Zayd's case as one between tradition and modernity has also been echoed in the media. In Hirschkind's view, Abū Zayd considers the Qur'ān as merely human, reduces it to a historical artifact, and is in general dismissive of the Islamic interpretive tradition. As he states, for “Abū Zayd, the divine never enters human experience at all. Unable to survive the passage into socio-cultural embodiment, God remains outside of knowledge.”

Hirschkind attests Abū Zayd scientific empiricism that necessarily leads to the privatization of religious belief and the Qur'ān's irrelevance for the organization of society since it secularizes the text. In Mahmood's view, Abū Zayd's hermeneutics separate the metaphysical intention from the text. Both authors see Abū Zayd as a “proponent in the plot of secular political rationality, [owing] his allegiance to the sovereign rule of the state rather than structures of traditional authority.” To respond to these assessments, let us briefly recall Abū Zayd's central theses.

Abū Zayd popularized the call for reading the Qur'ān “as text.” He urged to consider its historic dimension for its interpretation, while holding on to its divine origin. It was particularly Abū Zayd's emphasis on the dialectic relationship between text and culture that caused the suspicion that he banned God from the Qur'ān and ascribed to a historicist perspective. His opponents objected to his claim that “the text is in reality and in its essence a cultural product.”

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689 Hirschkind, “Heresy,” 43.
690 Ibid., 38-46.
692 Abū Zayd, Maḥfūm, 21, 27.
693 “Debate between Muḥammad ʿAmāra, the great Islamic thinker and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, The Marxist on
Therefore, it is worth unpacking. The central term for Abū Zayd in this context is *wahy* that he conceptualizes with the help of communication theory. *Wahy* mostly refers to an immaterial communication between God and humanity.\footnote{Abū Zayd, *Mafrūm*, 35. If one considers the verbal form of the same root (*awāḥ*), *wahy* is mentioned seventy times in the Qurʾān. Compare Kermani, *Offenbarung*, 40-45.} Abū Zayd doubts that one can know anything about the exact process of that communication. A question that can be pondered though is what exactly Muḥammad received, i.e., whether the exact wording, the text in sense and diction, or the content that the messenger himself formulated in Arabic.\footnote{Speculations about the process of *wahy* are part of a branch of Qurʾānic studies, called “*Kayfiyyāt al-anzāl wa maʾnāhu*” (sciences of the kinds of descending and its meaning). See Abū Zayd, *Mafrūm*, 47-48.}

Following the various explanations provided by Islamic tradition, Abū Zayd identifies various kinds of *wahy* that the Prophet received: verbal, visual or auditory (a non-linguistic, non-verbal code, such as a dream vision), and by means of a medium, in Muḥammad’s case the angel Gabriel.\footnote{Ibid., 35-75, 46. This is basically also al-Ghazālī's view. For al-Juwaynī, Gabriel at times read to the Prophet from a text, at times, he repeated only the content of what God had told him. Van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration,” 621.} Basing his discussion on Ibn Khaldūn, Abū Zayd entertains the question of what it means that Muḥammad received a non-verbal inspiration or a code from Gabriel that he then formulated in his own words.\footnote{Ibid., 57-59. Abū Zayd quotes Ibn Khaldūn’s *Muqaddima* at length. Ibn Khaldūn differentiates between non-verbal *wahy*, verbal *wahy* and visual *wahy*. His main thesis is that the Prophet over time gets increasingly enabled to receive *wahy*. He also holds that the Prophet changes ontologically in the process of *wahy*. See ibid., 53-55.} Assuming that Muḥammad could find the appropriate words himself and was guided to the right formulation strengthens the idea of divine and human cooperation in the Qurʾān. Consequently, Abū Zayd suggests that some Qurʾānic verses are paraphrases of the divine.\footnote{Elsewhere however, Abū Zayd states that the Qurʾānic message must have been promulgated in its exact wording as Muḥammad had received it, since it is a linguistic message. See ibid., 64.} As he explains:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWSIOGLMOcc (accessed June 24, 2016)
Certainly, [the Qur’ān] is a message from heaven to earth, but it is not a message that is independent of the rules of reality with all its structures that are embedded in this reality; and the most important of which is the cultural texture. The absolute discloses [about] itself (yakhṣīfu ‘an nafṣīhi) through speech that descends (yatanazzalu īlayhim) to them by using their cultural and linguistic frame of reference (niẓām dalālī).699

This quotation is important for several reasons. First, Abū Zayd affirms the divine origin of the Qur’ān and that it was sent down. Thus the revelation is something that comes from outside of the prophet, not something he produced. Second, the main activity derives from God. The divine message is addressed to humans and conforms to their reality.

The human element is the medium through which the absolute can be approached without being conflated with it, and hence, preserves the unicity of God in the way the Mu‘tazilites or later Ash‘arites would conceptualize it. Its formulation in a human language also makes it comprehensible. One can study what God tells people, what he does in the world, and, on the basis of the linguistic and cultural context, why terms and sentences are phrased the way they are.700 But God Himself remains to a certain extent inscrutable. God sends down his word, but is never Himself the “subject of the nuzūl.”701 Not to misread Abū Zayd here, he does not deny that the Qur’ān speaks about God; yet, the transcendent is ultimately known through human language that remains human.702 For Abū Zayd, the human aspect of the Qur’ān serves to safeguard God’s transcendence and divinity. What Abū Zayd means by “cultural project” is that wahy has to be understood in the context of its cultural circumstances and language system:

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699 Abū Zayd, Maḥfūm, 64.
700 Ibid., 64-65.
701 For the spatial imagination of revelation in Islam, see Stefan Wild, “We have sent down to Thee the book with the Truth. Spatial and temporal implications of the Qur’anic concepts of nuzūl, tanzīl and inzīl,” in The Qur’an as Text, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1996), 137-141.
702 Abū Zayd’s meticulous account of the different Islamic scholarly opinions as to how the communication from God via Gabriel and Muhammad toward the people took place mainly serves him to prove the variety of opinions Muslim scholars have had on the process of wahy. See Abū Zayd, Maḥfūm, 40-42.
God (pbuh) chose, when he revealed the Qur’ān to the messenger (pbuh), the specific linguistic system of the first receiver. The choice of language is not the choice of an empty vessel [...] language is the most important instrument of society to grasp the world and give an order to its consciousness. It is impossible to speak about language detached from culture. Therefore, it is also impossible to speak about a text detached from culture and reality since text is something that stands in a linguistic and cultural framework.\(^{703}\)

Leaving aside the logo-centrism one can attest Abū Zayd, this quotation elucidates that the Qur'ān issues from God and is rendered comprehensible for humans. For example, the concept of wāhy must have been present in Arab culture prior to the Islamic revelation. Otherwise, people would not have understood what wāhy was.\(^{704}\) God's message has to be adapted to human capacity. The Qur'ān is an expression of the culture in so far as it embodies it *structurally*; that is, it “embodies [culture and reality] by rebuilding the structures of its givens in a new mode.”\(^{705}\)

Once the text enters society, the culture is not just a passive sound space for the text. Rather, text and culture exist and develop in a complex dialectical relationship over the course of twenty-three years. While the Qur'ān was being revealed, it transformed the reality that it entered – the social, political, and intellectual landscape – and *vice versa*. This does not mean for Abū Zayd that the text is contingent and culturally determined, but that the Qur'ānic discourse adapted to the culture. The principle that scriptures adapt themselves to the point of view of the multitude was not an unfamiliar principle in Muslim medieval theology. Some medieval thinkers argued in favor of the “Principle of Accommodation.” They elaborated on the phrase “Scripture speaks the language of man” that was originally used in Jewish legal discourse but soon came to be adopted


\(^{704}\) Ibid., 38. Abū Zayd follows Toshihiko Izutsu’s argument closely, although he does not indicate Izutsu explicitly in this part. See Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur’ān. Semantics of the Qur’ānic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keyo University, 2008), 149-151.

\(^{705}\) Qur’ānic language is not detached “from the general linguistic system (*niẓām lughawī*), but creates its own code that builds and structures anew the elements of the original signification system.” See Abū Zayd, *Naqd*, 146.
by other scholars.\textsuperscript{706} For these thinkers, “Scripture speaks the language of man” did not mean, as it does for later historical-critical scholarship, that the content, composition, and language of scriptures are human because they are authored by humans and are, therefore, human products.

Instead, the medieval thinkers held that “the language of revelation uses elements of familiar and natural order to transcend them; and this procedure is in itself a property of the language of humans, which operates through analogies and metaphors.” In stark contrast to this view, in traditional historical-critical scholarship, the Bible and the Qur'ān become human, i.e., historical documents.\textsuperscript{707} Whether Abū Zayd thinks that language can transcend itself is unclear. Yet, the way he explains the adaptation of God's Speech to its human environment sounds indeed reminiscent of earlier Islamic views. That the Qur'ān's language reflects a specific culture and time is a thought held by diverse modern and pre-modern thinkers, for example, Ibn Kullāb, Faḍlallāh, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, and Jarādī.\textsuperscript{708}

Hirschkind is right that Abū Zayd has adopted a view of history that mainly functions without God.\textsuperscript{709} However, the former's conclusion that Abū Zayd starts from empirical reality, not from metaphysical assumptions,\textsuperscript{710} may be challenged. Abū Zayd's premise is based on the absolute oneness and transcendence of God (\textit{tanzīḥ}), a conception in which God's Speech is part of His essence and thus cannot “descend” or be “inlibrated” in the Qur'ān. Abū Zayd by and large rejects as sterile and otiose ('\textit{aqīm}) metaphysical speculations about the constitution of the

\textsuperscript{707} Ibid., 219-221.
\textsuperscript{708} See, for example, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, ‘\textit{An sanawāt wa mawāqif wa shakkīyāt: Hakağī taẖaddatha – hakağī qāla. Hāwaratahu Munā Sukarīya} (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār: 2007), 57.
\textsuperscript{709} See Abū Zayd, \textit{Naqḍ}, 30.
\textsuperscript{710} Hirschkind, “Heresy,” 42-45.
Qur’an before its descent. In his view, such an approach leads to the creation of myth around text and reality, to a concealment of the message, and to a closure of the text. Since God cannot be an object of scientific research, one must approach the Qur’an by means of the study of reality, language, and culture. Abū Zayd identifies two conceptual approaches to the Qur’an. The first, mainly chosen by the contemporary religious discourse, follows a “descending dialectic” (diyālīktīk ḥābiṭ) that starts from God, proceeds to the prophet, and finally arrives at the reality, the actual historical situation. The second approach, which Abū Zayd favors, follows an “ascending dialectic” (diyālīktīk ṣāʿīd) and starts from the particular, tangible, and sensual in order to arrive at the hidden. In Abū Zayd's view, the problem with the descending dialectic is that it is based on dogmatics and confuses preaching with scholarship.

This view leads Hirschkind to ascribe to Abū Zayd a Kantian understanding of religion that follows an epistemology where nothing can be said about the metaphysical anymore. However, caution regarding strong metaphysical claims about God is common among ulamā’ as well. For example, Faḍlallāh states in that respect: “There exist limitations to our thinking. We can ruminate about the existence of God but we cannot discern His self since we do not possess the capabilities or the means to discern that absolutely.” One may also take note of a general reluctance among other Muslim and Islamist thinkers to engage in metaphysical discussions that are often seen as useless, scholastic, and outdated. While Abū Zayd rejects metaphysical

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712 Abū Zayd, Maḥfūẓ, 3, 27. This statement is not new. Many Mu’tazilites rejected assigning attributes to God; Ibn Ḥazm did so too. Of course, they arrived at very different conclusions. See Kermani, Offenbarung, 88-89.
713 Ibid., 29.
714 Hirschkind, “Heresy,” 43. Hirschkind refers to Locke rather than to Kant. However, Abū Zayd himself mainly refers to Schleiermacher who was concerned more with Kant than Locke.
715 Fadlallah, An sanavwāt, 56.
discussions about the Qurʾān, he yet makes an argument concerning the Qurʾān's ontological nature and links it directly to the modes of interpretation. Similarly to Wielandt and the Rand report, he thinks that the problems in contemporary Qurʾān scholarship (and in society) result from considering the text as divine, not human, although language is always human. The conviction that the belief in an eternally prescribed word of God hinders the “openness of the text” will have to be tested in the course of this thesis.

Yet the Qurʾān remains, in Abū Zayd's view, God's message to the world that we have in unaltered form. The harsh vocabulary he employs against absolute claims regarding the Qurʾān's meaning aims to make the qurʾānic text again available for open interpretations, guided by human reason, which, he stresses, has always been part of Islamic practice. He particularly objects to conflating the Qurʾān with its interpretation and to the monopolization of qurʾānic meaning by a “caste of interpreters.”717 His intentions in these claims are both political and theological. First, he means to safeguard tanzih. Second, his emphasis on the humanness of understanding, well grounded in Islamic tradition, challenges the religious establishment when it declares its interpretations to be absolute to the exclusion of deviating opinions.

Another aspect of language Abū Zayd emphasizes is its communicative function.718 Because God decided to make his message (and to a certain degree Himself) known through a language system, the literary method is the best (and in fact, Abū Zayd says the only) means to arrive at an understanding of Islam.719 This statement is not a universalist claim to truth, as Hirschkind understands it. Rather, Abū Zayd's rationale is that in order to understand language,

717  Abū Zayd, Naqd dl., 60-61.
718  Ibid., Maḥfūm, 28-29.
719  “The method of linguistic analysis is the only possible human method to understand it, and therefore also the only one to understand Islam.” See ibid., 30.
linguistics is the best approach. An exclusively linguistic approach to the Qur'ān does have the
tendency to neglect other aspects of the Qur’ān that equally convey meaning and can lead to
turning it into a mere object of inquiry. Mitchell has drawn attention to the political effect of
conceptualizing texts as a mere means of communication. The belief that words signify particular
meanings (ideally univocally), as we find it, for example, in Saussure, on whom Abū Zayd
heavily draws, displaces the authority of those who formerly taught the “correct” way to recite
and understand the texts. 720 Taken together with his suspicion of Sufism, one can agree with
Mahmood that he wants to dispense with a form of regula fidei for reading the Qur’ān by
devaluing the spiritual practices that often accompany such a reading. 721

For Abū Zayd, the Qur’ān is a message and thus has an informative function, which one
can only grasp if one takes its signification system seriously. Since poetical language is much
more complex than every-day-language, he insists that a proper understanding of the Qur’ān, and
therefore Islam, is in need of a literary interpretation and hermeneutics. 722 His suggestions as to
how to read the Qur'ān presupposes access to an extra-textual guidance that only the literary
scholar can provide. By proposing new literary methods to approach the Qur’ān, he also
implicitly challenged the members of the dominant Egyptian Islamic establishment, who mainly
police the interpretation of the Qur’ān. Abū Zayd's deviant interpretive framework threatened
their own hermeneutical position as well as their authority over Qur'ān interpretation, in other
words, their credibility and meaningfulness.

720 Mitchell, Colonising, 140-151.
722 Abū Zayd, Mafhūm, 27-30, 251. Abū Zayd alludes to Ferdinand de Saussure’s differentiation between langue
(language) and parole (speech, speaking). Abū Zayd is familiar with western hermeneutics as well as with Arabic
classical interpreters and scholars. He refers to: Schleiermacher, Gadamer, Sībawayh, Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Abd al-Qāhir
al-Jurjānī (died 1413) and ‘Abd al-Jabbār (died 1025). See further Kermani, Offenbarung, 22.
Because of his theological conviction that the meaning of the Qurʾān transcends temporal and spatial limitations, meaning has to be produced anew, so that the Qurʾān can speak to contemporary and future generations. The language of the Qurʾān (just as the language of any other text) is “not in itself clear, insofar as the theoretical and cultural horizon of the reader must be taken into account in the process of understanding […] the text.” Taʾwīl connotes coming to an understanding of the text; it is really the production of meaning for Abū Zayd. The text obtains meaning only through the reader or recipient. In line with this argument, the content the Qurʾān communicates to a Muslim reader today will be different from the content transmitted in the seventh century. Therefore, an exegesis oriented toward the earliest exegeses or aḥādīth can never determine the specific message for the respective present more accurately than a new interpretation. This is true even for Muḥammad whose understanding of the Qurʾān was also limited. An interpretation that rests upon the “authority of the old” leads to conflating the meaning of the text with the intellectual and cultural environment of the first generation(s):

Being content with a tafsīr of the text that is based on the first generations – and with it the confinement of the modern exegetes to (mere) accounts of what these first exegetes said – leads to the even more dangerous result for society […] that people adhere to the literalism of these tafāsīr and transform them into creeds; the result of this is being satisfied with ever-valid (azalī) truths in the sense of ultimate truths, to abandon […] the study of human and scientific phenomena, [and to transform] religion into superstition and fable tales, as well as to a relic among relics.

In this quotation Abū Zayd takes particular issue with certain forms of modern Islam that focus

723 Abū Zayd, Naqd, 81-82; Abū Zayd, Maḥfūm, 27, 251.
724 Ibid., Naqd, 87.
725 Ibid., Maḥfūm, 252-153.
726 Ibid., Naqd, 93. He states, “The text was transmuted from the first moment on – i.e., when the Prophet recited it when it was revealed to him – from its being as a divine text (naṣṣ ilāhī) to something cognizable, a human text (naṣṣ insānī) because it mutated from descent to interpretation. The comprehension of the texts by the Prophet constituted the first stage of the movement that springs from the link between text and human reason.” In general, Abū Zayd is very suspicious of hadīth. See Abū Zayd, Naqd, 87-89. See Kermani, Offenbarung, 8.
727 Abū Zayd, Maḥfūm, 250-252.
on the origins of Islam instead of on tradition as a whole. It is the recipient who makes “the text speak,” who “decodes” the text and thus produces its meaning. Therefore, ta’wil and text are inseparable in any extraction of meaning from the text.728 Without the human effort of ta’wil the Qurʾān remains silent.729 The area between text and reader is filled with meanings. Outside of this area, the meanings remain open and renewable depending on the shifting perspectives of the readers. The reading of the text is subject to changes of the linguistic and cultural realities. This finding critiques the view that understanding is only a reproduction or discovering of meaning.730 According to Abū Zayd, humans can only arrive at a relative (fahm nisbi), not at an absolute understanding (fahm mutlaq). This is the case because the “information” of the divine “message” is never the same but depends on the person who “receives” it. There cannot be only one ever-valid understanding of the Qurʾān – a view that coheres with the Islamic emphasis on the polyvalence of the Qurʾān. For Abū Zayd, to claim certain knowledge is a form of shirk (polytheism) since it equates something human with the divine.731

Although he refers to a literary method for interpreting the Qurʾān, it would be wrong to assume that he reduces the Qurʾān to a mere piece of literature. To lay great stress on its literary character is in line with Islamic thinking insofar as the miraculous character of the Qurʾān was especially attributed to its literary structure.732 While Abū Zayd sees himself primarily as a literary scholar, he is aware of the fact that he enters a theological and political discourse with his

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728 Abū Zayd, Mafhūm, 11.
729 Ibid., 337.
730 Gadamer, Wahrheit, 104, 109. However, Abū Zayd leaves this theory unexplored, at least in the two works on which I have focused.
731 Abū Zayd, Naqd, 93-94. Abū Zayd, Mafhūm, 120, 122. Qurʾānic language differs from natural language especially with regard to its complex structure that switches between different linguistic levels: “mere transmission of information (iʿlām) – which only refers to very few texts – and the literary language that is condensed in its meaning and that evokes its own specific mechanisms.” See ibid., 212.
732 Ibid., 173-178.

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work. By blaming a certain theological strand and its dominance in Muslim discourse for the backwardness of Muslim societies,\(^{733}\) he links a certain form of hermeneutics that posits the human as historical to the progress of society – a well known theme from Enlightenment thought. His hermeneutic framework is clearly formed by post-Enlightenment conceptions, but not entirely. At this point, it is important to underline that Abū Zayd did not develop his theses in an ivory tower but in a broader societal setting, in which he saw the Qur’ānic message gradually being reduced to its normative elements. His treatment of the Islamic discourse of the 1990s must be understood as a direct response to academic, social, and political developments in Egypt.\(^{734}\)

Some notes may suffice to suggest that the struggle over interpretation one sees in Abū Zayd's case can neither be reduced to the categories of tradition and modernity nor lead to the conclusion that Egypt was not yet ready for a new and “modern” understanding of scripture and his contesters locked into a pre-modern (read, traditional) mindset. Rather, as Starrett argues, one should keep in mind that it “was Egypt's integration into the modern – or postmodern – world system of economy, politics, and culture that has secured for Islam an integral part in the governance of the nation. In Egypt as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the connections between religion and national security descend deep into the infrastructure of the modern state.”\(^{735}\) In other words, the contest over who has the right to police Islam is part of the realignment and sustainment of political power in the hands of the nation-state.

Of particular relevance in this context are Abū Zayd' reflections on the question of what

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\(^{733}\) Abū Zayd, Naqd al, 160. Thus, for example, when he criticizes the religious discourse for reducing all phenomena to a single cause he rejects the theological stance of determinism.

\(^{734}\) He wants to “give an objective definition of the concept of Islam that transcends ideological preconceptions [dictated] by the various social and political forces in the Arabic-Islamic world.” See Abū Zayd, Maḥfūm, 22. Ibid., 6.
Islam is and ought to be in the modern context. Significantly, he blames the modern drive toward univocality for the deadlock in which he sees Islam. Modernity has caused serious damage to Muslim collective memory that seems not to know what to do with the plurality of Qur’anic interpretations. While this kind of plurality led in the past to a form of agnosticism (al-lā-adīyya), in modernity, it eventually led to the prohibition of thought itself. 736 Abū Zayd notes that the contemporary ‘ulamā’ do not merely follow the methods and results of the classical scholars but simplify (tashīl wa tabsīḥ) their works and methods and promote a unified version of Islam that stands in contrast to its multifariousness in pre-modern times. Importantly, he faults the “prevailing religious discourse” not with conservatism, although his vocabulary of “reactionary,” “backwardness,” and “progress” may suggest such an interpretation.

Instead, he faults them with simplification and manipulation of the turāth, and a lack of Islamic erudition. He argues that former exegetes and fiqhah, who held that kull mujahid muṣīb (every jurisprudent is correct), were open to a variety of opinions. This openness could also provide solutions for the contemporary context, although modernity seems to hinder such multivalence. 737 These statements clarify that Abū Zayd is not uncritical of modernity that he sees in parts responsible for the loss of meaning of the Qur’ān and for a narrowing conception of Islam. Yet, he does not blame “traditionalists” for this state of affairs but explicitly the state. In effect, his hermeneutics, if realized, would entail the dismantling of the prevalent religious discourse – both Islamist and state-sponsored Islam. His insistence on the humanness of

736 Abū Zayd further states, “Everyone talks about Islam, the opinion of Islam, and the rule of Islam, but it seems that we speak of a concept on whose definition no one ever agrees.” Abū Zayd, Mafhūm, 24-25. He refers to Ibn Qutayba who cites Qāḍī ʿAbīd Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan arguing that all views, however conflicting they may seem, are true as long as they are based on the Qur’ān.

737 Ibid., 13, 25.
understanding is linked to the hegemony of certain interpretations of Islam in Egypt. Abū Zayd uses history not only to assess the Qur'ān but also to challenge the state that does not allow for freedom of research. In his view, one cannot ignore the increasing impact of Islamic associations on the public discussion in Egypt despite their apparent oppression by official politics. The public discussion on any topic linked to Islam in Egypt is not held freely. Finally, the official, that is to say, government controlled, politics also have their share in trying to control the discussion on religion. He notes that the official religious discourse will find Islamic justifications for whatever the government needs, whether it be communism, anti-communism, a peace treaty with Israel, the politics of economic opening toward the West, or previously, the cooperation with colonialism and its agents.\cite{738}

His writings are a direct response to the situation of Egypt in the 1990s. As Starrett reminds us, in Egypt, Islam is the official state religion – “a matter of vital government interest.”\cite{739} Just as autonomous Islamic groups can be seen as posing a threat to the authority of the state over the interpretation of scripture, so do individual academics who by-pass the well-established hermeneutical logic and present themselves as being better equipped to produce scriptural meaning. Some might find it counter-intuitive to assume that the Egyptian state is opposed to scriptural hermeneutics that seem to support a more individualistic and privatized understanding of Islam because Egypt is a self-acclaimed secular state. However, first, Starrett has convincingly dismantled the myth that Egypt is a secular state.\cite{740} On the contrary, The Egyptian government has increasingly brought Islamic institutions under state control and

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\item \cite{738} Abū Zayd, Mafhūm, 22-23. He points to the continuing occupation of Palestine and Jerusalem by Zionists, while the official ‘ulamā’ give their blessing to the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.
\item \cite{739} Starrett, Putting Islam, 5.
\item \cite{740} Ibid., 16.
\end{itemize}
declared Islam to be Egypt's state religion. Thus the state sees it as its duty and right “to co-opt Islamic discourse for itself.”\textsuperscript{741} Second, along with the utilization of Islamic discourse for building a responsible and, mind you, modern citizenry, the state aimed to put Islam in service for achieving this aim. Starrett calls this process the “functionalization of Islam,” which led not only to the tendency of representing Islam as a unified and coherent (i.e., univocal) whole in which dissenting voices have a hard time to be heard. The institutionalization of Islam through the school and university system was also a central tool in Egypt to discipline the population into becoming law-abiding citizens. While the state institutions adopted the European disdain for ritual, they also started affirming that religious education could provide positive “moral instruction,” once Islam was turned into something that was not simply to be lived but to be known and defined.

Islamic teaching was thus seen and propagated as a means to cultivate “civic and industrial virtues” in order to satisfy the needs of the modern nation-state.\textsuperscript{742} Abū Zayd's hermeneutics, that is, his different approach to the problem of meaning, stand in direct opposition to seeing Islam as a public tool for “moral instruction,” unless one assumes that religion as an inner and private disposition (or a kind of Kantian moral imperative) necessarily leads to law-abiding citizens. To clarify, I am not suggesting here that the Egyptian state directly rejected Abū Zayd's project. What I am instead proposing is that the strong reactions to his literary approach can be described as contests for influence and control not only over what constitutes Islam, history, or meaning but over the formation of citizen selves. The final verdict of apostasy by the

\textsuperscript{742} Ibid., 9-11, 39, 53, 231.
Court of Appeals of Cairo (\textit{Mahkamat isti\'n\=af al-q\=ahira}) – mind you, a state institution – did not simply judge Ab\=u Zayd to have deviated from Islam but from the Egyptian constitution.\textsuperscript{743} In this context it is also worth noting that the majority of his contesters, for example Mu\=ahammad \textquoteleft{}Am\=ara (1931 – 2015), though rejecting Ab\=u Zayd's thought, did not call him an apostate and viewed the disagreements as a scholarly affair.\textsuperscript{744} In a publicly aired debate between the two one gains the sense that they still have enough in common to acknowledge each other as being part of the same tradition. Finally, the reactions to Ab\=u Zayd were very different in Egypt than they were, for example, in Iran, where his works were first welcomed (before he came to be declared an apostate), which highlights that Qur\=\={a}n hermeneutics in some cases are not only of political but, more particularly, also of national concern.

While Ab\=u Zayd's hermeneutics, his usage of a foreign vocabulary, epistemology, and style were part of what caused the contention about his work, it was above all the way of how he linked his hermeneutical claims to his critique of both the dominant religious discourse and the government that made his work controversial. To that end, Hirschkind rightly points to Ab\=u Zayd's polemical tone that may seem exaggerated.\textsuperscript{745} Yet, when compared to his contemporaries of all stripes, whether secularist, Marxist, or Islamist, his tone is not out of the usual. Ab\=u Zayd emphasizes that the (existential) challenges for the Muslim world, or better Egypt, in his times come from outside (world imperialism and Zionism) as well as from within, in the form of the “hegemonic reactionary forces.”\textsuperscript{746} His hermeneutics and rhetoric betray a political urgency,

\textsuperscript{743} Yusuf Rahman, \textit{The Hermeneutical Theory of Na\c{s}\textsuperscript{a}r Hamid Ab\=u Zayd: An Analytical Study of his Method of Interpreting the Qur\={a}n}, (Phd diss. McGill University, 2001), 218-219.

\textsuperscript{744} Ibid., 221-222.

\textsuperscript{745} Hirschkind, “Heresy.”

\textsuperscript{746} Ab\=u Zayd, \textit{Ma\=f\={a}m}, 16.
namely to diversify the Islamic discourse in Egypt and to reveal the utilization of Islam by the Egyptian government. His rhetoric against imperialism should be taken seriously. For him, to overcome the injustice of imperialism necessitates a new historical consciousness. He thus uses history to formulate his own resistance to imperialism that he sees fortified by the representatives of Islam in Egypt. To be very clear, his own approach is political and aims at a liberal polity. As Abū Zayd has emphasized repeatedly, he was not attempting to do something new, but merely to process material that already existed in Islamic tradition. He perceived his intellectual project less as the fostering of a particular understanding Islamic sources than as a disclosure of the diversity of Islamic tradition in order to retrieve “the lost dimension within this tradition (turāth),” defying his own demand to apply hermeneutics.

Yet, as Mahmood and Hirschkind rightly contend, his approach also constitutes a serious break with the Islamic tradition. His hermeneutics seem to make the creation of meaning for Muslims communally impossible. Meaning can still be created, but not authoritatively. His approach also serves the creation of a religious subjectivity, in which Islam becomes confined to the private sphere and, in particular, de-politicized. His focus on the literary method to read the Qur'ān and his disparaging comments regarding ritual exclude other modes of approaching the Qur'ān. My contention with Mahmood is not so much with her assessment of Abū Zayd. Rather, I want to address her implication that his approach is not the result of an “indigenous formation.” This raises the question of how one can responsibly account for shifts in thinking. As Hirschkind notes, there exist mainly two opposing attempts to account for intellectual and

747 Kermani, *Offenbarung*, 114.
749 Ibid., 12.
750 I fully agree in these points with Mahmood, “Secularism,” 341-342.
relational changes in the Muslim discourses. On one side, are culturalist approaches that explain
Islamic social movements (in the broadest sense of the term) by focusing on certain
characteristics of social actors, often reducing them to a particular aspect of that culture (e.g.,
authoritative texts, ritual, or laws). These approaches highlight the authenticity of certain
practices and often tend to essentialize Islam. On the other side, are those that explain changes in
Islamic practices and discursive structures mainly on the basis of material conditions. In those
explanations, the use of Islamic idioms is mostly a cover-up for an actor's real (that is materialist)
goals. It is, however, difficult to avoid either explanation completely. Even thinkers such as
Asad, Mahmood, and Hirschkind lean toward a culturalist approach, although they emphasize
that their method is different. Each views Islam as a discursive tradition, defined by Asad as a
tradition relating

Itself to the founding texts of Qur'an and the Hadith […] and consist[ing] essentially of
discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a
given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. An Islamic discursive
tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of
the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the past.

According to this definition, one could well claim that Abū Zayd writes within the Islamic
discursive tradition since he bases most of his research thoroughly in Islamic material and
disciplines. Hirschkind clarifies that those Islamic practices have to be differentiated from merely
applying Islamic rhetoric that “lack this longitudinal embeddedness.” What differentiates Abū
Zayd then from his opponents is the religious subjectivity he promotes, according to Mahmood.

However, concerning “indigenousness,” there is no empirical proof that either he or his

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752 Talal Asad, The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies,
Georgetown University, 1986), 14-16.
opponents follow a more Islamic Islam. Hirschkind cautions to not confuse this approach with
culturalist arguments that emphasize identity and tend toward essentializing Islam. On the
contrary, any discussion of a discursive tradition should pay “attention to specific articulations of
material processes, structures, and practices, including practices of reasoning and speech,
embedded in the society under study.” Alas, if it were only that easy.

Hirschkind's suggestion leads to the questions of how one is to decide which aspects of
Islam as discursive tradition are genuinely Islamic and which are not, as well as whether the
same can be argued for “the West.” True, while neither homogenous nor static, certain disciplines
formed in western countries and remained for some time specific to that geopolitical area.
However, in the last one hundred years, the project of the nation state has been a pervasive force
in all societies that restructured the conceptual and material every-day life of people. People react
to such restructuring differently and offer different solutions to what they perceive as problems
and challenges.

Historical consciousness is generally seen as the cornerstone of “the modern
enlightenment subject,” defined as self-conscious, autonomous, and above all, critical of
tradition. While one can agree with this general idea of what constitutes western situated
subjectivity, it remains an idea. Although a basis for contemporary political, social, and scholarly
thought, this idea is not static and has been challenged by the voices within the very discourse
that it generated and has not left so-called “traditionalists” untouched. For example, a polemical
reaction to a historicizing approach concerning the Qur'ān may work under similar assumptions

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755 Ibid., 35.
concerning historical truth, need for clarity instead of ambiguity, and acceptance of cause and effect as the historical approach itself. There is no reason to privilege the discernment of various kinds of religious subjectivity as main criterion for an author's “Islamicity.” Yet, one can work out what kind of hermeneutics is linked to which political project, i.e., the politics of scripture.

Hirschkind writes that the study of discursive tradition focuses on “the coherence and continuity of a set of discourses, so as to map the transformations which they undergo, including those brought about under pressure of more powerful traditions.” The promise of this approach is to understand how Muslim thinkers and movements have dealt with the intellectual resources of Islam “in order to accommodate, understand, and achieve practical mastery over a reality increasingly organized by discourses whose historical locus and most formidable bases of power lie in the West.” The following chapters attempt to map these developments. The pitfall of this approach is discerning the boundaries of these discourses. One easily runs the risk of overgeneralizing with regard to “religious reason” and “religious subjectivity,” two variables that are not easily tangible. What makes a resource of Islam (speech pattern, epistemology, reasoning, ritual, vocabulary) essential to Islamic discourse and what does not is often difficult to decide.

More importantly, “orthodoxy” is itself determined by power structures: what counts as orthodox is the version of Islam prescribed by Muslims writing from a position of power. As Asad writes, “Orthodoxy is [...] a distinctive relationship – a relationship of power. [...] Wherever Muslims have power to regulate, uphold, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy.” According to Asad's concept of orthodoxy, proper Islam is the result of

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757 Ibid., 37.
whatever Muslims in a specific time and place argue, enforce, and institute when they have the power to do so. In that scheme, it becomes difficult to account for contradictory claims. Positing a form of orthodoxy, one necessarily reproduces the power structures in any time and place and creates yet another dichotomy, the binary of orthodoxy and un-orthodoxy.\footnote{This point has been similarly argued by Ahmed, \textit{What is Islam?}, 270-274.} It is necessary to take generalizations about religious subjectivities, religion, and secularism with a grain of salt, particularly with Islamic thinkers who deal with their contemporary modern reality. I believe that it is most promising to identify the various factors that play into the debates concerning historical critique of the Islamic texts.
PART II

THE RECEPTION OF HISTORICIZING HERMENEUTICS AMONG MUSLIMS
V. History and Historical Critique Contested

The Case of the Arabic Nöldeke Translation

This chapter introduces some general deliberations on the complex reception of western orientalist scholarship and historicizing approaches to the Qur'ān in the Arab-Muslim world. In order to do so, we will take the case of the Arabic Nöldeke translation in Lebanon as a starting-point to examine the use of history in view to the foundational Islamic sources in the modern Arab-Muslim discourse. We will continue where we left off in the introduction, namely with the questions: How and why could a book published originally in 1860 cause such stir? Why would Georges Tamer spend one year of his life translating a book that had found its way into some Islamic scholarship already before? Further, how can we explain the reactions to the book?

I argue that an important reason for the rejection of western Qur'ānic studies and the historical-critical approach in particular is that many of its proponents link historical critique ideologically to western (secular) modernity, reform, and progress, while its adversaries suspect political intentions and Christian proselytism in western hermeneutics. The sensibilities concerning historicizing approaches to the Qur'ān have various reasons, among them identity politics, anti-imperialist sentiments and, above all, a realistic fear of epistemic violence, that is, the fear of having the Qur'ān controlled by methods that prima facie evacuate the transcendent from the Qur'ān and alter the constitution of Islam.

While officially, it was Nöldeke's book that was banned, the introduction and preface by Georges Tamer may have equally contributed to this result. When I focus in the following chapter mainly on the preface and introduction, rather than on Nöldeke's work itself, one must understand that a preface is hardly ever an unambitious addendum that introduces in a merely neutral way
the actually substantive work. Instead, as Russel McCutcheon asserts, the preface often serves to make an apology for the text: “The preface cannot exist innocently or neutrally outside the text, for it presupposes, comes after, and defends all that follows it.”760 Tamer certainly makes his introduction “the site of much rhetorical work.” Paying close attention to the rhetorical strategies Tamer uses to justify and explain how he wants Nöldeke to be understood in a twenty-first century Arab context, reveals a strong desire to influence, create, and sustain a particular common social identity. Tamer's introduction provides a kind of roadmap for envisioning how historicizing one's heritage, and in particular the Qur'ān, is linked to greater societal concerns.

He thus does not merely provide some introductory material to contextualize Nöldeke, but more importantly, makes a case for privileging, authorizing, and even creating a certain sense of Arab identity by appraising Nöldeke in the Arab context. I assume that the rhetoric he employs to discuss Qur'ānic studies (and the concepts this entails, such as faith and reason, religion and history) is a technique of “organizing perceptions of the world, thinking about the world, [...] acting in the world, and organizing individuals as members of groups with a very particular sense of their relationship to others.”761 This point may seem to overreach what Tamer is actually doing. However, as we will see, his concise and well-written introduction, does not merely introduce Nöldeke but a whole way of thinking about the Qur'ān and with it a certain religious and political subjectivity as well as a vision of the creation of new Arab selves.

Let us first consider some of the reasons Tamer specifies for his translation. In his opinion, Nöldeke's work (reworked by Schwally, Fischer, Bergsträßer, and Pretzl) was the most

760 McCutcheon, Discipline, 58.
761 Ibid., 5.
important one that German Qur'ān scholarship produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. With the translation of Die Geschichte des Qorān into Arabic, Tamer wished to make this seminal work accessible to scholars not versed in German. One can understand his translation as an attempt to familiarize Arab scholars with the trajectory of western Qur'ānic studies. With it, he explicitly intended to “start a dialogue” over the methods of the book and contribute to the scholarly debate on Qur'ānic and Islamic studies in the Arab world. This statement clarifies that Tamer did not expect Muslims to accept Nöldeke's methods and premises impartially, but that he finds them still useful for the contemporary study of the Qur'ān.

As mentioned before, Nöldeke had been the first western scholar who wrote a book that specifically dealt with the Qur'ān's textual history, scrutinizing explicitly the historical context of the Qur'ān instead of the life of Muḥammad. Nöldeke was less tendentious than other scholars. Compared to Muir, for example, Nöldeke's depiction of Muḥammad was much more positive and less prepossessed by Christian convictions. The more positive presentation of Islam was

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762 Georges Tamer, “Muqaddima,” in Theodor Nöldeke, Tārikh al-Qurān, trans. Georges Tamer (Berlin/Beirut: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2004), xi. Interview Rahel Fischbach with Georges Tamer, March 12, 2012. Morteza Karimi-Nia has discussed the quality of the translation in a comprehensive article in Persian: “Tārikh-e Qur’ān (Nöldeke va Schwally): Tārikhhe-ye tadvīn va naqd va barresī-ye tarjome-ye arabī-ē ān” Pāzhūhesh Nāme-ye Qurān va Hadithī 51 (2006). Karimi-Nia points to some weaknesses of the translation that may have resulted from the high number of confusing cross references. Since Tamer is not originally a Qur'ānic studies scholar, some terms and phrases are translated in an odd way. However, given the time of one year in which he translated the book, with the help of his wife, and the lack of any other translations into Arabic, not even into English, one has to give Tamer credit for his work. Moreover, the original text is also oftentimes confusing, a fact which is also lamented by the English translator.

763 Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xxii.

764 Muir's missionary zeal pervades all his works. See Powell, Scottish Orientalists, 261. Muir's negative image of Islam did not derogate his influence on Arabic scholarship. An author who drew on Muir extensively is Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal in his Hayāt Muḥammad (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-kutub al-miṣrīyā, 1939/1940). Haykal had studied at the Sorbonne before he became disillusioned with western thought and politics. Hayāt Muḥammad was well received by Salafis, e.g. Rashīd Rīḍā in his journal al-Manār, although Haykal faced critique especially for following western views on the Prophet's relationship to Christians and for rejecting miracles. See Antonie Wessels, A Modern Arabic Biography of Muhammad: A Critical Study of Muhammad Husayn Haykal's Hayāt Muḥammad (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 39-41; 224-226; 238-240. See also Rudolph, Westliche Islamwissenschaft, 22-23.

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perhaps one of Tamer's main reasons for selecting Nöldeke among others, in addition to methodological considerations.

By choosing Nöldeke as an early, yet fairly unbiased scholar, Tamer seems to have purposefully opted for someone whose method could be accepted by Muslim scholars suspicious of orientalist works – a judgment that will become substantiated in the course of this thesis. Tamer's stated reason for the translation sounds innocent enough and aims to convey impartiality. Yet this declared intellectual interest is also a useful rhetorical move. It helps articulate a view of religion (how it should be defined, understood, and socially situated) which competes with other long-established and powerful institutions that police the socially contested space of the Qur'ān, and with it a certain understanding of religion. Tamer declares historical consciousness as imperative for the public discourse on Islam and Arab social identity in general.

*Nöldeke among Muslim Scholars*

Tamer was not the first Arab author who wanted to publicize Nöldeke's work. He could hence position himself in an institutionalized camp – a line of shared intellectual lineage – that helps to authorize his own undertaking. It is to these intellectuals who referred to Nöldeke prior to Tamer that we now turn to understand the genealogy in which he places himself. Even before Tamer's translation, Nöldeke's approach was not entirely unknown to non-European Muslim scholars. We find him mentioned by Muslim-Arab scholars who wrote some of the best-known textbooks in Qur'ānic studies in the Arab world in the twentieth century, such as Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh Darāz and Şubḥī Şāliḥ. Both scholars took a critical stand toward Nöldeke. Şāliḥ's tone was

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particularly polemic when he discussed western Qur'anic studies. Among other Muslim scholars, the *Geschichte des Qur'an* came to enjoy some popularity even before its translation into Arabic. Scholars like Parvez Manzoor and Muhammad Ḥusayn ‘Alī al-Ṣaghîr, both generally very critical of orientalist scholarship, commented positively on Nöldeke.

His relative prominence among Arab scholars may be owed to the fact that Amīn al-Khūlī (1895 – 1966) appreciated Nöldeke's work. Al-Khūlī was professor for Qur'anic exegesis at Cairo University where he developed a theory of literary Qur'ān exegesis (*al-tafsīr al-adabī li'l-qur'ān*) that was mainly concerned with the original meaning of the Qur'anic text. His works have been influential for a wide range of religiously and ideologically diverse thinkers in the Arab world. Al-Khūlī's maybe most famous student who applied his methods of literary *tafsīr* to the Qur'ān was his wife ‘Ā'isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 1998), known as Bint al-Shāṭī. She became a prominent Qur'ānic exegete, especially as the author of *al-I'jāz al-bayānī*.

Since the 1930s, al-Khūlī had voiced his appreciation for Nöldeke's work and intended to translate it into Arabic. Al-Khūlī himself had probably encountered critical biblical scholarship

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766 Darāz was an Azhar shaykh in the 1950s. He studied at the Sorbonne where he familiarized himself with research on the Qur'ān. His book is not used anymore in Islamic teaching institutions. However, some of his works and theories became widespread. Şāliḥ was a Lebanese professor who taught at universities in Damascus, Baghdad, and Beirut. He studied at the Azhar in Cairo as well as at the Sorbonne under Blachère. See Dorothea Krawulsky, *Eine Einführung in die Koranwissenschaften: ‘Ulām al-Qurān* (Berlin/Bern/New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 17.


during his studies in Germany and Italy in the 1920s. It is noteworthy that most of the scholars who incorporated Nöldeke's findings into their work received at least some of their training in the West and were able to read western Qur’anic studies in their original European languages. For unclear reasons, al-Khūlī never followed up on his plan to translate the entire Geschichete. According to Bint al-Shāți, the first part of the book had actually been translated, but al-Khūlī's age kept him from completing the translation. He was also hesitant due to the ado his student Muḥammad ʿאחmad Khalafallāh's book al-Fann al-qaṣaṣī fī’l-qurʾān al-kaṛīm had provoked, a case well documented in western scholarship.

To recall, his main thesis, for which he had come under attack, posited that the Qurʾān was not a text that aimed at reporting history. In his view, to consider the Qurʾān as a historical document could only lead to misunderstanding the text's true purpose. He advanced the view that the Qurʾānic stories were not intended to satisfy modern historical curiosity but to convey spiritual, aesthetic, and ethical meaning. Thus, he was less concerned with the disposal of myth than with its interpretation. According to Khalafallāh, the Qurʾān in its majority wants to instruct and admonish. To this end it uses myths (ašāṭīr; sing. ṣūṭūra), understood as didactic stories. Just as myth in the Christian context often has a negative connotation, ṣūṭūra conveys an invalidating sense in the Muslim context. Khalafallāh did not understand “myth” in its negative eighteenth

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771 Al-Sayyid, “al-Istishrāq al-almānī.” Among the scholars who mentioned Nöldeke before he was translated into Arabic, it seems that only Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Zanjānī did not study in the West. For a concise biography of al-Zanjānī see http://alencyclopedia.com
century Enlightenment sense – as the “false and discardable elements in scripture”\textsuperscript{773} – but employed uṣṭūra positively. He argued that the Qurʾān did not deny that its narratives were aṣāfīr.

What it denied was that their author was Muḥammad. Khalafallāh aimed at freeing Muslims from the need to justify what can be conceived as historical content of the Qurʾān that, in his view, made it vulnerable in the face of historical-critical scholarship.\textsuperscript{774} Bracketing the question of the historical accuracy of the Qurʾān did not mean that Khalafallāh neglected the question of history. He simply asserted that history writing was not the purpose of the Qurʾān. Instead of investigating the facts about the personalities, places, and events in the Qurʾān, he focused on its aesthetic and rhetorical strategies.

Khalafallāh's view of myth requires an awareness of the distinction between myth and history and, therefore, a change in worldview. As Steve Kraftchick frames it, the “modern person is committed to concreteness and a sense of historical here and now. This is, in effect, an eclipse of the conception of sacred time and space. That is, the transcendent reality is negated in light of historical existence.”\textsuperscript{775} Khalafallāh saw the Qurʾān as mainly being mythological, a feature that was not directly ascertainable to the modern person. He thus accepted the dichotomy between ancient religious ideation that saw God as immanent in the world and modern disenchanted world construction that rests on historical facticity. His endeavor absolved the Qurʾān from having to adhere to history by breaking up the apparent dichotomy between religious and historical truth.


\textsuperscript{774} Haddad, \textit{Contemporary Islam}, 47-49.

Despite this pious intention, the reactions to Khalafallāh's thesis were radically negative. From this reaction, one may infer that the modern idea of the synonymity of truth with historical fact had by then become so pervasive that Khalafallāh's work was understood as charging God with telling lies. The rationale behind this accusation equated narrating stories that were “fictional” or “literary” (i.e., not historically accurate) with lying, which is unfitting for God. That is to say, history as disenchanted, homogenous, and linear time had become thinkable even by those people who rejected Khalafallāh's thesis. After submitting his work to the Faculty of Arts at Fu‘ād I (now Cairo) University in 1947, he was denied to defend his thesis because the committee deemed the content of the work improper.

At the heart of the matter, one may assume, were the different existential worldviews of the committee members and Khalafallāh that required a change in epistemology and in the view of how humans exist in the world. Khalafallāh believed that myths could still be interpreted for the religious benefit of the believers. Meanwhile, he failed to address the question of the relationship between truth and myth in regard to the Qur'ān and what kind of truth the Qur'ān conveyed. Avoiding these questions he focused instead on how myths function to provoke thought, sentiments, and imagination. He did not elaborate in detail on why myths should and could still produce meaning, once myths were declared historically invalid. If one lives in a post-mythical world, which is implied by accepting that myth does not equal history, myth can easily cease to be an “item of importance.”\footnote{For such a view, see Craig Evans, “Life-of-Jesus-Research and the Eclipse of Mythology,” \textit{Theological Studies} 54 (1993): 3-36. Quoted in Kraftchick, “Recast,” 191.} It should also be noted that the rhetoric of thought, sentiments, and imagination suggests a quite interiorized form of religion. Noticeably missing

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from Khalafallāh's list is action indicating that he was involved not simply in a hermeneutical endeavor but in the production of privacies and subjectivities. That is to say, reading the Qur'ān elicits something in our innermost sphere where it supposedly remains without being translated into praxis, let alone law or ritual. Through his literary and seemingly unassuming method, he promoted a vision of religion as distinct, inward, and private experience and hence accepted the often taken-for-granted privatized concept of religion.

Similarly to Abū Zayd later on, Khalafallāh's approach constituted a challenge to those who were in charge of policing the interpretation of the Qur'ān. That his adversaries were mainly situated in the same institution as Khalafallāh, namely the supposedly secular university, might lead one to believe that his opinion could have just been accepted as one voice in the greater discipline of literary or qur'ānic studies. This view, however, ignores the fact that the academy, whether in Egypt or the United States, is precisely not detached from greater socio-political contexts, whose foundational presumptions it often shares and propagates.

While Khalafallāh did not see history as a problem for interpreting the Qur'ān, his work presupposes this implicitly. He wanted to make the qur'ānic text plausible for his contemporaries and bring its interpretations to correspond to their present, an intention that rests on a scientific modern understanding of the world. While, at first sight, his approach seems to simply bracket the question of the relationship between history and truth, a solution to it becomes imperative as soon as one asks for the ethical and legal injunctions of the Qur'ān and, ultimately, the sharī’ā. Khalafallāh' case had allegedly made al-Khūlī cautious about translating Nöldeke.777 If one accepts that this was indeed al-Khūlī's main reason for not publishing it, one can assume that he

777 Al-Sayyid, “al-Istishrāq al-Almānī.”
was well aware of the explosiveness of history in relation to the Qurʾān and decided to not step outside of the sanctioned and institutional zone in which he operated.

With these considerations in mind, let us return to the justification Tamer gives for his own project. Before the publication of the Arabic Nöldeke translation, there had been some efforts by Arab intellectuals to found an organization for the publication of orientalist and western Qurʾānic studies in Arabic. When Tamer decided to translate Nöldeke's work, he saw himself in line with these previous translation attempts and received further encouragement from various Muslim scholars who had heard about the book but could not read the German original. With his translation, Tamer intended to initiate a discourse on scientific (ʿilmī) methods and research on the Qurʾān in Lebanon.778 The term ʿilmī could be understood as simply connoting “scholarly.” However, in the course of Tamer's explications, it becomes obvious that he has western science in mind.

While he meant to advance knowledge among Arab scholars about western Qurʾānic studies, the Dār al-Fatwā and muftī al-Qabbānī objected to the book and even considered it to be a risk for public safety. Both were the main initiators in demanding to take the necessary legal steps to enforce its censorship. The reasons given in the letter of the Amn al-ʿĀmm for the censorship of the book, namely that it defamed the Qurʾān, the Prophet, and the wives of the Prophet, and finally that it could lead to sectarian tensions, seem unconvincing at first. One might even assume that the person who issued the fatwā had not read the book since better reasons for censorship could have potentially been given. Yet, if one takes Lebanon's volatile confessional situation into account, the state establishes itself through this censorship as defender not simply

of Islam but also of religious sensibilities in general. The state functions in that moment as an 
intermediator of potential sectarian unrest and asserts its authority.

According to the grand-*muʃīṯ* al-Qābānī, it was Tamer's Christian background that had 
made the *Tārīḵh al-quɾān* scandalous.\(^\text{779}\) This is no uncharted argument if one bears in mind the 
suspicion of many Muslim scholars *vis-ā-vis* Christians (or non-Muslims in general) who study 
the Qur'ān. Critics of works such as Nöldeke's question the reasons behind approaching the 
Islamic foundational sources in a critical way and at times associate them with proselytizing 
intentions.\(^\text{780}\) One sees a good example for such a suspicion in the work *Sumūm al-istishrāq wa'l-*
*mustashqiqūn fīl-ulūm al-islāmīya* (The toxins of orientalism and the orientalists in Islamic 
studies) by Anwār al-Jundī (1926 – 2002), a prolific and widely read essayist and literary critic, 
who dealt with the discipline of orientalism in a highly polemical way.

His main, and perhaps only, objection against Massignon's work, for instance, was that 
the latter was a Christian, although Massignon's phenomenological approach especially to Sufism 
was generally well received among Muslim Arab scholars.\(^\text{781}\) Al-Jundī was suspicious as to why 
anyone would spend time on learning about a completely foreign language and culture. At the 
same time, books published within the past few decades by Muslim scholars on questions dealing 
with the Qur'ān and history have met censorship, too.\(^\text{782}\) Moreover, Tamer, as a Lebanese and

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\(^{779}\) Interview Rahel Fischbach with ‘Abd al-Raʾūf Sinno, December 12, 2012.

\(^{780}\) Rudolph, *Westliche Islamwissenschaft*, 77.

\(^{781}\) Anwār al-Jundī, *Sumūm al-istishrāq wa'l-mustashqiqūn fīl-ulūm al-islāmīya* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿa al-turāth al-islāmi, 
1984), 179. For an overview of al-Jundī's work, see Haddad, *Contemporary Islam*, 84-87. On his reformist 
thought: Arkoun, *Pour une Critique*, 105-108. Schulze characterizes al-Jundī as a typical proponent of the Neo-

\(^{782}\) Some of the writings that have become important for a history of the Qurʾān in the Arabic world are: Hishām 
works with a variety of western qurʾānic scholars, mainly French and German. Nābil Fayāḏ, *Umm al-muʾminīn*
scholar of Arabic, is not “foreign” to the Arabic language or Muslim culture. Yet, the long-standing tradition of polemical works by Arab Christians may weigh in negatively as well.\footnote{I deal with Christian Lebanese polemics and their impact on the general perception of the historical-critical approach in detail in the next chapter.}

At the same time, and despite its censorship, Nöldeke's book met with high demand. Its distribution in Arab countries and in religious Islamic institutions bespeaks an interest to engage with western Qur’ānic studies. Before we take a closer look at the Nöldeke translation and responses to its publication, it is worthwhile to situate the debate against the background of broader discussions over orientalism, imperialism, and history in the Muslim-Arab context. For now, I examine mainly polemical treatments of historical-critical studies and postpone epistemological questions to a later point in this thesis, unless they are indispensable to mention.

\textit{Situating Debates over Historical Critique to the Qur’ān in the Arab Discourse}

Given the centrality that discussions over Arab and Islamic history have played within political, intellectual, and social struggles since the late nineteenth century, it is worth surveying some of the most important arguments. This will help us better understand why the seemingly outdated Nöldeke translation could still lead to disconcertment. The following section focuses on two major themes: First, the reception of orientalist studies and the call for historical-critical studies of the Islamic tradition in the Arab world; and second, the increasing centrality of the Qur’ān in these discussions.

The title itself, \textit{History of the Qur’ān}, seems to have posed a problem for some of the critics of the Nöldeke translation since they see this title conflicting with the view of the Qur’ān

as God's word. Even when Muslim exegetes include historical observations in their work they often have a different understanding of what constitutes Qur'anic history and to what extent the Qur'an can be historicized. For example, Ayatollah and marja’ al-Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim al-Khūṭī (1899 – 1992) and ‘Allāma al-Sayyid al-Ṭabaṭābā’ī included discussions on the historical context of the Qur'an and on its redaction but refrained from calling this “history of the Qur'an.”

It is remarkable that interest in the history of the Qur'an arose approximately around the same time in Europe as it did in the Muslim world, a curious fact if one considers today's hostile attitude toward such approaches. Governments and some individuals were eager to learn about western technology, military development, and scientific methods, among them the discipline of history. The movement that in the nineteenth century combined the tensions and curiosities of this “discovery” of western thought, especially western literature and science, is often referred to as nahda (rebirth or renaissance). In Laroui's words, the nahda was

A vast political and cultural movement that dominate[d] the period of 1850 to 1914. Originating in Syria and flowering in Egypt, the nahda sought through translation and vulgarization to assimilate the great achievements of modern European civilization, while reviving the classical Arab culture that antedated the centuries of decadence and foreign domination.

According to Albert Hourani, this intellectual contact led to a “historical awakening” and to a curiosity about Arab history. Scholars like Nasif al-Yaziji (1800 – 1871) were open to orientalist ideas without being uncritical. For many prominent nahda thinkers, such as Rifāʿī

784 Karimi-Nia, “Historiography,” 49-52; Al-Khūṭī, Prolegomena.
788 He especially critiqued the philological weaknesses in works such as the edition of Ḥāfirī's Maqāmāt by Silvestre de Sacy. Johan Fück, Die Arabischen Studien in Europa bis in den Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1955), 148-149. Barbara Stowasser (informal conversation) noticed a similar appreciation of
al-Ṭahṭāwī, al-Afghānī, and Muḥammad ‘Abdu, the revival or “regeneration” of Islam could incorporate the positive aspects of western sciences and cultures without infringing on Islam's character.\footnote{Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, \textit{Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World} (New York/Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 6.} One side effect of the \textit{nahda} was that Arab scholars were fast to adopt the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. History that had been so useful to define and invent Europe now also became central in Arab discourses on shaping their own societies and identities.\footnote{I say it influenced societies because history was institutionalized in education, nationalism, and institution building. See Reinhard Schulze, “Mass Culture and Islamic Production in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East,” in \textit{Mass, Culture, Popular Culture, and Social Life in the Middle East}, ed. Georg Stauth and Sami Zubaida (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 189.} This does not mean that prior to colonialism, Muslims had no means of dealing with the past. However, as Yvonne Haddad notes, “Islam has witnessed its history as written and interpreted by Orientalists and historians using Western methods.”\footnote{Haddad, \textit{Contemporary Islam}, 5-6.} It was not simply the case that there had been something called history that was now written by the colonizers.

The very concept of secular history, theories about history, and the ways of documenting it were introduced as a superior way of constructing the past that were simultaneously proclaimed to determine the future. History created a situation in which certain practices and forms of thinking suddenly were designated as belonging to the past, although they existed in the present. They were “out of time,” so to speak, yet able to be analyzed by critical historical tools that could uncover their real (that is, material) structures.\footnote{Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing}, 239, 243.} History and politics, moreover, worked hand in hand. As Mitchell writes, the temporal “break” dividing the modern West (as the place of rationality, order, and power) from the rest was not an objective or aesthetic description but was essential to integrating the non-European world into the larger process of the world economy and

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\footnote{orientalist scholarship through al-Ṭahṭāwī, while criticizing philological shortcomings of Sylvestre de Sacy.}
political order. Coming to terms anew with the Islamic past as judged by the present posed novel challenges to Muslim knowledge production in a sociopolitical and scientific environment that was dominated by the West.

Ibrahim Abu Rabī’ posits that the “essential question of the nahḍa thinkers was how Muslims could be authentic and modern at the same time.” Figuring out this question proved to be a tricky affair. According to Suha Taji-Farouki, the debate that transpired was a “discourse of crisis.” The term refers to a view of history that sees the “Golden Age” of Islam to have come to an end at the latest with the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate in the thirteenth century. According to this narrative, since then, Islamic societies had gradually deteriorated in the military, economic, and spiritual realms, particularly when compared to western societies. The thesis of decline was forcefully promoted by orientalists. For example, Gustave E. Von Grunebaum and Gibb argued that after the so-called Golden Age, Muslim culture(s) mainly decayed and were characterized by rigidity, stagnation, and irrationalism. Overall, the “antiquated culture” of Islam had to be transformed and adjusted to the progress in science, thinking, and technology that the West had already undergone. Arab “backwardness” was often linked not to military and economic weakness but to Muslim “ancient categories of thinking.”

Although the decline thesis has been critiqued and challenged by several scholars, it

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793 Mitchell, Colonising, 165-166.
797 The “Islamic decline” narrative has been challenged in various fields of academic scholarship. In regard to jurisprudence, Wael Hallaq argued that the “gate of ijtihād” was never closed and that jurisprudential development never came to a hold. See Wael Hallaq, “Was the Gate of Ijtihad closed?” International Journal of Middle East Studies 16.1 (1984): 3-41. More generally: Hallaq, Sahīʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); The Ottomans were in particular blamed for historical decline. See Ehud R. Toledano, “What Ottoman History and Ottomanist Historiography Are - Or, Rather, Are Not,” Middle Eastern Studies 38.3 (2002): 5. See also Jonathan Grant, “Rethinking the Ottoman ‘Decline’: Military
persists to be influential not only in western thought but also among Arab Muslim and Christian, Islamist, and secular thinkers. The pervasiveness of the decline thesis can at least partly be explained with the authorization of knowledge through specific power structures. In the course of a shifting power balance that set Europe apart and above the colonized world, the opinion took hold among many orientalists that the only hope for the Islamic world was its alignment with Europe. The means to do so was to adopt European institutions, thought, and rationality, as we have exemplarily seen in Renan's thought.\textsuperscript{798}

It is important for the argument of this thesis to emphasize that most scholars – non-western Muslim or western – accepted that the “backwardness” of Muslim societies was linked to their inner intellectual development that was equally characterized as lacking. This thesis is related to the myth of the “European miracle” that does not necessarily entail a positive view of colonialism; yet, it is not brought into direct connection with Europe's rise either.\textsuperscript{799} Rather, social advancement is considered to be based not mainly on economic and political enhancement but on accepting European forms of knowledge. According to the thesis of the European Miracle, Europe thought its way upward through scientific thinking and rationality, while the rest of the world remained in a constant state of the past, i.e., tradition. The myth contributed to the privileging of certain practices and regimes of knowledge over others, while it ignored that this was an effect not simply of the strength of certain theories but of configurations of power.

\textsuperscript{798} Technology Diffusion in the Ottoman Empire, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of World History* 10.1 (1999): 179-201.

\textsuperscript{799} For example, see Grunbaum, *Modern Islam*, 131: “The formal constraint of thought, in which the preservation of the known was at stake, collided with the West's passionate devotion to scientific progress, to domination of nature, to knowledge as an unending process. To the cult of the inherited, the West opposed active interference in social conditions and problems. [...] Whereas the Arab was prepared to satisfy himself with supra-rational interpretation of the real, the European insisted upon rationalistic criticism.”

\textsuperscript{799} Blaut, *Colonizer's Model*, 2.
To point to the economic and political impact of colonialism on both Europe and non-Europe in this context is important because it refutes the theory that the “development of societies” mainly depends on culture, religion, or an “inner spirit” or “native reason.” Concerning the rise of Europe, Blaut suggests that economic, military, and technological power gave legitimacy to certain cultures, conceptualizations of religion, and ways of thinking and provided the economic means to produce and sanction those kinds of knowledge. Europe's own particular trajectory was then projected on to the rest of the world, entailing concepts such as religion and the secular that helped structure those societies.

This is not to suggest that ideas do not matter or are irrelevant to the development of societies. However, privileging thought over political and social conditions in which that thought is produced ignores the power structures that authorize certain forms of knowledge and dismiss others. A mode of thinking that focuses on mental reasons for the “decline” of the Muslim world is not confined to a western audience. Rather, as we will see, the conviction that the “backwardness” of Muslim societies was to be remedied through an intellectual or spiritual awakening soon came to be adopted by Muslim and Arab thinkers all over the world.

The rethinking of one's own history and historical consciousness became central variables in these discussions. The emergence of territorial and later nation states, mostly under colonial impact, ensured that the notions of religion developed in the West came to also be adopted and institutionalized in the structures of non-European states. In this context, religion became a normative concept.\(^{800}\) This means that religion had to be thought of anew, according to conceptual paradigms of western modernity. As Shahab Ahmad states,

This was carried out, not only by the Western (Orientalist) practitioners of the universalizing Modern-Western discourse [...] but also by subject Orientals who remade themselves as moderns in the terms of Western Modernity. Thus, the societies of the planet were identified – either by Orientalists or by Orientals – as having religion and were analytically, politically, socially, and cognitively re-ordered by Modern Western discourse in terms of its idea of religion; this despite the fact that the languages in which these societies historically conceptualized themselves did not possess an idea equivalent to that of Modern Western religion.\(^{801}\)

The refinement and restructuring of Islamic law in Muslim societies under colonial influence may come to mind as the most immediate effect;\(^ {802}\) but the new organization of societies as territorial and nation states, with the differentiation of legal, educational, economic, and social spheres, also meant that the relationship between various intellectual discourses came to be restructured. Educational institutions adopted the concepts of religion and secularism which brought about a new conceptual framework to think about Islam.\(^ {803}\) Islam had to be thought of as religion in its western (Christian-Protestant) sense now. The increasing impact of colonialism coupled with intellectual attacks on Islam and Muslims led to a change in the image Arab thinkers had of Europe and European sciences. Al-Afghānī and others reacted to accusations of irrationality and backwardness by reversing the myth of the European miracle and formulated a counter-hegemonic discourse. As Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi states:

> This counter-hegemonic ideology simply turned the European miracle inside-out and identified the spirit of progress as an essential feature of Islam. Proponents of this view, […] argued that to achieve their scientific, technological, and military superiority, Europeans emulated the great medieval literary and scientific renaissance of Islamic civilization. The time had come, they declared, that Muslims return to their own rational, scientific traditions and reclaim what Europeans have taken away.\(^ {804}\)

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801 Ahmad, *What is Islam?*, 185.
803 Ahmad, *What is Islam?*, 176-246.
Modernity was thus something desirable for many Muslim scholars while they did not consider it as inherently western. Al-Afghānī, for example, held that modernity was an Islamic project that was western neither in its origin nor in its global implications, yet Europe remained in his thought the standard for progress and modernity.\textsuperscript{805} By benefitting from western technological advances, he argued, Muslims could get closer to Islam that in its essence had always been rational, even scientific and was the forbear of modernity.\textsuperscript{806} Al-Afghānī was mainly concerned with defending Muslims. Islam could be utilized in the fashion of al-Fārābī or Spinoza to discipline the masses, yet all religions eventually faced opposition by rational thought – an idea sounding reminiscent of Renan. In both authors, Christianity does not fare better than Islam, but Christianity had already undergone the necessary transformation. Al-Afghānī emphasized that the rational character of Islam could make it superior to Christianity.

Over all, it was for him Islam's ability to unify Muslims and give them identity that made it a powerful tool for social change as well as for the confrontation with the West.\textsuperscript{807} Later Arab critics of orientalism often took this discussion as a starting point for their own thought.\textsuperscript{808} A dilemma that would become more exigent later on already loomed in al-Afghānī's thinking: “If being modern meant, above all free rein for human creativity and originality, how could a colonial society modernize by imitation?”\textsuperscript{809} This question elucidates the paradox that a quest for authenticity poses if it is to be achieved by means of history, because its main goal – indigenous

\textsuperscript{805} Gunnar Hasselblatt, \textit{Herkunft und Auswirkungen der Apologetik Muhammad 'Abduh's (1849-1905), untersucht an seiner Schrift ‘Islam und Christentum im Verhältnis zu Wissenschaft und Zivilisation} (Göttingen, PhD, 1969).
\textsuperscript{806} Ghamari-Tabrizi, \textit{Islam}, 20.
\textsuperscript{808} Rudolph, \textit{Westliche Islamwissenschaft}, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{809} Mamdani, \textit{Good Muslim}, 46.
originality – depends on referring to a “foreign” method and way of thinking. Al-Afghānī’s argument is only one example of a colorful, and by no means homogenous, group of Arab and Muslim scholars who, since the late nineteenth century, set out to write an Islamic history that could help to work out problems of the present. History was in particular used for the creation of national identities that would help to foster the nation state.  

Importantly, most Muslim-Arab thinkers, whether Islamist, Salafist, secular, or modernist, adopted the basic code of history as homogeneous, empty, and linear time, even if they set out to conceptualize a specific Islamic form of history writing, such as Sayyid Qutb, Maḥmūd al-Sharqāwī, al-Jundī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥajjī, or ‘Imād al-Dīn Khalīl. While the interpretations of Islamic history have differed considerably, history itself has proved to be a pervasive notion that is not going to disappear. As Haddad observes,

The modern concern, which can almost be called an obsession, appears to agree [...] on success in history as an obligation for all peoples. It becomes, in effect, an end in itself. Therefore, there is an overriding concern for interpreting what has gone amiss, with the need to recapture history and make it subservient to the human will.

It would be mistaken to assume that the concept and discipline of history, with its emphasis on facticity and empiricism, left Islamic thought and practice untouched. This holds true even for Islamic practices and thought that are presented as more “authentically Islamic” than others. There were also sympathetic views of orientalist works that did not merely adopt some elements eclectically but strove to include orientalist research into Arab science production. According to

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810 Haddad, Contemporary Islam, 5-6.
812 Haddad, Contemporary Islam, 141. Italics mine.
Rudolph, these scholars were heterogeneous and included people from diverse social, economic, and confessional background. One can generally state that Christian scholars were more likely to accept orientalist works than Muslims.

Remarkably, not all of these thinkers advocated secular policies. For example, the Syrian scholar of Arabic manuscripts Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (1920 – 2010), a proponent of orientalist scholarship, fiercely opposed Marxism and socialism and advocated the regeneration of Islam. To achieve this vision, he called for taking recourse to orientalist scholarship that could also be useful for Arabs. He was not alone in aspiring to an Islamic historical consciousness with the help of orientalist scholarship. The Lebanese Christian scholar Najīb al-‘Aqīqī, famous for his extensive compendia of orientalist scholarship, aimed at incorporating European scholarship into the Arabic science corpus and defended it against accusations of ulterior motives. Yūsuf As‘ad Dāghir, also a Christian author, in his popular bio-bibliographical work Maṣādir al-dirāsāt al-‘arabīya, considered the contribution of orientalists to be crucial for “an awakening of a national consciousness” and “for a scientific and intellectual vitalization” in Arab lands. In the course of colonialism, imperialism, and so-called Islamic revivalism, the scholarly influx of European thought into the Muslim world came to be seen as increasingly problematic.

**Orientalism and Politics**

Many Arab critics of orientalist studies detected a link between orientalist scholarship and politics long before Said's *Orientalism*. A few examples may suffice to capture the tenor of this

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critique. Algerian Mālik ibn Nabī (1905 – 1975) viewed orientalists as always writing in the interest of their nations and political systems. Hence, their writings could not offer solutions for the problems of the Arab world.\textsuperscript{816} Aḥmad Amīn, sympathetic toward orientalist studies during most of his life, later on raised harsh critique against orientalists. In his view, they never managed to distance themselves sufficiently from an earlier crusader and missionary spirit. In his \textit{Yawm al-Islām}, Amīn criticized not so much the epistemological framework of orientalists but their anti-Muslim rhetoric. In the course of the founding of Israel, the Arab Israeli wars, and the post-colonial struggle of many Arab countries he became disillusioned with Europe. Leftist thinkers also interpreted orientalism frequently as an extension of imperialism. Only rarely were orientalists understood as neutral and objective.\textsuperscript{817}

Many scholars drew a relation between crusader spirit, colonialism, Christian missionary activities, and western academic orientalist studies, for example, Egyptian philosophy professor Muḥammad al-Bahī (1905 – 1982) in his book \textit{al-Mubashshirīn waʾl-mustashriqīn fī mawqifihim min al-Islām}. In his view, the orientalist mentality did not significantly differ from the earlier more openly hostile anti-Islamic attitude of crusaders and colonial officials. The remedy for Muslims was to produce their own scholarly works.\textsuperscript{818} He left hypothetically room for the use of western methodology. For many Muslim and in particular Islamist thinkers, such as Quṭb, Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, and al-Bahī, orientalism appeared as a modality of politics and

\textsuperscript{818} Al-Bahī was one of the proponents of the reform of al-Azhar under Muḥammad Shafīʿ. Al-Bahī had studied in Germany. In his later work, he especially criticized Muslim authors who used western research and theoretical thought for a “reconstruction of Islamic belief.” See ibid., 33.
less as a scholarly independent undertaking. Given Quṭb's successful legacy among Muslims, it
is worth looking at his thoughts on orientalism more closely. In Quṭb's words,

The colonizers [...] base their colonialism on comprehensive and saturated studies of all
the components (muqawwimāt) of the people they colonize, in order to extinguish the
seeds of resistance [...]. Orientalism emerged in order to assist imperialism from a
scientific point of view and in order to moor its roots in the [Islamic] intellectual soil. But
we worship the orientalists brainlessly, in naivety believe that they are monks of
knowledge, and that they have distanced themselves from their origins, especially when
some of them utter a good word about our religion and Prophet, the vaccine that lulls our
thought to sleep.820

Note here that orientalist studies are not to be rejected because they are unscholarly or wrong. In
other words, the problem is not “bad history.” Rather, orientalism itself is subversive to the
colonized. For Quṭb, orientalism was an integral tool in the machinery of colonialism to dictate to
Muslims how to conceptualize their past, present, and future. Moreover, they lacked the right
world-view, the “internal apprehension,” which made them tendentious.821 Orientalists
propagated a view of religion as being subjective, internal, and private.

Such a view of religion incapacitated Muslims to realize true Islam that could not be
reduced to religion in the western sense and is all-encompassing.822 Quṭb seems to have
anticipated later postcolonial critique of epistemic violence. In this respect, orientalism, similarly
formulated by Said, becomes a type of knowledge constructed to dominate, restructure, and exert
authority over Muslim collective memory and societies.823 In Quṭb's view, orientalism was a

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819 Muhammad al-Ghazzālī strongly polemicized against orientalists, especially Goldziher. See Muhammad al-
a general analysis of these authors, see Schulze, Islamischer Internationalismus, 108-110.
820 Sayyid Quṭb, Ma‘rakat al-islām wa‘l-ra‘smālīya (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1993), 98. Also quoted and translated
slightly differently in Abu Rabi‘, Intellectual Origins, 124.
821 Quṭb, Fīl-tārikh, translated and quoted in Haddad, Contemporary Islam, 166, 166. The usual terms Quṭb uses for
orientalists are “treacherous” and shrewd. See Quṭb, Milestones, 71, 72, 74.
822 See also Quṭb, Ma‘rakat, 92-95.
823 Sa‘īd, Orientalism, 2-3; Quṭb, Ma‘rakat, 98.
hegemonic tool because it forced upon Muslims a framework of thinking and reasoning that alienated them subtly from Islam. In short, it worked under the assumption of a religious subjectivity that confined Islam to the private sphere.

For Quṭb, orientalism was particularly disastrous when it dealt with the Qurʿān and the Sunna. By enforcing their own views on the Qurʿān, and by denying its ethical and political intent, orientalists undermined the creation of the ideal Islamic society. Orientalists were the “main enemies of Islam” because they subverted it from within, resulting in social, spiritual, and intellectual apathy.824 Accepting orientalist methods and ideas, for Quṭb, amounted not only to a spiritual and intellectual capitulation of Muslims but threatened their identity. Despite his intention to purify the body Islamique, he paradoxically took on the modern projects of history and agency as means to change the future. His idealization of the early Muslim community as model for the perfect society should not be mistaken as “retrogression” but seen as an attempt to actively shape and come to terms with the present. In his view, to do so effectively, Muslims had to dispense with non-Muslim interpretations of their history. They had to live in continuity with their past and be aware of it in order to control their present and future.825

Even Quṭb conceded that one could use orientalist works as secondary sources. Yet, accepting orientalist work was potentially self-defeating: “When we borrow western methods of education, systems of training and curricula, we borrow also a general scheme of philosophy and a mode of thought which underlies these methods, systems, and curricula.”826 Abu Rabi interprets this stance as opposition to “any epistemological rupture with, or spiritual alienation from, the

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826 Quṭb, Fīl-tārīkh, translated and quoted in Haddad, Contemporary Islam, 166; Quṭb, Social Justice, 250.
past.” But more than that, Quṭb was painfully aware of the connection between knowledge, discipline, and the formation of citizen selves. Imperialism was not simply the physical presence of Europe or some mode of thinking but, in Mitchell's words, was predicated on the “spread of a political order that inscribes in the social world a new conception of [time and] space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real.”

Abu Rabi is right that orientalism for Quṭb was not simply to be rejected since some of its writings were islamophile, but because they operated within an epistemological framework that opposed what Quṭb considered to be an Islamic epistemology and system of thinking about the world. Yet, Abu Rabi's statement is also slightly misleading and misses to grasp the full paradox in Quṭb's thought. That is, Quṭb himself stands for a form of spiritual and epistemological alienation from much of the Islamic past, namely that which he declared to be non-Islamic (like Sufism) or simply too complicated and prone to sow discord (like fiqh).

Setting up the ideal society of pious, law-abiding Muslims against the jāhiliyya (which is everything else, the non-Islamic), Quṭb accepted implicitly a division of the world into religious and secular, or Islamic and non-Islamic. In his conceptualization much of what constituted Islam for centuries had to be ejected from true Islam. Shahab Ahmad observed more generally in view to the phenomenon of Salafism that their discourse is “similarly founded on the axiomatic claim that true and authentic Islam is to be identified by distinguishing it from the human and historical accretions of Islamic culture and society.” Quṭb's works betray a paradoxical way of thinking that one also sees in other contemporary authors, which consists in the presence of “Europe” in

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827 Abu Rabi, Intellectual Origins, 111. Often, it seems that Quṭb uses “orientalists” and “treacherous orientalists” as a shibboleth for indicating western influence. For example, Quṭb, Milestones, 71, 72, 74, 78.
828 Mitchell, Colonising, xi.
829 Shahab Ahmad, What is Islam?, 171.
non-European historical knowledge production.\textsuperscript{830} This presence neither has to be straightforward nor is it necessarily explicit. It is therefore not only complex, but also often “perplexing,” since the resistance against the West is formulated with the help of western concepts.\textsuperscript{831}

The adoption of disenchanted vocabularies and frameworks might be more apparent in leftist anti-colonial writings, such as Ḥanafi, Laroui, or Hishām Ju‘aṭ, but an implicit presence of Europe is also an element in Quṭb, who writes against that very practice. To be sure, Quṭb's is a project of selective memory, in which he de-historicizes the major bulk of Islamic history and experience. He attempted to purify and simplify human and historical Islam by identifying Islam with a historical (and mythical) moment before Muslims had the opportunity to convolute it with their various and contradictory methods of tradition building throughout the centuries. In this process, he privileges certain sources, namely hadīth and Qur'ān, over other Islamic sources, such as maghāzī, history (tārīkh), and tafsīr. Much of the discourse that sees itself as resistance to colonialism and imperialism is articulated in a disenchanted vocabulary, or is, at least inspired and motivated by that very discourse. Most of the harsh critics of orientalist studies had in fact received all or part of their education in Europe.

As Rudolph demonstrates, the attacks on orientalism were originally mainly directed at particular persons. In the course of decolonization and Arab independence, those critiques turned increasingly into general anti-imperialist endeavors.\textsuperscript{832} With changing political configurations in

\textsuperscript{830} One is reminded here of Frantz Fanon, \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 223: “At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country. He contends himself with stamping these instruments with a hallmark, which he wishes to be national, but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism.”

\textsuperscript{831} Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing}, 72. For the term “perplexing” to describe modern Islamic knowledge production, see Laroui, \textit{Crisis}, 87.

\textsuperscript{832} Rudolph, \textit{Westliche Islamwissenschaft}, 36.
the global world (e.g., the Cold War, the foundation of Israel, and the sequel of Israeli-Arab wars), the emphasis of critique of orientalist scholarship changed. The change of tone and the impact of political developments on intellectual work can be observed in the aforementioned scholar Bint al-Shāṭī, who was not entirely opposed to orientalist scholarship, as we have seen. In the course of the October War in 1973, in a lecture at the Qarawiyyīn University in Fes, she elaborated on the role of the isrāʾīliyyāt in relation to the West.833 Isrāʾīliyyāt are accounts and information attributed to Jewish or Christian sources used in Muslim exegesis.

In her lecture, printed under the name al-Isrāʾīliyyāt fīʾl-jawz al-fikrī (1975), Bint al-Shāṭī critiqued in the majority Jewish orientalists or those she thought to be Jewish, such as Goldziher, Israel Wolfensohn, and Joseph Schacht (who was actually not Jewish). She interpreted their work as a continuation of the so-perceived age-long fight of Jews against Islam in modern times through undermining the Qurʾān by drawing on Jewish legends.834 At the same time, some Arab thinkers, even Salafis, utilized orientalist scholarship selectively to affirm Islam's superiority, a persistent trend chided emphatically by Ibn Nabī.835 The adopted conceptualizations, dichotomies, and the importance of “history” continued to be elements in the Muslim-Arab discourse. Dirks' observation in regard to India is apt for the Middle East as well:

History has and can and can be used as it was by colonialist writers to universalize at the same time it denies the logics of colonized discourse, denigrating difference all the way down. It is then easy to end up privileging certain kinds of histories, texts, or traditions over others. [...] This is not to accord totalizing power to the colonial state, which could never fully contain the lived experiences [...], but rather to suggest the sinuous and subtle

835 Rudolph, Westliche Islamwissenschaft, 37-40.
One could dismiss the critiques of the likes of Qutb and al-Jundi as mere apologetics. But such an evaluation misses an essential aspect in their work, namely that theirs can be seen as attempts to claim ownership of their past. History, as a way of thinking and academic discipline, belonged to the colonizers, not the colonized. This fact did not prevent the colonized to utilize this new discipline in their own anti-colonial struggles. History and anthropology became, in Dirks' words, the discourse “in which policing of tradition [understood as] the codification, control, reform, and suppression during colonial rule was transformed into the knowledge of tradition.”

Knowledge of tradition was a new form of conceptualizing one's past and creating counter-hegemonic discourses, making active use of the historic discipline.

The transformation of tradition into “knowledge of tradition” also concerned Laroui, who scrutinized this process. In his *L'idéologie Arabe Contemporaine* (1967), he criticized the ideal of objectivity in western Islamic studies and history. Any interpretation of history was necessarily ideological, the historical-critical approach being an expression of liberalism. Historical critique could lead to the destruction of values inherited from one's ancestors and shake the faith of Muslims in their tradition, bringing them to reason according to liberalism. Against a wrong sense of objectivity Laroui claimed that mythological history writing could be used in order to build Arab society. Laroui reprimanded orientalism. Yet, he also called for self-examination and critiquing the tools Arab and Muslim thinkers had used since the *nahda* to construct their

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837 Dirks, “History” 28.
societies. In this context, he called for historical consciousness that would enact intellectual and political change. Larouï did not refrain from criticizing this practice. He took issue with the ahistorical thinking of his contemporaries that threw them into an atemporal past, essentialist self, and static tradition. These absolutes, just as “universal reason,” had to be demystified.

His critique of orientalism derived from his assessment of the Arab intellectual and social landscape. In his view, since colonialism, the Arab intellectual mode of thinking had been in a complex crisis of self, in which everyone could sense the social, economic, and political “retardation” of Arab societies. In response to colonialism, Arab intellectual production aimed at “catching up” with the West, often by uncritically accepting its models and theories. This wish for “catching up” reproduced the enactment of historicist consciousness that was always linked under colonialism to what Chakrabarty termed “a recommendation to the colonized to wait.” Even Qutb read the Islamic present in terms of a lack of something, an “incompleteness,” given that he aimed to fill that gap with an outspokenly non-western future.

However, there can be no doubt that, for Qutb, the Muslim was a “figure of lack,” an assessment that Larouï shared. The latter objected to outright rejecting anything that could be associated with the West. Whether one accepted or rejected “the West” did not change the fact that “the West” – its ideas about history, economy, and society – was present in any definition of the modern Arab self. In his view, this reality could not be denied; it could, however, be examined critically and by means of engaging the discipline of history carefully. He captured

840 Larouï, Crisis.
841 Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 8.
842 Larouï, Crisis, 10, 28.
the paradox of modern thought in the Muslim world as both anti-western and western thus:

Studies of modern Arab thought, nineteenth-century Russian philosophy, and Chinese thought after 1840 [reveal] the same structure without the slightest indication of previous entente or mutual influence. Where is the unifying matrix? It is the West, it will be said. […] But how are we to define the West […] when we consider that these essays begin by asking precisely this question – What is the West – and that behind the objective appearance of the West there lies concealed the accompanying shadow of an anti-West? The West inwardly questions itself even while others question it from without.843

The “West” – a hyper-real ideal to be aspired more so than than a fixed entity – was omni-present even in writers who were not aware of it; theories and theorems are often utilized eclectically and unconsciously. In that respect, orientalism has had a “confusing effect.” For Laroui, Muslim intellectuals (‘ulamā, journalists, and university professors) had to adopt some form of historical thinking to solve the “crisis of self.” He did not envision myth building in the sense of ahistorical fiction writing. Rather, he envisaged a “consciousness toward a stage where history becomes the essential element of the debate and at the same time loses its fluidity to become a protecting myth.”844 The way out of the crisis of the Arab world was hence earnest history writing that corresponded to reality and contextualized the present in continuity with the past. To historicize meant for Laroui to also place western methods in their proper context and be aware of how, why, and for which purpose they had been developed. Once the material and methods had been scrutinized, some western theories could be accepted.845

Laroui urged Arabs to take control of their own history, avoid both “medievalization” and “westernization,” and launch a sincere dialogue between Arab and western ideas.846 He did not reject western influence per se but called for attentiveness to the historical conditions in which

843 Laroui, Crisis, 85-86.
844 Ibid., L’idéologie, 73.
845 Laroui, Crisis, 128, 156.
846 Ibid., L’idéologie, 57; ibid., Crisis, 147-148, 156.
reason – always contextual and malleable – is produced. Opinions, religious dogmas, political constellations, and reason change. History writing always happens in relation to something, such as the nation state, post-colonial resistance, identity building, or religion.\footnote{Ibid., \textit{L'idéologie}, 15.} Clinging to any form of reason or reform in the sense of “renewal of the old” was anachronistic and occluded a realistic assessment of the present, necessary to achieve progress.\footnote{Ibid., 61; Larou, \textit{Crisis}, 43. Footnote 70.} Such a break must be gentle and guided by the needs of society. Larou’s assessment of the intellectual developments in the Arab world in the 1960s is still relevant and reverberates in much of the contemporary Arab knowledge production. No author in the Muslim world dealing with western methods applied to the Qur’an has remained untouched by European knowledge production on the Qur’an.

While this statement may seem rather obvious, I want to emphasize that even authors who categorically reject orientalist scholarship have been affected by that very scholarship and by “imagininations of socially just futures for humans [that] take the idea of single, homogeneous, and secular historical time for granted.”\footnote{Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing}, 15.} The ideas of “Europe” or that of “non-Europe” are certainly not homogeneous or undisputed. Yet, “A certain version of 'Europe,' reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern, continues to dominate the discourse of history.”\footnote{Ibid., 28.} Europe functions as a “silent referent” in historical knowledge, which is also true for the discourse on history in non-Europe. History writing has been part of the project of the modern state. While the nation state is a European introduction into, or rather imposition on, the global context, and has had many critics, it remains to be the major organizing force of social and political life in the world.
The question of tradition has come to occupy a central place in modern Arab thought, whether in Islamist or secular discourse, and the Qur'an is an even more contested element in this field. Abu Rabi called the turn to history the “turāth resurgence,” in which the “Islamic tradition” became a contested field. One may add to this observation that “Islamic tradition” did not only become a contested field but was being constructed in the process along new ways of categorizing, analyzing, and verifying. The term turāth is in any case a modern term. The reactions to the Nöldeke translation must be understood against this background. In the following section, we will explore the strategies Tamer employs to justify the historical-critical approach to the Qur'an and examine where he situates himself and Nöldeke's work in the discourse over the historical place of the Qur'an in contemporary Arabic works.

Tamer's Introduction and the Defense of German Orientalist Studies

Since it was especially Tamer's introduction to the Nöldeke translation that was perceived as politically motivated, it is worth looking at it more closely. Once again, the “good old” historical-critical approach becomes linked to the progress of society. However, before Tamer takes this conceptual step, he aims to convince his audience of the feasibility of historicizing the Qur'an. His explicit intention for the translation was to initiate a “scholarly debate to encourage research in the field of qur'ānic and Islamic studies through equipping [Muslim scholars] with the rich critical (naqdi) material. [The KAS and Tamer] hope that this book will start a dialogue over the material which it entails.” This statement clarifies that Tamer does not expect Muslims to accept western scholarly methods impartially. He explains the core method and purpose of

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historical-critical approaches to the Qurʾān at length, critically assessing the history of German Qurʾānic studies and indicating its shortcomings, at times missionary intentions, methodological naïveté, and political motives.\textsuperscript{855} That he mentions the political intentions of some orientalist scholarship suggests that he is familiar with the debates over historical scholarship in the Arab world and the hostility of many thinkers toward orientalist scholarship. Implicitly, he addresses those thinkers and their concerns. Despite the political motifs that entered orientalist studies during the time of colonialism, Tamer holds that there has always been a strand of scholarship that was mainly interested in the linguistic aspects of ancient cultures and “sacred writings.” He underlines the difference between the negative view of the Qurʾān in the Middle Ages and the philological study of the Qurʾān “out of scholarly curiosity.” One should see this latter project, he suggests, against the background of larger trends of philological studies that started with the European Renaissance. “Oriental” cultures at that time were mainly explored on the basis of texts under the “domination of philology,” which explains why the Qurʾān, as core text of Islam, attracted scholarly interest in particular.

Tamer aims to reconcile his audience with orientalism. Based on his “conciliatory approach,” one can discern the issues that are at stake for applying historical critique to the Qurʾān. He draws a positive picture of humanistic scholarship that did no longer look for derivations from Jewish and Christian sources and instead emphasized the Qurʾān's independence from these traditions. Those scholars came to appreciate the Qurʾān in its own right. Yet, Tamer concedes, the majority of scholars maintained an attitude that focused on Christian and Jewish elements in the text. By mentioning examples of scholars who took a different road, for example

\textsuperscript{855} Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xiii-xiv.
the theologian Johann Adam Möhler (1838 – 1896), Tamer aims to present a more differentiated picture of orientalist scholarship than given in much of the literature available on the subject in Arabic.  

Indeed, one of the main objections many Muslim thinkers voiced against orientalist scholarship in the twentieth century was that it aimed to trace Jewish and Christian “influences” in the Qurʾān. Implicit in the search for Christian and Jewish origins in the Qurʾān is the assumption that Muḥammad authored the Qurʾān.

The sensitivity concerning accusations of the human composition of the Qurʾān becomes apparent in the controversy over Muḥammad Husayn Haykal's book Hayāt Muḥammad, whose main source was Emile Dermenghem's La Vie de Mahomet (1929). The latter examined the possible origins of Islamic faith doctrines, which became the main point of contention for Ḥusayn al-Harāwī in his al-Mustashriqīn (1936). Muḥammad's authorship of the Qurʾān is also implied in psychologizing approaches to explain the “process” or “development” of the Qurʾān, a theme popularized by Gustave Le Bon, who imputed pathological behavior to the prophet, such as depression and epilepsy in order to explain the process of Muḥammad's revelation experience.

Based on works such as al-Tamāḥī Naqara's Manāḥīj al-mustashriqīn (1985), one can surmise that orientalist theories that seem particularly offensive to Muslims are well-known in circles familiar with orientalist scholarship. Apologetic works demonstrate that it is especially grave to accuse the Prophet of pathological symptoms. Such explanations for the authorship of the Qurʾān resemble some theories well-known from Byzantine and Latin medieval polemics.

856 Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xiv.
857 Rudolph, Westliche Islamwissenschaft, 92.
858 Even more fierce was al-Harāwī's critique of D.S. Margoliouth and of A J Wensinck who argued the theory that the entire Islamic cult derived from Judaism. See Rudolph, Westliche Islamwissenschaft, 92.
against Islam, fortifying the suspicion of the ideological continuity between the Middle Ages and modern orientalism.\textsuperscript{860} Instead of giving an apologetic account of orientalism, Tamer emphasizes the heterogeneity of the field. Describing the milieu of German Qur'ān scholars, Tamer paints their enterprise as free from political and colonial motives and as mainly focused on linguistics.

He highlights the \textit{islamophilia} of many German scholars, for example Goethe, who pursued Qur'ānic and Arabic studies “out of love for their object.” According to Tamer, a particularity of German orientalist studies was the search for a translation of the Qur'ān into German that could do justice to its aesthetic character.”\textsuperscript{861} Having previously established that German orientalist scholarship was not free from political motives, one can state that Tamer tweaks his data in order to arrive at a more positive picture. This is not mischievous on his part but entails a view of politics as being something negative in regard to academic scholarship. It may be noted in this respect that Said similarly elevated some orientalists above the negatives of Orientalism, as long as such knowledge was not used to dominate and control the “Orient.” He even called philology “the most basic and creative of the imperative arts.”\textsuperscript{862}

Against assumptions to the contrary, Tamer seeks to demonstrate that not all orientalists rejected the divinity of the Qur'ān. As an example he presents Josef von Hammer-Purgstall, who wrote in the introduction to his translation of the last forty \textit{sūras} (1809) that the divine character of the Qur'ān was revealed in the “splendor of its language.” In Hammer-Purgstall's view, the “power of the word of God,” not a desire to expand militarily and politically, was the reason for

\textsuperscript{860} Rudolph, \textit{Westliche Islamwissenschaft}, 93.
\textsuperscript{861} Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xix. One of the journals Tamer references in this regard is the “Treasure Trove of the Orient. Arranged and worked out by a society of lovers, by which is meant “lovers of the Orient” (\textit{Fundgruben des Orient bearbeitet durch die Gesellschaft von Liebhabern}).
\textsuperscript{862} Said, \textit{Orientalism}, xix, xxiv.

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Islam's success. Another positive example Tamer mentions is the poet Friedrich Rückert (1788 – 1877), who also displayed great appreciation for the Qurʾān. By mentioning these two examples, Tamer strategically does away with two stereotypes. The first is a widespread view that Islam was spread by the sword, the second is that this belief was uniformly held by the older generation of orientalists. His defense of German orientalism, however, does not address the main suspicions of its critics. For example, Quṭb did not argue that all orientalists were islamophobe but rejected their epistemological and social presuppositions. As we have seen, many anti-orientalist writers critiqued orientalism's underlying presuppositions and system of thought. Tamer probably consciously brackets this point since he is familiar with these arguments.

After his selective introduction to the history of Qurʾān scholarship in the West, Tamer acquaints the reader with Nöldeke's work. Being a form of historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān, the latter aims to historicize (yuʿarrikh) the qurʾānic text by “treating [the Qurʾān] as a document among other documents of human history, connecting it to its Sitz im Leben.” Its principle tool is “thorough linguistic examination” in order to derive the chronological order of the sūras based on events described in the Qurʾān that are “worthy of trust.” Tamer agrees with Nöldeke that the empirical findings of history constitute the most reliable indications for arriving at the correct qurʾānic meaning. The data is often “covered by obscurity” owing to the time difference that separates a modern contemporary audience from the time of the emergence of the Qurʾān. According to Tamer, Nöldeke's work, though speculative in many respects, was more humble than many later approaches. Nöldeke clung to the ideal of the researcher as objective and

864 Quṭb, Maʿrakat, 98.
865 Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xvi.

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accepted the limitations of time and place. Tamer explains,

Nöldeke then, and those who followed in his footsteps [...], do not assess the Qur’ān as a text sent down [from God, i.e., as revelation in the Islamic sense] but as a text that the Prophet Muḥammad compiled (wadāʿa) as a result of inspiration, in interaction with the religious, social, and political events and developments he faced over the years.

Although some passages read like accusations of Islam and its prophet, Nöldeke's work “is based solely on the meticulous philological study of the text of the noble book; it has no other motive than love of learning (maʿrifa) and the drive toward knowledge (ʿilm).”866 Tamer's concept of ʿilm is secular, derived from empirical data, while it brackets the question of the transcendent. He concedes that Nöldeke's view was strongly influenced by the intellectual developments of his time in medicine and psychology – sciences that have naturally been advanced since then.

That Muḥammad was the author of the Qur’ān is not Tamer's view, and one of his aims is to demonstrate that divine revelation and historical considerations do not have to be mutually exclusive. His introduction is meant to evoke sympathy for a historicizing approach to the Qur’ān. Thus, he highlights Nöldeke's view of Muḥammad as a “true prophet.” The Qur’ān's “momentous contents as they are related to Muḥammad and his dynamic mission,” can be accentuated by taking its historical circumstances into account.867 In order to arrive at the most certain form of knowledge about early Islam and the Qur’ān, the scholar should concentrate on the qur’ānic text itself by means of the historical-critical approach, focusing in particular on literary and linguistic aspects of the text.

In this context, Tamer overemphasizes Nöldeke's reliance on literary analysis. In the former's view, Nöldeke achieved his fourfold division of the Qur’ān into early Meccan, middle-

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867 Ibid., xvii-xix.
Meccan, late-Meccan, and Medinan suras principally based on literary analysis of the text's style, language and structure. Nöeldeke certainly drew on literary critique for his reordering of the suras. However, the “serious interaction between text and context,” Tamer detects in Nöeldeke's work, materializes especially in the way the latter connected verses and passages from the Qur'ān with reports from the Islamic transmission. Nöeldeke adopted most of the sura's structure and arrived at a mainly chronological, not a literary, order of the Qur'ān.

Tamer admits that the book, due to its time, presumes a polarity between the Christian and the Islamic world, which he wants to overcome by emphasizing the positive aspects of cultural, political, and economic interaction. While Nöeldeke presupposed the superiority of European scientific methods, he also gave credit to the scholarly accomplishments in the Arab world. Importantly, one cannot and should not, in Tamer's view, conflate Europe with Christianity and the Arab world with Islam. He does not say so directly, but he may well have in mind the Christians of the Middle East of whom he is one as well as Muslims living as a significant numerical minority in Europe.

Tamer's conciliatory approach becomes especially clear in his suggestion of how to understand wahy and how to make historical critique useful for a modern understanding of revelation. His main aim seems to be to connect Nöeldeke's work with the findings of recent western and Arab Qur'ān scholarship. Here Tamer goes beyond Nöeldeke's own approach and takes the freedom to lay out his own view in a style that may remind the reader of the works of Neuwirth, Abū Zayd, and Arkoun. Tamer explains that the historical-critical approach aims at

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Qurʾān was yet in a state in which it was being uttered, a living speech, being read out loudly […] and preached, before it was collected, before it became a muṣḥaf. Nöldeke adheres to the text as something concrete and tangible, and he treats it with objective seriousness, [just] as modernist Muslim thinkers such as Mohammed Arkoun and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd have done.869

Tamer lays out revelation as a kind of communication model and explains how one can consider the Qurʾān a “true revelation from God, yet [also] that God's revelation includes human speech.” God does not converse with the prophet only. He also addresses the believers, the ahl al-kitāb, and the unbelievers. Not only God's voice is present in the Qurʾān but also those of the people in Muḥammad's environment. As such, the Qurʾān represents a double discourse: 1) vertically, between God and the human, and 2) horizontally, when the revelation becomes reality in history, in interaction with its environment. Tamer emphasizes that, according to all Muslims, the Qurʾān is God's speech, yet Muslims also linked it early on to Muḥammad's life and the Muslim faith community: The revelation “adjoined reality.”870 For Tamer, several Islamic hermeneutical devices attest that Muslims were attentive to the historical circumstances in which the Qurʾān was revealed, without impeding the Qurʾān as word of God.

At the beginning of Islam stands “a cordial dialogue between Muḥammad and the angel Gabriel in the cave Ḥirā', a dialogue between the earthly and the heavenly.” This dialogue left its mark on the whole message. According to Tamer, summoned by the angel Gabriel to recite, Muḥammad's answer “I do not recite” or “I am not a reciter/reader” (mā aqra’ – mā bi-qārī') does not simply indicate Muḥammad's illiteracy but gives expression to an existential state of being.

The human is fundamentally able to respond to God's address, either positively or negatively.

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869 While Tamer does not mention Neuwirth, he references Abū Zayd and Arkoun by name, the wording in this quote highly suggests Neuwirth's influence. Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xxi.

870 Ibid., xx-xxii. One clearly hears echoes of Abū Zayd's Mafhūm in this phrasing.
What Tamer means here is (probably) that the engagement between the prophet and Gabriel is a reciprocal relationship, in which the participation of the human becomes crucial. Muḥammad's reaction is sincere and is marked by confusion and amazement. Even if mā agra' is understood as a question, i.e., “what shall I read?” Tamer interprets it as an essential query, not simply a practical question: In both cases, one sees a sincere human, striving “in obedience and subordination,” who accepts “the descending word from up high.” This observation leads Tamer to an affirmation of the human element in the process of wahy. When wahy occurred,

The human dimension – the dimension of the historical condition that accepts the divine revelation – does not cease to exist, neither within that [first] dialogue nor in the time that follows. Rather the repetition of the command [coming from the angel] and the response indicate that wahy did not come as something mechanical. It did not occur by God pushing a button in the prophet but through an activity of communication (tawāsul), in which the prophet participated with might and main with all his being. [...] The situation of the prophet is a situation of one who longs and yearns for the word of His Lord, Who still withholds something from him and raises deep pain in the self of the longing one, [while] wahy also occasionally relaxes the worry and anxiety of the prophet.  

According to Tamer, the narrative of the first revelation, as told in al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and others, demonstrates the human element in the dialogical process between the human and the divine. The story narrates how Muḥammad wanted to throw himself off a mountain because he did not understand what was happening to him. In other situations, he came close to ending his life. The story of Muḥammad's first revelation in the cave Ḥirā' and the subsequent and dramatic interaction with the angel Gabriel is one of the most salient founding narratives in the Islamic tradition. We will see an interpretation of this narrative that differs considerably from Tamer's in Jarāḏi's account in regard to the meaning of the story. In Tamer's view, God, Muḥammad, and the people in his environment partook in this conversation that we find represented in the Qur'ān.

While Tamer describes Muḥammad as a longing self, he also emphasizes him as a historical being, rooted in contingent, cultural circumstances, that is to say, he emphasizes Muḥammad's humanness that cannot be conceptualized outside of the confines dictated by secular history.

The picture that emerges in Tamer's plea for the historical-critical approach is a picture of Cartesian opposites with the divine on the one hand, the human on the other. There is a dialogue, but the human remains human. For Tamer this does not mean that the Qurʿān is not wāhy, rather “that the wāhy of God speaks the language of humans.”872 This is not in and of itself radical. As we have seen, there were several medieval authors who similarly argued that language is human and finite.873 We also find modern formulations of this argument, for example in the work of Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr and Jarādī. As the latter emphasizes, Muslims “have the duty to acknowledge the humanness of the language of the Qurʿān. […] God's divine speech can take on numerous forms, among them words (alfāz), but in all instances they dress in the garb of the one who is addressed […] while the source is the Speaker – the High and Wise.”874

We will see how Tamer's idea of the process of revelation differs from someone like Jarādī's in more detail later on. For now, it is sufficient to state that Tamer's account of language and historical situatedness does not mention the possibility for language to transcend itself. Yet, his account also leaves room for a divine source of the Qurʿān as an important element in its constitution. The method to read the Qurʿān used by Nöldeke, of course, presupposes Muḥammad's authorship. He reverses the medieval assertion that “God speaks the language of men,” as God using human language, into humans using human language to express a higher

872 Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xxii.
truth. The limitedness of humans in that moment can easily be understood as reducing the revelation to something mundane that is dominated by historical random circumstances.

Tamer emphasizes that the “Qurʾān has a dialogical, communicative, and discursive structure that conforms to the circumstances in which it emerged.” Nöldeke strove to arrive at the origins (uṣūl), when wahy was still a living reality, “dynamic words that would astonish those who first heard them through their beauty and through the peculiarity of their content.” Finally, he “wanted to discover the historical situation in which the Qurʾān was collected (jamaʿ), and in which the various narratives and readings emerged.”875 This is, in a nutshell, Tamer's plea for the historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān. I dwell so extensively on his introduction because other thinkers we will encounter have addressed the same themes. It becomes clear that Tamer deems it important to demonstrate that historical-critical methods do not conflict with Islam.

Tamer's Audience

One of the explicit incentives for Tamer's work is to contribute to a “scholarly dialogue with Islam.” One must wonder though with whom exactly this dialogue is to be imagined? With “Islam,” as he states? If so, what would that mean? Who represents Islam and with whom is he conversing? The dialogue partner remains silent in Tamer's introduction. It is left to the reader to figure out whom exactly he addresses. The question of Tamer's audience is crucial because the way he frames his argument tells us much about his epistemological presuppositions that are rooted in a neo-Kantian framework and in a narrative of the success of modern rationality, which he places in genealogy with Islamic philosophy over and against superstition and belief. To explicate the endeavor of western Qurʾānic studies Tamer draws out the differences between faith

875 Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xxii.
and reason. The latter operates on the basis of things graspable for the human mind. Since the historical-critical approach only appeals to the realm of reason, propositions about the transcendent have to be bracketed in the scientific study of the Qur'ān. The transcendent cannot be proven but can only be assumed on the basis of faith. This differentiation is crucial for Tamer to make his audience understand how Nöldeke could have high esteem for Muḥammad and recognize him as a prophet, yet explain the Qur'ān in merely human terms on the basis of social, historical, and political circumstances. Sounding reminiscent of Abū Zayd, Tamer asserts that to read the Qur'ān as text means acknowledging that “God's word, divine speech (kalām ilāhī) takes on the letters (hurūf) of human language and is expressed in human language; it becomes an aggregate of two dimensions, the divine and the human.”876

Tamer mentions the Islamic philosophers as precedent for such an approach who tried to understand prophecy from within its human dimension on the basis of Aristotelian and Platonic conceptualizations, which, for Tamer, means understanding the Qur'ān “as text.” He mentions Ibn Rushd in particular.877 One could, of course, argue that the humanness of the Qur'ān was not at all what the peripatetic philosophers had in mind. The objection Jarāḍī, for example, raises in regard to the peripatetic philosophers is that they “only looked at abstractness and selfhood. Moreover, [they] did not present anything that explains the interconnectedness [of the Qur'ān] with time, place, and history.”878 Jarāḍī thus faults the Islamic philosophers with a lack of historical thinking. Their emanation theory neglects time and place, while Tamer suggests that this is precisely what characterizes them, or at least what makes them predecessors of the historical-

876 Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xx.
877 Ibid.
critical approach. One must side with Jarādī in this case. The emanation theory of revelation that the peripatetic philosophers proposed was no less mystical or more scientific than the way in which non-peripatetic thinkers imagined the process of revelation. Unless one were to accept the Platonic view of the universe, which the peripatetic philosophers propounded, their theory of revelation is, from a modern scientific point of view, not any more reasonable than the non-philosophical Islamic accounts.879 This shall not concern us much here.

What is important for our concern is the genealogy Tamer suggests between historical-critical approaches to the Qur'ān and Islamic philosophy. This may be interpreted as a legitimizing strategy for these approaches by linking them to an intellectual strand within the Islamic tradition. This strategy has the possible advantage of circumventing accusations of imitating the West. On the other hand, it may be precisely this suggested genealogy that would then make the historical-critical approach even more objectionable, especially among Salafis who often consider the peripatetic philosophers as “heretics,” at least as people who introduced bid‘a (unlawful innovation) into Islam.

By building a genealogy with the Islamic philosophers, Tamer takes a position in the inner-Arabic debates over the turāth – a highly contested field, as we have seen. The rejection of the Islamic philosophers as being “foreign” to true Islam is obvious in someone like Quṭb. For him, Muslims lost their original dynamic relationship with the Qur'ān and the meaning of true knowledge when they ventured into the obscurities of philosophy. It was particularly their encounter with “foreign” cultures that led to this development. Renan formulated the reverse

argument, namely that the only elements that made Islam in any way great were foreign, in particular Greek thought.\textsuperscript{880} Both Quṭb and Tamer assume an affinity between medieval Islamic philosophy and modern scientific and philosophical thought, which might be questioned on several grounds. The rejection of any “foreign” influences on “Islam” (and with it “Greek” philosophy) is, of course, not a particularity of Quṭb's thought. Even scholars who did not reject philosophy outright, as the afore-mentioned al-Jundī, took issue with the “Greek” influence and called for the “originality of Arabic philosophical thought.”

Al-Jundī sympathized with authors like Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Rāziq, who argued for a “school of originality” (madrasat al-'aṣāla) within Islamic thought. In al-Jundī’s opinion, true Islamic philosophy could not be found in philosophers such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, or in the Mu’tazila. He rejected them as Greek philosophers when he stylized Ibn Taymīya and al-Ghazālī as pioneers in critiquing Aristotelian logic, never mind that al-Ghazālī drew on Aristotelian logic, especially in his treatise on legal theory.\textsuperscript{881} Instead, for al-Jundī, true Islamic philosophy is to be found in the “Qur'ānic School” based on Qur'ān and Sunna alone. Following Ibn Taymīya, al-Jundī claimed that one had to conserve and protect the authentic Sunni tradition against bid’ā that was introduced into Islam after the prophetic time. Al-Jundī thus rejected any influence from outside of Islam that could not be derived from the Qur'ān and Sunna.\textsuperscript{882} His today well-known Salafī and neo-Salafī demand ignores later Ash'arite religious production that strongly operated with the


\textsuperscript{881} For the use of Greek logic in \textit{uṣūl al-fiqh}, see Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, \textit{al-Mustasfā} (Cairo: Dār al-baṣā‘ir, 2007).

help of philosophical thought.\textsuperscript{883} Al-Jundî represents a strand of modern ideological Islamic thought that, on the one hand, seems to be dramatically unappreciative of the legacy of Islamic scholarship and, on the other, blissfully unaware of its own inducement with western thought.

He disdains any western thought (or, for that matter, traditional and classical Islamic thought) that he considers un-Islamic as being useless and damaging for modern Muslims.\textsuperscript{884} The discussion about the Greek influence on Islamic thought illustrates the problem of making strong claims about the Islamicity of partakers in the discourse of Islam in the framework of Islam understood as a discursive tradition. To recall, for Asad, an Islamic discursive tradition is “a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.” He clarifies,

Clearly, not everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition. Nor is an Islamic tradition in this sense necessarily imitative of what was done in the past. For even where traditional practices appear to the anthropologist to be imitative of what has gone before, it will be the practitioners' conceptions of what is \textit{apt performance}, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form.\textsuperscript{885}

As much as one can agree with this definition, who in the end decides what an “apt performance” is? Al-Jundî and Quṭb both have been influential in their own ways and both are selective in how they define the Islamic \textit{turāth}. Stating that Greek thought is not part of actual Islam is simply wrong if one takes Islamic scholarship, reasoning, and argument, seriously. The decision to rely mainly on the Qur'ān and Sunna has, of course, precedents in the Islamic tradition. While

\textsuperscript{883} For the influence of philosophical thought on later Ash'arism, see Hildebrandt, “Ǧamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī,” 217.
\textsuperscript{884} His belief in an autonomous Islamic existence free from any “un-Islamic” influences seems unrealistic in the modern globalized world. I do not wish to imply that there are not also valuable observations to be found in al-Jundî's exposition. At some points, for example, his suspicion against the entanglement of science with the form of state and society, in which that science is practiced, is apt.
philosophy was an elitist undertaking, certain elements from Greek thought had a strong impact on Islamic thought, particularly on fiqh and Sufi practice. Which elements from the past are chosen, which ones omitted, and which discourse prevails momentarily is always linked to power struggles within society. Drawing on a particular element from the turāth while ignoring others is also an ideological choice. There does not exist an objective benchmark that enables us to classify people as more rational, Islamic, or modern. These ascriptions are already part of the struggles between different positions about legitimacy and Islamicity. Both positions express different accesses to Islam. In this context, it is pointless to label Islamist views to be more Islamic than other Muslims' or secular ones, unless one concedes that one simply adapts the alleged view of the majority that can change under different circumstances.

By mentioning the peripatetic philosophers in a positive light, Tamer positions himself in a camp of Arab thought that strives at continuing the rationalistic tradition of Islam and rejects the Salafi view of Islamic history. From Tamer's exposition one can deduce that the dialogue partner he has in mind is not of the kind of al-Junḍī or ‘Abd al-Rāzīq's “school of authenticity” but an audience that is already fairly open at least toward philosophical thought, even if not to historical-critical studies. Bringing in the Islamic philosophers is a move that seems at first inconsequential for legitimizing historical critique (with which the Islamic philosophers were simply not concerned). Tamer suggests an intellectual connection between philosophy, which he seems to equate with rationality, and historical critique – an assumption with which proponents of historical critique would agree. Accordingly, to approach texts in a historical-critical way is the rational thing to do, although the concept of reason and rationality of the peripatetic philosopher

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886 For the importance of philosophy for Sufism and fiqh, see Ahmad, What is Islam? 26-31; Bauer, Kultur, 161-164.
differed greatly from modern historical source and literary criticism. Their worldview and epistemological framework was similarly different. Metaphysics, statements about unseen forces in the world, and a Neo-Platonic cosmology are maybe the most striking differences when compared to the world of historical criticism that is merely concerned with empirical facts.

The emphasis historical-critical scholarship places on the origins of Islam and its focus on the Qurʾān qua Qurʾān, one could argue, brings it closer to the interests of Salafi thinkers than to those schools of thought that emphasize the richness and progression in the Islamic interpretative tradition through the ages. Salafis, similar to historical-critical scholars, are consumed with a discourse of origins, and quick to reject later interpretations that they see without recourse to the earliest interpretations. Based on our analysis of Tamer's introduction, one can conclude that he does not address those Salafis. Instead, he addresses another strand of Muslim intellectuals who identify with the Islamic peripatetic philosophical tradition. While this ideological self-positioning is in itself political, Tamer's introduction also conveys a more explicit political message that is linked to his vision of modernity modeled after a European model.

*Can a Translation be Political?*

Tamer emphasizes dialogue as the ulterior end of his translation. He further expresses hope that the work “will encourage research in the field of qurʾānic and Islamic studies and provide them with the rich critical material [that] may generally contribute to the crystallization of a modern reading of the Arabic and Islamic turāth.” This remark implies that a “modern reading” has not yet happened or is in its beginning. Tamer's introduction remains rooted in a discourse of modernity that implicitly either ignores or rejects postmodernity. Note here the

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linking of the historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān with modernity which makes sense since, as we have seen, the historical-critical approach itself is embedded in modernity and modernism. But what exactly constitutes the modern element in this particular approach in Tamer’s view? To detach reason from faith? To view the origination of the qurʾānic revelation in historical terms? As with so many authors, it remains unclear what exactly Tamer means by “modernity.” While we cannot say much about his conception of modernity, he does elaborate on what the effects of a “modern reading” or the lack of such a reading of the Qurʾān will yield. Without a critical treatment of the tradition, so Tamer, progress and improvement in science will not be possible. He thus links education, the treatment of the tradition, and the acceptance of modern sciences closely to societal progress and development:

There is no room for progress and keeping up with […] knowledge unless one proceeds from a critical treatment of the turāth. The critique of the tradition transforms it from being a heavy and outmoded burden (ʿibʾ thaqīl mutaḥajjir), which hampers development and modernity, into a cultural treasure, whose contents are turned to the advantage of the production of a present-day culture. […] Tradition then is the sum of past novelties (ībdāʾ ʿāt) and in that heritage lays the motivation for creativity (ībdāʾ) today […]. The culture stays alive among the people when the later ones derive what enables them to create themselves by means of tradition from the heritage of those who went before them. This is novelty (ībdāʾ) of which the coming [generations] will profit in the forming of their future culture. It is the responsibility of the present-day Arab generation toward the future generations to be culturally innovative, to improve their heritage, and to secure the continuation of creating their civilization (ḥadāra). This will happen only by means of a cultural opening that interacts with the production of the sciences and research that arose in the past and present in various fields, whatever their source was.⁸⁸⁸

Tamer suggests the critical assessment of the Islamic heritage. He cannot be labeled an anti-traditionalist in the sense that he simply rejects all tradition as outdated. Tradition is actually an “accumulation of innovations,” a point already underlined by Ḥanafī.⁸⁸⁹ Hence, by continuing to

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⁸⁸⁸ Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xxiii.
be innovative, one just does what previous generations of scholars have always done, namely being innovative and creative. Tradition is thus not dead. However, unreflected acceptance of it poses an obstacle to progress. Remarkably, Tamer does not call for studying the past for its own sake. Rather, heritage must be re-read to shape society and what he calls culture or civilization (hadāra). Tamer does not simply address Muslims but also “Arabs” more generally. The Islamic turāth he mentions in a subtle way become the heritage of all Arabs, who are each responsible for critically assessing them. Tamer is cautious not to call Islam or Muslims “backwards” and in need of Enlightenment, nor does he use similar strong terminology one often finds in the vocabulary of reformers, be they Islamists or liberals. Yet, his suggestion of how to achieve “progress” and “development” assumes such a binary division inherently. As seen earlier, he is by far not the first Arab or western thinker who considers the rereading of the tradition as central to the renewal of society. Tradition has been consulted to either promote change or plea for keeping

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890 Hadāra is a tricky term with whose different meanings I cannot deal here in detail. The term civilization is a modern construct. For the development of the term see Tomoko Masuzawa, “Culture” in Critical Terms for Religious Studies, ed. Mark C. Taylor (London: University of Chicago Press), 70-94.

891 The term bid’ā has a negative connotation in Islamic thought. However, ibdā’ has come to be used almost independently from bid’ā without associating it with bid’ā. For its use in a positive light, see, for example, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, Dunya al-Mar’a (Beirut: Dār al-malāk, 1997), 9.
the intellectual and spiritual status quo and to defend against “foreign” or “un-Islamic” influences (which can entail change as well).

What Tamer means with “modern,” so it seems, is a historical consciousness that can produce the agency needed to create present and future. As we saw, Yerushalmi evaluated how the adaptation of scientific historicism by scholars of the Wissenschaft des Judentums affected the Jewish collective memory. He contended that the embrace of historiography did not naturally follow the trajectory of Jewish tradition and memory. Instead, in his view, when Jewish historians adopted European Enlightenment thought for the study of Jewish history, they disrupted the Jewish memory that relied mainly on the ritualistic function. The same result, one can argue, could follow from historicizing Islamic tradition.

However, even thinkers like Qutb reverted to history in the hope to construct a sustainable and vibrant Muslim present and future. He in particular wanted to reclaim Islamic history for Muslims. According to Ricoeur, history writing is not a reconstruction of the past as “it really happened.” Instead, he envisions a “citizen historian,” who responsibly seeks out the most useful and responsible historical construction that can educate the present and future generations. Ricoeur has been criticized for such an almost ideological approach to history. One could argue that authors such as Qutb do exactly what Ricoeur calls for, namely, they discipline the Muslim collective memory by referring to a historical discourse while “forgetting” others, even if major humanistic assumptions are missing in Qutb's vision of history and society.

However, recourse to history does not necessarily entail a historical consciousness that

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892 Yerushalmi, Zakhur, 85.
893 Ricoeur, Memory, 259, 411.
894 Ibid., 107, 278, 322, 332, and the whole part 234-281.
implies a *historical sense* of historical consciousness and a “heightened sensitivity to history and the 'constructed' character of one's ideas or beliefs – historicism as it is generally called.”

Quṭb aimed at a particularly Islamic history on the basis of the Qurʾān that lacks the inherently critical element (*Kritik*) of historicism. As Ebeling stated, the historical-critical method differs from a mere historical curiosity and exceeds a mere philological refinement in that it meets tradition with skepticism and questions its fundamentals and presupposes a whole new intellectual mindset. Quṭb is not willing to let history be judge over well-established Islamic truth claims.

Tamer calls explicitly for a *scientific and critical* approach to the Qurʾān. It is no secret that the critical demands of *wissenschaft* often sharply conflicted with more conservative and orthodox convictions. Tamer ignores the “dissecting” or even dismembering function of historical critique. Instead, he focuses on a hope that by means of critique tradition can be made alive. However, the life-giving of critique mainly consists, so one must assume, in partially giving up that past. According to Tamer, a conscious and critical treatment of one's past creates a responsible agent who can shape the future. He accepts a form of temporal epistemology in which one moves teleologically from a non-modern past toward modernity, in which agency and personal responsibility decide over the collective future. Asad describes this mode of thinking that is so central to political modernity as follows: “to make history, the agent must create the future, remake herself, and help others to do so, where the criteria of successful remaking are seen to be universal.”

It would go too far to attribute to Tamer a universalist intention since he leaves room for dialogue and particularity. However, by placing this paragraph into his

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897 Asad, *Genealogies*, 19.
discussion of western scholarly approaches to the Qurʾān, Tamer links a specific scriptural hermeneutics, namely the historical-critical approach, to modernity. Accordingly, society can only develop if the Qurʾān itself is also brought into dialogue with modern scholarly methods, which entails accepting its human aspect.

In another article, Tamer deals more directly with the question of the reconcilability of faith and reason in the Islamic tradition. There, he states that in achieving a consistency between faith and reason in Islam “the Qurʾān takes a key role since it is the fundamental text for Islam.”

Echoing Wielandt, Tamer argues that the character of the Qurʾān as verbally inspired book deriving its content, shape, and form directly from God renders it an eternally unchanging and universally valid text and obviates a modern approach to religious topics. To achieve the modernization of Islamic discourse, the Qurʾānic text must be critically re-assessed to overcome the dichotomy between revelation and reason. Tamer evidently sees the Qurʾān as critical for the changing of society, a theme that is also central to other authors of Qurʾānic studies. By suggesting societal reform through reinterpreting Islamic heritage, Tamer takes a position within the Arab discourse of history writing. By bringing Qurʾānic hermeneutics into relation with the progress of society, he selects the Qurʾān and a certain kind of scriptural hermeneutics as the most important object of reform.

Some scholars, such as Abū Zayd, supported the Nöldeke translation project publicly. Abū Zayd not only pressured the KAS to release the publication rights, he also published a PDF

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899 The second edition was published in 2007 by al-Kamāl [Beirut, Köln], corrected with a new preface; thereafter editions were also published by “Antoine” in Beirut and “Ibn Sinā” in Paris.
of the book on his own web page. This may not have helped the cause much regarding the attempt to convince a more conservative clientele of the book's value, given Abū Zayd's own controversial position on Qurʾān hermeneutics and his critique of the Islamic religious establishment. Then again, a long time – twenty years – had passed since the latter's trial in Egypt; and Lebanon is not Egypt. Several reviews of the book by Muslim authors have been written since its translation into Arabic, complimenting the book as well as criticizing it. Many responses remained on the level of polemics against any non-Muslim writing on the Qurʾān.\footnote{A book that falls into this category is ‘Umrah, Jawla fi kitāb Nuldiki.} However, some works aimed at a more fair but at the same time critical analysis.\footnote{Al-Daqiqī, Shabuhāt.}

Riḍwān al-Sayyid's response to the Nöldeke translation was ambiguous. The introduction to the Arabic Nöldeke translation suggests that al-Sayyid originally endorsed the project.\footnote{Tamer thanks al-Sayyid, among others, for the latter's support to publish the work. Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xxiv.} At the presentation of the first publication at the Beirut Book Fair in 2004, he even brought along a Moroccan delegation, with whom he engaged in a vivid discussion about the book. Even so, the review he published in the course of its publication was rather negative, at least restrained. Al-Sayyid is familiar with works such as Nöldeke's. He has written several pieces on western orientalist and Qurʾān scholarship, in which he aimed at explaining the methods and results of this scholarship to an Arabic audience. He himself received his doctorate in philosophy from Tübingen University in 1977.

Al-Sayyid has never been an uncritical recipient of western methods or historical criticism to the Qurʾān. For example, in one of his articles, he criticizes the old-fashioned and out-dated instruments and methods orientalists use when approaching the Qurʾān. In other words, he takes
issue with their “traditionalism.” Al-Sayyid criticizes the classical orientalists, among them Nöldeke, for their obsession with the etymology and meaning of single words and phrases. They often did not pay attention to the whole Qur'ān, an argument that accords with the modern study of language. According to modern linguistics, it is a fundamental principle that words or sentences in a language do not have any inherent meaning. Words only gain meaning in the broader system or structure of which they form a part or with which they contrast. Al-Sayyid thus evaluates historical-critical scholarship from within its own scholarly parameters, not on the basis of philosophical or epistemological questions.

Al-Sayyid initially found Nöldeke's book very useful, especially how the latter divided the Meccan sūras into three periods. The publishers had even asked him to review the translation and to write its preface. When al-Sayyid prepared for this task he read the original German version and was fascinated with the book's timeliness that seemed to “go beyond its own time.” According to him, Nöldeke seems objective and moderate toward the Qur'ān and the Prophet, especially when one compares his tone and stance with Muir or Alois Sprenger. While al-Sayyid did not object to the translation, which he even called “beautiful,” he found it outdated, unnecessary and not representative of qur'ānic scholarship anymore, not an unfair judgment. He thus applies the notion of anachronism, so central to history, to the historical-critical approach itself. As an historical artifact it can give witness to the past but sits awkwardly, albeit harmless, in the present. What al-Sayyid criticized was Tamer's introduction and its political implications.

903 Al-Sayyid, “al-Istishrāq al-almānī.”
904 See, for example, Barton, Biblical Criticism, 110.
905 Al-Sayyid, “al-Istishrāq al-almānī.”
906 Alois Sprenger (1813 – 1893) was an Austrian orientalist. See, for example, his The life of Mohmmad (Allahabad: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851).
907 Al-Sayyid, “al-Istishrāq al-almānī.”
Al-Sayyid's reaction to the translation and its introduction are indicative of a broader problem of western Qur'ānic studies, that is, their often normative claims. According to his own statement, he objected to Tamer's allusion that this book “could lead to the progress or development of Islam.” That a publication such as Nöldeke's carries political weight is supported by the fact that it was a political foundation that was responsible for its publication. The book was published by the KAS, whose personnel had originally planned to promote its publication in other Arab countries.\footnote{Interview Rahel Fischbach with Georges Tamer, December 3, 2012.} It is noteworthy in this context that only a year before the Nöldeke translation was presented at the Beirut book fair, the KAS had organized a conference during which Luxenberg's thesis on the Syriac origins of the Qur'ān had been presented.\footnote{Compare Ralph Ghadban's introduction to his article in \textit{al-Ḥāyūt al-Ṭayyiba}, a presentation of Luxenberg's thesis printed with a response by Zarāqīt, “Qirā'at armānīya,” 307-331.} The KAS is a German political foundation that works on “consolidating democracy, the unification of Europe and the strengthening of transatlantic relations, [and] on development cooperation.”\footnote{See mission statement on the KAS webpage: \url{http://www.kas.de/wf/en/71.3628/} (accessed October 10, 2013).} Apparently, the foundation viewed western Qur'ānic studies as a tool for furthering these aims. This fact did not escape some of the critics of the translation.\footnote{This link between development (\textit{tamnīya}) and the book's publication is alluded too ironically by al-Sayyid in “al-Istishrāq al-Âlmānī.”}

In conclusion, history has become one of the central components of contemporary Arab discourse. The question of history entails the conceptualization and archiving of Islamic tradition – in short, how it should be remembered. The dichotomy between revelation and history only makes sense once one has accepted history as a merely secular realm. This might seem like an obvious statement. However, it is only obvious to someone who has adopted a worldview from which the transcendent is already evacuated. Tamer grapples with the dichotomy of the human
and the divine and how to make sense of revelation despite history's confines on such an event. I suggest that his theory of revelation comes close to a theory of accommodation as exemplified in Jarādī, whose thought will be examined in a later chapter. The acceptance of a form of accommodation theory presupposes that one loosens the Cartesian dichotomy between the divine and the human. The step Tamer takes to bridge the gap between the human and the divine, namely the interaction between both in the act of revelation, can be brought into accordance with a form of history in which the transcendent is not absent.

In Tamer's account, however, it remains within a Cartesian conceptual framework. The modern concept of history does not allow for a transcendental category since it is tied to empirical data. Bracketing the divine in a historical approach to the Qur'an can still yield fruitful results for understanding the Qur'an in a better light. This approach only becomes problematic in the moment in which one posits its full application as necessary for the progress of society and links a particular epistemological understanding normatively to modernity and a universalized form of rationalism.

It is this political potential of historical-critical approaches that provokes their rejection by many Muslim authors who are concerned with the integrity of Islam and maintaining control over that tradition. Only rarely is the historical-critical approach introduced as merely one among other options of reading texts. Instead, with it usually comes an explicit declaration of its urgency for societal development. The following chapter examines how that political urgency has been articulated in the Lebanese context with a focus on Christian readings of the Qur'an.
VI. The Lebanese Interreligious Context as a Forum for Critical Ideas

Arguably, more so than in western countries, debates over religion in Lebanon are linked to politics because of the particular structural location of its religions between state and society that, according to Casanova, determines the public character of any religion.  

This chapter focuses on institutions and persons involved in interreligious dialogue in Lebanon – a context that allows for disseminating and discussing methodologies for reading the Qur'an in a way not provided in other contexts. I argue that Muslim engagement with historicizing approaches to the Qur'an in Lebanon is partly the result of answering Christian demands to historicize their scripture or, in some cases, of scholarly encounters.

In general, the confessional social texture in Lebanon makes qur'ânic studies not merely the concern of Muslims but of Christians as well. The Christian thinkers for their part engage in qur'ânic studies not out of mere scholarly curiosity but mainly fall into two camps. On the one hand, there are those who locate themselves as having a voice within the Islamic tradition as members of Muslim societies. On the other, are those who engage Islamic and qur'ânic studies from a polemical angle. All of them, however, negotiate their own Christian identity with the help of the Qur'an. Kropp and Conrad's assertion that historical-critical scholarship is merely neutral and disinterested will be once more disproven in this chapter.

The call for the application of the historical-critical approach to the Qur'an, recently often voiced by western thinkers, has been a common feature of Lebanese inter-faith dialogue for decades. The modern context has brought into question certain concepts and institutions for

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913 Heidi Hirvonen, Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Perspectives of Four Lebanese Thinkers (Leiden/Boston: Brill,
which Christians and other minorities in Muslim majority countries demand solutions and a new form of approaching the Qur’ānic text. Lebanon provides a unique case for interreligious encounters in the Middle East due to the relatively even power balance between Muslims and Christians. No other Arab country provides a similar opportunity for Christians to participate in government and society. This is true despite the decline in the number of Christians in Lebanon over the past seventy years and the fluctuation in the allocation of political, military, and economic power in the Cedar state. In that respect, Lebanon is an exceptional arena for the scholarly encounter of Muslims and Christians.

Yet, Lebanon has its own political and social problems and can hardly be described as a heaven for inter-confessional coexistence. That it has come to be perceived that way by several authors is the merit of some extraordinary intellectuals and activists who have tried to face the volatile situation in Lebanon from within their religious traditions. It may be noted that neither Muslims nor Christians in Lebanon constitute monolithic blocs but are highly diverse. Power and religion cannot be conceptually separated in Lebanon since the country has no civil status


915 From a historical perspective, Lebanon’s Christians “are not a monolith but a collection of distinctive groups possessing marked diversities. They broadly divide into three major denominational groups – the Maronites and the Melkites, both Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox, who are part of the Eastern Orthodox church.” See Sandra Mackey, Lebanon: Death of a Nation (New York: Congdon and Weed Inc., 1989), 30. The Civil War was similarly not a war between Christians and Muslims although it was at times perceived as such. For a comment on Christian-Christian violence, see Faḍlallāh, Afāq, 75.
law. The confessional communities govern their own personal status affairs according to their different laws and traditions. Consequently, religious identity and one's rights and duties are closely linked to one’s confession. The religious communities thus mediate between the citizens and the state, which tends to obliterate the line between the religious and political spheres.  

All eighteen officially recognized religious sects in Lebanon are assigned positions in the political system in proportion to the percentage of the population they allegedly make up. This system – political sectarianism (*al-tāʾifiya al-siyāsiyya*) – has existed in Lebanon since 1943. At the time, Christians held the advantage in both the executive and legislative branches.  

Seats in the parliament, as well as representation in the government and among employees in the public administration, were distributed according to a 6/5 Christian/non-Christian ratio. The alleged dependence of the “representative” system on the confessional demographics of Lebanon added to the politicization of the various religious communities.

Political power has been allocated according to the only official census ever taken in Lebanon (1932). There are no reliable current statistics on the number of adherents of the religious denominations. It is certain that the demographic balance has shifted considerably. This is most evident in the Shi’ite community that has experienced a dramatic growth in population and is estimated today to constitute about 40% of the Lebanese population. The unequal representational system and the static formula that failed to reflect the changing demographic reality of the country worked detrimentally especially for Shi’ites who felt restricted to a marginal

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917 In accordance with this arrangement, the president of the country is a Maronite Christian, the prime-minister is a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of parliament a Shi’ite Muslim. See William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600 – 2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 198.

918 Ibid., 194.
political role. The Ta'if Accord (1989) reallocated representation between Christians and Muslims to a ratio of 6:6, altering the balance of power between the different religious communities, enhancing the powers and prerogatives of the Muslim Sunni Prime Minister and decreasing that of the Christian Maronite President. The Civil War (1975 – 1989) and its aftermath have had a profound impact on the self-consciousness of the religious communities. During the Civil War, the Lebanese engaged in sectarian massacres that divided Lebanon into religiously homogeneous enclaves and impeded the realization of cooperative pluralist projects in the state. In Assaad Haydar's words, what was once “a federation of communities on an inter-confessional territory” was transformed into “a federation of mono-sectarian territories.”

The religious diversity in Lebanon does not guarantee any substantive form of religious or cultural synergy. Communities live separately, go to different schools, and often do not even enter areas perceived as belonging to another religion. A major factor in the miscommunication between the various communities is the fractured education system. For example, history books taught in public schools end with the independence of the state from French occupation in 1943. Every sect has its own version of the Civil War as well as its own collective memory and interpretation in situating their community in history. The contrasting views of history are being taught in the different private and parochial schools depending on the school’s location and sectarian affiliation and are therefore strongly biased. In addition, the media promotes sectarian

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919 Shaery-Eisenlohr, Shi’ite Lebanon, xi.
920 In the fall of 1989, the “National Charter for Lebanon” was crafted and signed in Ta'if by all sixty-two (including thirty-one Christian) deputies from Lebanon except four. Compare Harris, Lebanon, 255.
921 Quoted in Dagher, Bring Down, 84. 81% (680,000) of displaced persons in Lebanon are Christians, 19% Muslims. It was particularly Maronites who lived in cities, towns, and villages with other denomination while the other religious communities, even before the Civil War, lived in predominantly homogeneous areas. See ibid., 84.
identity as TV channels affiliated with certain confessions and their respective political parties insert fear of the constant threat by other religious communities. Often, interreligious dialogue becomes the only means for many participants to enter a shared space that has been lost through the Civil War and religious “cleansing.”

**Issues of Discontent**

Interreligious dialogue can challenge static beliefs or assumptions and bring participants into contact with new theories, methods, and thoughts. It was against the background of the tumultuous political situation in Lebanon and the Middle East that Christians and some Muslims involved in Lebanese inter-faith dialogue demanded from early on that historical-critical methods for understanding the Qur’an had to be employed, or at least a form of historicizing approach. Of course, not every intellectual or activist dealing with the Lebanese reality considers Qur’an hermeneutics as crucial for Muslim-Christian relations and conciliation. Muḥammad al-Sammāk, for example, stated that current differences between Christians and Muslims “d[id] not stem from disputes about religious doctrine but from long-standing disputes of history and power-sharing, disputes that affect[ed] day-to-day political decisions.” Faḍlallāh explained the sectarian conflicts along similar lines of argument. For these thinkers, the solution for the trust crisis in

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924 Sulaymān, “Muqaddima,” 22.


Lebanon was primarily economic and political and less religious, let alone methodological. The statements of these thinkers elucidate that they partially accept the modern concept of religion as a different sphere from economics and politics, even a self-acclaimed Islamist thinker, who considers Islam to be a comprehensive system (niżām shāmil), like Faḍlallāh. Otherwise, disassociating religion from violence, politics, and economics would not make much sense.\footnote{Faḍlallāh often refers to the “Islamic movement” (al-ḥaraka al-islāmiyya) as Islamists (islāmiyyūn). See Stephan Rosiny, Islamismus bei den Schiiten im Libanon: Religion im Übergang von Tradition zur Moderne (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1996), 2.}

While there exists the tendency to assert religion's innocence from violent acts and outbreaks, it is worth keeping in mind, that religious leaders (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) in Lebanon have first and foremost an interest in upholding clear boundaries for their communities – a fact that became evident in their rejection of then President Elias Hrawi’s proposed 1998 legislation sanctioning civil marriage. It was especially religious authorities, regardless of their affiliation, who fought the proposed legislation, which confirms the assumption that religious leaders have a strong interest in keeping their communities closed and defined. Their success in preventing the proposed legislation demonstrated the political influence of religious leaders.\footnote{Today, no civil marriages can be performed in Lebanon, although the state recognizes those done in other countries. One can see the tendency to maintain strong boundaries between confessions also in Faḍlallāh's advice to Muslim men not to marry women from the ahl al-kitāb since such marital alliance would weaken the Muslim identity of the children.}

It is against this background that scriptural hermeneutics gain particular relevance, even if they concern seemingly outdated concepts. For example, in reaction to the increasing Islamization, particularly the successful ascent of Hizbullah, and demands for the establishment of an Islamic state, Christians in Lebanese inter-faith dialogue called for a re-examination of the Islamic concepts of the theory of tahrīf, kufr (disbelief), shirk (polytheism), and the negative
consequences of being associated with *našāra* (the term used for Christians in the Qurʾān). A concept that has received considerable attention in non-Muslim writings has been *dhimmīs* (covenanted people) that sometimes led to discussions over new hermeneutics. The status of *dhimmīs* or the payment of the *jizya* are often connected to the famous “sword verse” Q 9:29:

Fight (*qātilū*) those who do not believe in God or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what God and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth among those who were given the Scripture - until they give the *jizya* from their hand while yielding (*hum ṣāghirūn*).

This verse caused debate among *mufassirūn* and orientalists alike, raising questions about coexistence of Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly the *ahl al-kitāb*, whether they should be fought or pay the *jizya*, and consequently what exactly the *jizya* is and stands for. The term ṣāghirūn can denote “humiliated, humble, servile, yielding, and slavish,” and thus suggests that paying the *jizya* is a humbling act. Under Islamic rule and firmly stipulated in Islamic law, *dhimma* came to denote Christians, Jews, and other *ahl al-kitāb* who paid an annual tax called the *jizya* in return for freedom and protection of person, property, and religion. The opinion of pre-modern jurists on the matter was almost unanimous that the *dhimma* status was linked to the

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929 Sulaymān, “Muqaddima,” 22. The Qurʾān uses the term *al-našāra* (once in the singular *al-našrān*) fourteen times as the most community-specific of the names employed to denote the historical followers of ʿĪsā, the messiah and son of Mary. In non-Arabic translations of the Qurʾān, the term is almost always translated as Christians. Sidney Griffith notes that Arabic-Islamic commentators have usually taken the term to be an Arabic word. In Griffith's view, *našāra* is probably a derivative from the Syriac *nāṣrāya* (Nazarene). See Griffith, “Al-Nasāra in the Qurʾān: A hermeneutical reflection,” in *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān: The Qurʾān in its Historical Context II*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 301-303.


931 The practice is justified on the basis of the Qurʾān and Sunna and in recourse to the so-called pact of ʿUmar (*shurūt ʿUmar*). However, in the Qurʾān, the term does not refer to the *ahl al-kitāb*. Nevertheless, *dhimma* came to have such significance in Islamic law that al-Bukhārī dedicated a whole book in his *hadith* collection to this topic. See Rainer Brunner, “Kein Zwang in der Religion’ oder immer noch ‘demütig aus der Hand?’ Diskussionen über die Kopfsteuer für Nichtmuslime im modernen Islam,” in *Zeitgenössische islamische Positionen zu Koexistenz und Gewalt*, ed. Tilman Seidensticker (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), 2.

disparagement of non-Muslims, a position that has been shared by a variety of modern Muslim thinkers, for example Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭanṭāwī, Muḥammad Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr, al-Mawdūdī, and al-Ṭabāṭabāʿī. In the current system of nation states these practices play no role, not even in the “Islamic states” Iran and Saudi-Arabia (in defiance of some pertinent requests for its implementation). Yet, there have been several instances in various countries, in which local groups who strove to implement an Islamic state either called for the jīzāya or actually forced local populations to pay it. More recently, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nuṣra introduced the institution again and thus realized the fears of many non-Muslim minorities.

In the 1980s, Hizbullah still saw Christians as dhimmīs or ahl al-dhimma, an institution they hoped to implement once an Islamic state was realized, Maronism being excluded from this “protected contract” since they were “hypocrites.” Christians have generally perceived the jīzāya practice in modern times as highlighting the differences and hierarchy between Muslims and other groups. While these practices have widely been abolished, the opinions of religious leaders on these issues are not meaningless. It was in particular in the high phase of demands for the establishment of an Islamic state in the 1980s that these practices did not seem so outdated after all and became concerns of those who saw their civil rights under threat. The most recent developments in the region, particularly the increasing political drift between Shiʿites and Sunnis, have brought questions of co-existence and violence to the fore with new force. Against this context, organizations engaged in interreligious dialogue have provided a space for developing

934 Ibid., 2-4.
935 Joseph Alagha, Hizbullah's Identity Construction (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 35.
new scriptural hermeneutics. Since the end of the Civil War in 1991, interreligious dialogue has become increasingly institutionalized. In the following section, some of these new institutions that can be viewed as furthering methodological debates will be introduced.

Institutions

Many Muslims were initially reluctant to engage in dialogue due to their vivid memory of western colonialism, the role the churches had played within colonialism, the western efforts at proselytism (tabshūr), and the prevailing western dominance.\(^\text{938}\) As the initiative for dialogue came primarily from Christians, they selected the topics of discussion and determined the procedure to be followed in the meetings, a fact that was noticed and criticized by Muslims.\(^\text{939}\) Organizations that focused primarily on dialogue were initiated extensively only after the end of the Civil War (1990). Only in the 1990s, Muslims became less reluctant to engage in interreligious dialogue.

Despite confessional tensions during and after the Civil War, Lebanon is a unique country in the Middle East regarding scholarly exchange due to the high percentage of Christians in the country, the significant number of higher educational institutions, and the relatively lenient censorship laws and free press. There exist several partnerships and cooperations between Muslim and Christian institutes, some already established during the time of the Civil War. An initiative spearheaded by Hisham Nishabeh with Augustin Dupré La Tour, André Scrima and


Professor Ibish established the Centre d’Études Islamo-Chrétiennes at the St. Joseph University (SJU) in 1977. The center aims to counter the developments of the war and has since provided an informal meeting space for Muslim and Christian students. Two years later, Nishabe helped in the founding of the Institute of Islamic Studies at the Maqāṣid Institute (IIS) and the Documentation Center for Islamo-Christian Relations. Its center for Muslim-Christian dialogue was opened in 1998. Educational programs sponsored by SJU and IIS provide a space for Muslims and Christians to study and learn together in an open academic setting. These two institutes have signed a protocol of cooperation and attempt to have each religion taught by its own adherents.

Thus, at SJU and the Institute of Islamic Studies at the IIS, Muslim scholars teach Islam while Christians teach Christianity. Such cooperative teaching can lead to new and common approaches in ethics, hermeneutics, and theological matters. Most of the thinkers we will be looking at shortly have at some point taught in the framework provided by St. Joseph or IIS. Several other universities and academic institutions have also established centers and academic programs whose main aim is interreligious thought and dialogue, such as the Center for Christian-Muslim Studies at Balamand University (Greek-Orthodox) in 1995. The university offers master programs and degrees in Muslim-Christian studies and organizes interreligious meetings, lectures, and symposia. They bring together scholars from Lebanon and abroad and

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940 Dagher, *Bring Down*, 221, footnote 1.
publish works on various aspects of interreligious relations.

The complexity of interreligious dialogue and religious diversity in Lebanon is well represented in the history and self-representation of the Center for Christian-Muslim Studies at Balamand University, which draws on the heritage of the Monastery of Balamand, built during the Crusades in the twelfth century by Cistercians. Three hundred years later, Orthodox monks took possession of the monastery. The Center for Christian-Muslim Studies consciously refers to the tradition “of learning and dialogue between the Antiochian Orthodox Church and Islam, a dialogue which has been unique in history since the beginning of the seventh century.” While the center stresses its Orthodox trajectory of interfaith dialogue with Islam and its ecumenical Christian past, its founding was motivated by scholars from the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The center yet represents itself and Eastern Christians as a mediator between East and West. Overall it aims at defending “the image of religion.”

The self-representation of the program at Balamand University indicates that several Lebanese Christian thinkers writing on Islam perceive themselves as sharing in this tradition. They represent Islamic turāth as being relevant to their own tradition, which can also be discerned in Tamer’s introduction when he stresses the rethinking of Islamic turāth as crucial for all Arabs. That non-Muslim Arab nationalists have emphasized the Islamic tradition is well documented in academic scholarship.

948 http://www.balamand.edu.lb/english/CCMS.asp?id=1451 The center also addresses other topical issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, 9/11, “religious extremism,” and the heightened binary division between East and West. Traditionally, the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch has underlined its Arab identity and ability to live in peaceful coexistence with Muslims. Its antagonism toward the West was also reflected in their relationship to the Maronites who were considered as western proxies. See Dagher, Bring Down, 60; ‘Aūn, Maqālāt, 190.
949 For example, Abu-Rabi’, Intellectual Origins, 43; Davisha Adeed, Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair (Princeton/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); C. Ernest Dawn, From...
background equally see themselves concerned with the Islamic turāth and directly impacted by that tradition. The scholarly debate in Lebanon is generally open-minded despite potential censorship. For example, most religious Islamic authorities I interviewed had read Nöldeke despite its official prohibition. Censorship can even serve as a catalyst for spreading ideas.

Outside of institutionalized dialogue forums, encounters and exchange between Muslim and Christian scholars can lead to methodological questions that do not arise in a homogeneous Islamic environment. For example, Būlus al-Khūrī, a long-time scholar of Islam and Christian theologian, who particularly focused on Karl Rahner in his theological work, has had a long-standing friendship with Jarādī, director of the Shi‘ite Ma‘had al-ma‘ārif al-ḥikmiyya (The Sapiential Knowledge Institute), whose thought we will examine closely in the next chapter. It is difficult to trace those personal interactions. Certainly, the institutional framework for encounter helps in establishing personal relationships.

Since 2002, under the directorship of George Šabra, the Near Eastern School of Theology (NEST) has been organizing interreligious meetings called Forum of Muslim-Christian Thought. The lectures and responses of the Forum were collected in a homonymous series of publications, termed “Dialogue of Truth for Life Together.” The Forum brings together scholars from different confessional backgrounds to discuss theological issues of contention, methodological differences, and hermeneutical problems. Participants in NEST-sponsored dialogues are mostly Lebanese and address an Arab audience. While some lectures have been delivered by English-speaking participants, those in attendance were provided with simultaneous translation and the lectures

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were subsequently published in both Arabic and English.

NEST sends out invitations to churches, mosques, and other Muslim institutions, offering an opportunity to attend and meet with a variety of religious intellectuals. Meetings are open to the public and structured to allow for conversations between lecturer and audience.  

The flexibility of the format provides an opportunity to follow up on particular issues. For example, in 2013 the only closed meeting in the history of the Forum was initiated by Jarāḍī, who had given a lecture the previous year on “the critique of religious texts.” He and some others felt the need for further discussion, and the thirty participants were invited to engage in discussion of Jarāḍī’s text. Importantly, NEST strives to reach scholars and thinkers who would not usually engage with western or Christian sources. Šabra attempts to diversify those engaged in the meetings, because, as he states, “we do not do much when we dialogue with people who have the same mindset to begin with. But it is tough to always find dialogue partners.”

An important new organization is the Adyan Foundation for Interreligious Studies and Spiritual Solidarity. The name refers to the conviction that for dialogue to be fruitful it has to be built on a solid foundation of interreligious studies that will lead to spiritual solidarity. The organization combines joint academic research with teaching and learning about each other. Part

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953 Rahel Fischbach, Interview with George Šabra, November 20, 2012. The participants included: Shaykh Shafiq Jarāḍī, Dr. George Šabra, Dr. Johnny Awwad, Dr. Silvie Avakian Ma’amarbashi, Miss Shakē Geotcherian, Dr. Habib Badr, Rev. Nabil Ma’amurbashi, Rev. George Al Kopti, Mary Mikhail, Dr. Peter Ford, Dr. Amin Farshoukh, Dr. Daniel Ayyouch, Dr. Nayla Tabbara, Richard Khoury, Mahmoud Youness, Dr. Maher Jarrar, Dr. Nader el-Bisrī, Dr. Issa Diab and three students of Jarāḍī. Information taken from the Forum program from February 4, 2013.

954 Ibid.
of Adyan’s ethos is joint reflection on theological concepts and texts, as well as societal and political issues.\textsuperscript{955} I introduce these institutions since we will encounter them again in several publications that have come out of these meetings and that deal partially with scriptural hermeneutics in regard to Muslim-Christian relations and religious violence. The unique demographic structure of Lebanon forces thinkers to weigh in the pluralist context. However, in the case of anti-Muslim polemics the same common space of intellectual influence can fuel a defensive stance that perceives historical critique as generally subversive of religious tradition.

\textit{Walking the Thin Line: Polemics, Theology, and History}

Before we turn to Muslim intellectual responses to the historical-critical approach, it is worth introducing some of the methodological issues raised by various Christians, within and without the context of Muslim-Christian dialogue. Lebanon has brought forth several Christian scholars who have studied the Qur'ān, respectively from a theological, historical-critical, and polemical angle. Examining these authors elucidates that the lines between these different purposes can easily be blurred, which is noticed by many Muslim scholars. Several Christian thinkers conceive of hermeneutics not simply as one of the keys for opening the Islamic tradition for new interpretations. Rather, they see it as \textit{the key per se} for arriving at a more open and tolerant, and as most seem to understand it, more modern perception of religion.

Since the founding of the Religious Studies Department at SJU, several works in Islamic and qur'ānic studies have been conducted by Christian scholars. Various texts from the 1990s suggest a frustration from the Christian side with their Muslim interlocutors, Islamic revivalism,

\textsuperscript{955} Interview Rahel Fischbach with Naylā Ṭabbāra, Skype conversation, August 23, 2013.
and the emerging Islamist movements.\textsuperscript{956} Frustration could also be felt in how history was being used or manipulated, as expressed by Khodr, who asked: “Why do committed Christian interpreters permit themselves the freedom to consider the flood [in Genesis] to be a Babylonian myth, and if a Muslim writer deals with Genesis, he says [the flood] is a myth, but if that same person writes about the flood in the Qur'ān, he affirms that it is an actual historical truth?\textsuperscript{957} Khodr is not the only one who called for historicizing the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān is not the Bible, and it does not have the same function or standing in its community.\textsuperscript{958} Nonetheless, differences of function, community status, and composition do not render the Bible and the Qur'ān incomparable. However, these differences do raise the question of the commensurability of the methods applied to these two scriptures. I think it is for this reason that Tamer calls for a dialogue rather than for an indiscriminate adaptation of any historical-critical method. The complexity of the relationship between a specific text and a particular method becomes more clear when we look at a concrete example. Khodr, for instance, acknowledges the fundamental difference between Bible and Qur'ān with respect to their standing and status in their communities, as they follow distinct pedagogic methods. While the Bible reveals universal values and principles through specific historical situations and human life, especially in the reality of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, the Qur'ān

\textsuperscript{956} Sulaymān, “Muqaddima,” 22-23.
\textsuperscript{958} Harry Austryn Wolfson suggested that the Qur'ān is the analogical equivalent to Christ rather than the Bible. The paradigm of \textit{inlibration} (“enbookment”) was introduced as an equivalent to the incarnation of the \textit{logos} in Christianity. Following this train of thought, while in Christianity the word becomes flesh, in Islam, the word becomes text (or book). See Wolfson, \textit{The Philosophy of the Kalam} (Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 50. George Šabra points to this analogy in his article “Mafhūm al-walī yīl-masliḥīya,” \textit{Al-Mahajja} 25 (2012): 111-112. It would be a thesis in itself to scrutinize whether this is in fact an apt analogy.
teaches not by means of history, but vertically, in the form of a thou-shalt message.\textsuperscript{959}

Consequently, Khodr recommends to read the Qur'ān on the basis of its own non-historical self-understanding: “The way of reading the Qur'ān [...] corresponds to the attitude of the Qur'ān because the Islamic revelation does not know any other. It is not historical.”\textsuperscript{960} In this passage, Khodr seems to commit to the view that the comparability between Qur'ān and Bible only goes so far. Yet, he asserts that Christians as well as Muslims can make use of the historical-critical approach without deviating from their tradition's teachings. In his view, all books, including scripture, have to be read in light of the context in which they emerged. Muslims could draw on historical studies to come to a better understanding of the Qur'ān without denying that the Qur'ān was divine revelation.

Like Tamer, Khodr is convinced that Muslims could review the concept of revelation by considering its human elements more seriously. Taking practically the position of the \textit{mufassirūn} by pointing to the \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl}, Khodr emphasizes that the Muslim understanding of the Qur'ān has always been rooted in history,\textsuperscript{961} a point several Muslim scholars would agree with. It must be noted that the \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl}, the practice of \textit{nāsikh wa mansūkhahu}, and reconstructing a historical context for reading the Qur'ān do not have to entail viewing reported miracles or, for example, narratives of the creation of the world in six days as historically inaccurate. One can well do without historicizing the content of the Qur'ān while affirming that it emerged in a particular cultural and historical situation. Khodr's thought regarding the historicity of the Qur'ān seems ambivalent. On the one hand, he insists on a radical difference between Bible and Qur'ān.

\textsuperscript{959} Compare Khodr, \textit{Afkār}, 141-142. My reading of Khodr follows mostly Hirvonen, \textit{Four Thinkers}.
\textsuperscript{960} Ibid., 134. Quoted in Hirvonen, \textit{Four Thinkers}, 147.
\textsuperscript{961} Khodr, \textit{Afkār}, 84, 141, 224-225.
and urges to take the self-understanding of the Qur'an seriously that he views as ahistorical, on the other, he demands that Bible and Qur'an be approached with the same hermeneutical methods. It may not be surprising that most Muslims see this demand with suspicion and point to the Sitz im Leben not of the Qur'an but of method itself.

Khodr can be grouped under Christian theologians who attempt a Christian reading of the Qur'an. From his theological viewpoint, he looks for the logos (the second person of the Trinity) in the Qur'an. To attest the presence of the logos in the Qur'an has a long-standing tradition among Arab Christian theologians. Simultaneously, it is evidently important for Khodr to assert the qur'anic independence from the biblical tradition. When Khodr affirms the ahistorical character of the Qur'an, he passes internal criticism on some Christian scholars who refer to Islam as a Christian heresy or who attribute the production of the Qur'an to Muḥammad. As Khodr clarifies, “The Qur'an is not historical and is entirely independent of the Prophet's intellect and psyche. It does not have any connection to the heresies that divided the Christian East during the sixth century.” Khodr wishes to disassociate himself from those theories offensive to Muslims that have been used in Muslim-Christian encounters to polemicize against Islam. We have already encountered the work of Luxenberg that must be read as a voice in the Lebanese context of Qur'an hermeneutics. The view that Islam was originally a heretical movement or developed in interaction with Christian heretics were early Christian responses to Islam during its expansion. An example of this type is the Byzantine Orthodox theologian John of Damascus (d. 753). In his

962 Khodr, Afkār, 32.
963 We will see this critique particularly in Jarāḍi’s approach.
964 Ibid., 126.
965 Bridger, Christian Exegesis.
966 Khodr, Afkār, 126. Translated in Hirvonen, Four Thinkers, 147. Translation slightly altered.
view, Islam was the “deceptive superstition of the Ishmaelites,” and Muḥammad a “false Prophet,” who knew the Bible only superficially and was influenced by an Arian monk.967

The theory of Islam as a Christian heresy and the ambiguities in the Qurʾān have long been used by Christian polemicists to discredit Islam. As Ṣabra notes, this position is still common among lay circles in the Middle East and Evangelicals in the West. Most contemporary Christian Middle Eastern scholars or theologians, however, refrain from calling Islam a Christian heresy.968 These older polemical themes have also drawn attention in western scholarship.969 For example, De Blois, basing his analysis on etymological and historical considerations, thinks that the Christians whom the Qurʾān knew belonged to some form of Jewish-Christian sect.970 Joachim Gnilka has drawn similar conclusions.971 In effect, what the Qurʾān rejects are heretical Christian ideas, not (orthodox) Christianity itself. Sidney Griffith forcefully refuted this idea:

The Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation that the Qurʾān polemically rejects are most reasonably seen as doctrines of the mainline Christian communities known to be in its milieu; there is no need to postulate the presence of other communities, for which there is no historical evidence at all of their presence, save in what the present writer takes to be a scholarly misreading of the Qurʾān itself. The misreading consists in the failure to recognize that in the pertinent passages, the Qurʾān is not reporting the views of those it calls Nazoreans; it is knowledgeably and rhetorically suggesting their absurdity from its own point of view and polemically rejecting them as wrong.972

The *topos* that Muḥammad encountered heretical Christians has, nonetheless, been persistent in

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western scholarship and argued by scholars such as Tor Andrae, Weil, Henri Lammens, Irfan Shahid, Giulio Basetti-Sani, and Bell.\(^\text{973}\) For Protestant missionaries, the thesis that Muḥammad rejected a Christianity that was heretical was a helpful explanation to convince Muslims that the Qur'an did not actually reject Jesus Christ and Christianity but a deviant form of it. The rationale is that had true Christianity been present in Arabia, events might have taken a different turn.\(^\text{974}\) The view that “Eastern Christianity” is somehow wrong is not obsolete.

Many western churches (both Catholic and Protestant) for centuries have questioned the authenticity of what they consider to be the “corrupt[ed] Eastern Christian churches” and deemed it necessary to send them missionaries.\(^\text{975}\) These views are not extinct as the work of Kenneth Cragg, scholar of Islam and longtime participant in interreligious dialogue in the Middle East, demonstrates. Cragg depicted Eastern Christians as having “the tendency to have [their] territory seen as a museum of history rather than an abode of living faith.”\(^\text{976}\) He also questioned the sincerity and orthodoxy of Eastern Christians. Their final hope consisted in Protestant missions as Catholic missions had also failed.\(^\text{977}\) Eastern Christians have never been immune to being orientalized. One can thus argue that by rejecting the thesis of the presence of heretical Christians


in Muḥammad's environment Khodr defends both the Qurʾān's accuracy and the standing of Eastern Christians who have long seemed obscure to academic western-focused production.

**Historical Critique and Polemics**

Two Lebanese Christian scholars, both writing under pseudonyms, whose ideas have been influential and controversial in the Lebanese scene, are Maronite monk Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī (Joseph al-Qazzi)\(^{978}\) and Catholic clergyman Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād (1915 – 2015). Mainly on the basis of etymological speculations, and to a lesser extent ḥadīth and sīra-tradition, they reevaluated the Qurʾān's position *vis-à-vis* Christians and explained many positions in Islam with reference to Christian heretical movements.\(^{979}\)

While al-Ḥarīrī's writings tend to be openly polemical, al-Ḥaddād aimed at a rapprochement between Islam and Christianity by means of this theory.\(^{980}\) He emphasized the relationship of the Qurʾān with earlier Jewish and Christian scriptures. Only in Medina the qurʾānic message was turned into a nationalistic community, yet still remained within the framework of its scriptural foundations.\(^{981}\) He rejected the idea that the Qurʾān claims that Christians and Jews falsified their scriptures (*taḥrīf*) or that Islam abrogated Christianity and Judaism, which he called an insulting innovation (*bidʿa*). On the contrary, “The Qurʾān accepts the guidance of the Bible, its narratives and legal rulings, […] without abrogating, refuting or rejecting them, nor [claiming to be] self-sufficient without them.”\(^{982}\) Thus, Luxenberg is not the

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\(^{979}\) Yūsuf Durra al-Ḥaddād, *Durūs qurʾāniyya I: Al-Infiṣal ilʾ-ṣūrʾān* (without date, publisher, or place, 196?), 283; Al-Ḥaddād, *Durūs qurʾāniyya II. Al-Qurʾān waʾl-kitāb: Aṣwār al-daʾwa al-qurʾāniyya* (N.P, 196?), 985.

\(^{980}\) The only western article that deals with his thought is, as far as I can see, Kenneth Nolan, “Al-Ustādh al-Ḥaddād,” *The Muslim World* 50.2 (1970): 170-177.

\(^{981}\) Al-Ḥaddād, *Durūs*, 15, 35.

\(^{982}\) Ibid., 46, 64.
first scholar who thinks that “the Qurʾān tallies with Christian Scriptures.”  

For both al-Ḥaddād and al-Ḥarīrī, the chronology of the Qurʾān is essential in explaining the emergence of Islam and highlights the difference between the Meccan and Medinan periods. In the works of both, Waraq Ibn Nawfal plays a central role in teaching Muḥammad a certain form of Christianity, and for both it is important to consider religions as human-made.

Al-Ḥarīrī started out as a scholar of biblical critical studies and of the Druze branch of Islam, which differs greatly from Sunni Islam in regard to social organization, structure, hierarchy, and religious doctrine. Henceforth, he turned to classical Islamic philosophy, which finally led him to the Qurʾān that seemed to him to make more sense when not read as a coherent work. Given his scholarly production, his interest in Islam was first and foremost academic. One may well surmise that his stance vis-à-vis Islam came to increasingly reflect his experiences during the Lebanese Civil War that was articulated along confessional lines. The experience of the Druze might have had an impact in that context as well. Both the Shi'a and Druze historically had sought refuge from Sunni persecution in Mount Lebanon. The Druze, who had never been granted legal status by the Sunni Ottoman overlords, espouse doctrines that deviate from many core Sunni and Shi'a beliefs. Often they were not even recognized as “Muslims,” and many of their members do not identify as such.

Al-Ḥarīrī's views suggest a more general distrust of religion. He has completely accepted

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984 Al-Ḥaddād, Durūs Qurʿānīya II, 410-114.
985 Judith P. Harik, “Perceptions of Community and State among Lebanon’s Druze Youth,” Middle East Journal 47.1 (1993): 45. Sociological data suggests that, even after the 1975-89 civil war during which the Druze drove out the Christians from their areas, the Druze continued to hold the highest sympathy for Maronites and other Christians when compared to other Muslim communities, particularly because of the growing power of Hizbullah among the Shi'a community. Compare ibid., 57.
the notion that religions are human constructs and therefore “Allāh barī min al-adyān” – God is innocent of the (actions of) religions. 986 Al-Ḥarīrī is critical of any religion. However, he sees in Islam a particular deviation from an originally spiritual path that was the initial work of Waraqa and Muḥammad. Al-Ḥarīrī's work indicates a strong impatience with Muslim understanding of the Qurʾān and Islamic tradition, yet he bases his work almost entirely on Muslim sources, which he approaches with historical-critical methods. He has made himself a name, and his book Qass wa Nabī (The Priest and the Prophet) 987 was published in its sixteenth edition before it was officially banned in Lebanon. It has been widely read by a diverse spectrum of readers and is more easily digestible by lay people than al-Ḥaddād's. Al-Ḥarīrī rejects interreligious dialogue as useless and deems a historical understanding of the Qurʾān necessary if any common ground between Christians and Muslims is to be realized. 988

His work links the Qurʾān to a form of Jewish-Christianity, namely the Ebionites whom he identifies with the naṣāra. Being a cleric himself, he must know that this theme was prominent among Christian missionaries. 989 Mainly drawing on Islamic material, al-Ḥarīrī reconstructs the story of the origin of Islam. According to him, Muḥammad was the descendent of a line of Arab clan leaders that started with Quzayy four generations before the emergence of the Prophet, many of whom belonged to a form of Jewish-Christianity. 990 According to Muslim sources, Waraqa was Khadīja's cousin who had converted to Christianity in pre-Islamic times and was knowledgable of the “scriptures.” After Muḥammad's first revelation, he was the first to affirm the legitimacy of

988 Interview Rahel Fischbach with Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, December 15, 2012. See also al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 213-216.
989 See, for example, Schlatter, “Die Entwicklung,” 251-64.
990 Al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 13-34.
Muḥammad as prophet of God.\textsuperscript{991} In al-Ḥarīrī's version, Warqa, a priest, recognized Muḥammad's spiritual tendencies and, seeing great potential in the young man, prepared him to become a priest and his successor as the leader of the local Christian community in Mecca. Al-Ḥarīrī finds this theory confirmed in the early qur'ānic verses, which call not to “Islam” but to the religion (\textit{dīn}) of Abraham. Under Warqa, Muḥammad gained familiarity with the Gospel of the Ebionites, known as the “Gospel of the Hebrews,”\textsuperscript{992} a scripture read by the Nazareans, who were Aramaic speaking Jewish-Christians of Palestine and Syria. Al-Ḥarīrī substantiates his theory by emphasizing that central Muslim rituals and habits can also be found among the Ebionites, such as anti-trinitarianism, the rejection of the divinity and soteriological function of Jesus, who was but a prophet in the line of other prophets, and the use of water and bread instead of wine in the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{993} Warqa translated the Gospel of the Hebrews into Arabic.

Much of al-Ḥarīrī's proof for this claim centers on the qur'ānic use of the words \textit{kitāb} and \textit{tadhkira}. In that context, “The qur'ānic descent is part of the previous descent or a clarification of what was sent down previously. Muḥammad's concern was to disclose to the people what had been sent to previous prophets.”\textsuperscript{994} It is not entirely clear whether Muḥammad did receive revelations in al-Ḥarīrī's account, but what he did receive did not deviate from the “\textit{wāhiy}” that went before him. The same is true for the \textit{sharī'a}. In al-Ḥarīrī's view, it was not Gabriel who transmitted the \textit{wāhiy}, but Warqa, called “\textit{khabīr ḥakīm} who taught him what he did not know” in the Muslim sources. For al-Ḥarīrī, the Meccan \textit{sūras} are obviously the arabized Ebionite

\textsuperscript{992} Al-Ḥarīrī, \textit{Qass}, 8, 63, 69-73.
\textsuperscript{993} Ibid., 16-29.
“Gospel of the Hebrews of the Meccan priest,” which also constituted the original and actual “Arabic Qur’ān.” Just as the Aramaic gospel of Matthew constitutes the source for all the other gospels, the Arabic gospel (i.e., the Qur’ān) is part of that same line of production.995 Islam in its original purest form is hence the same as the religion of the naṣāra and of Abraham (ḥanīfīya).

Al-Ḥarīrī clarifies that this kind of Christianity was not mainline orthodox Christianity and denied central doctrines such as the incarnation of Jesus.996 In his opinion, the influence of the Aramaic churches can be discerned in the Qur'ān's social and legal content as well as in its descriptions of paradise.997 Muḥammad's task was to instruct the people in the kitāb (scripture) and wisdom, making them aware of their sins, promulgating the verses of God, reminding them of the stories of the ancient prophets, and informing people of hell and paradise. He aimed at the unification of the divergent groups and parties into one unified community (umma). To that effect, he issued legal rulings that would eliminate usury, theft, infanticide, adultery, etc. and introduced rituals such as fasting and the hajj (pilgrimage).998 Muḥammad's predecessors had prepared the way for these innovations.

Only after Khadija and Waraqa had passed away, Muḥammad followed other converts to Medina. That he was still a Christian al-Ḥarīrī sees confirmed in Muḥammad's adherence to monogamy while he was married to Khadija. The Islam Muḥammad preached was even in Medina in the beginning not a new religion but a call to return to “what had been before” and the religion of Abraham. Yet, al-Ḥarīrī conceives a sharp divide between Medinan and Meccan

995 Al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 80-82, 88, 92.
996 Ibid., 104-109, 111-113.
998 Al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 193-194.
Islam. The original Qur'ān was Waraq'a's Arabic reading (girā‘a) of the Ebionite gospel and its translation (naql) into Arabic as well as some other materials he united in the Qur'ān, which explains the Qur'ān's “collection” (jam‘). Waraq'a and Muḥammad were successful in uniting various versions of the Hebrew Gospel, whereas the Church failed roughly at the same time to unite the four (orthodox) gospels into one in the form of the Diatessaron. ʿAl-Ḥarīrī thus reads the emergence of Islam against the background of broader developments in church history.

Emphasizing radical monotheism (tawḥīd), Waraq'a and Muḥammad also successfully united the divergent groups in Mecca who constituted various factions of naṣāra. In order to eliminate the various theological quarrels and to emphasize the unity of God, the Qur'ān required a moderation of the conflicting doctrinal stances, a lessening of legal rulings, and negotiation between the extreme views, which finally led to a “community of the middle” (umma wasat). ʿAl-Ḥarīrī thus imbues core Qur'ānic terms dexterously with a Christian or neutral meaning. For him, the Qur'ān clearly states that belief in both the Arabic and Hebrew “sending down” is necessary to be a follower of Muḥammad. A true follower of Muḥammad, i.e., Muslims, have to adhere to the Torah, the gospel of the naṣāra, and the (original) Arabic Qur'ān. Anyone who follows only the Qur'ān as we have it today is not a follower of Muḥammad but a follower of the muṣḥaf of ʿUthmān. ʿAl-Ḥarīrī does not spend much time on the explanation of the redaction process of the muṣḥaf. For him, it suffices to indicate that immediately after Muḥammad's passing, various factions of Muslims started to fight and favor different versions of Islam. They

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1002 Al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 85-86.
disagreed with regard to Muḥammad's whereabout and his succession, split up into warring groups and finally launched *jiḥād* against each other, instead of fighting the *mushrikūn*. These political, sectarian, and tribal conflicts are reflected in the contradictory views contained in the *muḥāfaẓ* that deviated from the original message of Islam. One can trace the confusion of textual variations in the *muḥāfaẓ*-Qurʾān when one considers the insertions of Meccan verses into Medinan *sūras* and vice versa. The current qurʾānic text is hence the outcome of political quarrels. The Qurʾān we have today still points to the lectionary written by Waraqa (the ur-Qurʾān) for the local Christian community in Mecca. This ur-Qurʾān is not only Christian, though in its Ebionite version, but also lacks any political content. 1003 Al-Ḥarīrī clarifies that the *naṣāra* in the Qurʾān are not to be confused with today's Christianity, but neither should one think that today's Islam was the Islam of the prophet. One must not “ignore historical truth!” 1004

Reading al-Ḥarīrī one senses his sympathy for the Ebionite version of the Gospel, which might be interpreted as an indirect critique of mainline Christianity just as it is an affront to Muslims. This assumption, however, remains speculation. The only orientalists al-Ḥarīrī uses are Tor Andrae, Denise Masson, and Nöldeke. The latter, in his opinion, did not advance critical scholarship much further than earlier Muslim exegetes. Rather, al-Ḥarīrī's approach follows historical critique as he knows it from biblical studies. He does refer to the works of Şāliḥ and Haykal, but sees them lacking in objectivity in regard to historical evidence, which led them to accept the “Islamic origin story” and ignore the encounter between Muḥammad and the Christians. In al-Ḥarīrī's reading, Islamic sources agree with his version. 1005 Above all, he relies

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1004 Ibid., 5-6.

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on the Qurʾān itself, even if in a highly selective way. One can argue that he pursues Christian
counter history by forcefully writing Christians back into Islamic history. He knows very well
that his study can be perceived as an insult to Muslims. In his view, Muslims only take issue
because they fail to accept that

The Qurʾān can be studied historically, that it entered history, and that it has any other
source but God. In their opinion, Muḥammad had no share in producing the Qurʾān […],
while the truth of wahi, as all the ancient prophets held, in whose genealogy Muḥammad
took so much pride, is based on the feebleness of human nature and historical changes. 1006

Al-Ḥarīrī gives the impression that Muḥammad himself would have adhered to historical
critique. According to al-Ḥarīrī, because of God's eternal love He interferes in human history, but
He does so in interaction with humans, who have a share in their own salvation. For that reason,
God's message must be based on elements that can be understood by the people He addresses.

Al-Ḥarīrī quotes Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, whose “reasonable words” led to accusations of apostasy.
For Ḥusayn, it was inconceivable for the Qurʾān to be “something completely new to the Arabs. If
it had been like that, they would not have understood or apprehended it, nor would they have
believed in it.” 1007 Al-Ḥarīrī notes sarcastically that little did “this man, who took pride in his
Islam, know that he did not only offend Muslims, but God Himself, and that his fellow Muslims
knew God as He is in Himself.” Their misguided assumption about their knowledge of God led
them to speak for God, “as if they could touch Him with their own hands,” while Ḥusayn simply
believed in the freedom and dignity of humans. 1008 These two concepts, human freedom and
dignity, feature prominently in al-Ḥarīrī's writings and can be understood as his ultimate concern.
He sees the cause for the lack of these two features in Muslim societies not only in the absence of

1006 Al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 186.
1007 Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Fīl-adab al-jāhili (Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif bi-miṣr, 1946), 78.
1008 Al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 187.
a historicization of the Qur'an; his concern is theological as well. Since humans are “weak and feeble” their opinions cannot carry absolute authority but have to be scrutinized. The way out of the dilemma is once again historical critique, which, for al-Ḥarīrī, entails a complete remodeling of the Islamic origin story. Above all, one has to allow for doubt in what al-Ḥarīrī considers human products (i.e., religion) and religious interpretation.

Again, the conviction that God adapts His message to humans does not imply that the Qur'an was authored by humans. However, human authorship is the presupposition of al-Ḥarīrī's work. For him, historicization far exceeds a historical context or the humanness of language and is directly linked to epistemology, that is to say, the conviction of human historicity and their limited abilities to know. Knowledge is clearly confined to the empirical. Furthermore, in al-Ḥarīrī's account, the Qur'an loses both political significance and its authority as self-possessed Islamic scripture. By reducing the political and social dimensions of Islam, he renders Islam effectually a private religion. Muslims would accept this view, too, if they could only be brought to reason and historical critique.

It goes without saying that al-Ḥarīrī's thesis is highly speculative; the historical material he uses is thin and needs a lot of imaginative creativity to be brought into the narrative he constructs. It remains impressive how he weaves together a counter-narrative to Islamic accounts on the basis of Qur'an, sīra, and tafsīr; which he brings into conversation with critical biblical scholarship that focuses on heretical Christian movements. Indication that his polemical style and intent are discerned as being linked to western historical-critical scholarship can be seen in rumors that speculate about al-Ḥarīrī's identity, wondering whether he is identical with Tamer or Luxenberg, or that he has been hired by the Vatican to debunk Islam. While these are just rumors,
they point to a perceived association between polemics and historical-critical scholarship.

Scholars involved in dialogue, like Khodr and Ṣabra, distance themselves from works such as al-Ḥarīrī's, whom they regard as a polemicist and therefore as an obstacle to a fruitful interreligious conversation. Reactions by Muslim authors have been, as to be expected, hostile, which does not bother the author much. He has no interest in dialogue with Muslims over historical work as long as they refrain from historicizing their sources and until they accept that “no revelatory book falls from the sky.” He is convinced that a historical revision of Islam and the return to what he considers true Islam is necessary for Muslims to overcome a mentality of fear and dogmatism. His reading is based on a strong dichotomy between a Meccan and a Medinan Islam and on the conviction that after Muḥammad's death the Prophet's followers betrayed his original mission and message. History did not correct the “distortions” of ‘Uthmān; but this does not mean that a revision and return to the true message is infeasible. Such revision remains impossible as long as Muslims do not “start to differentiate between God and their own views.”

Such a differentiation must start from debunking tradition and leads to a private form of religion. Al-Ḥarīrī thus combines Christian polemics with a liberal vision of the polity that rests on the freedom of the individual.

While Ṣabra warns against polemical approaches, he approves of a healthy self-critique of one's own religious tradition, especially in the contemporary context that is increasingly informed by pluralism. Historical consciousness is part of that self-critique and without it he does not think any dialogue can seriously advance. Such critique, however, should come from within the tradition. One of his main critiques of apologetic and polemical Christian readings of the Qur'ān

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1009 Al-Ḥarīrī, Qass, 210-215.
is that they mainly address the question of how Christians ought to think about Islam, instead of inquiring how they should relate to Muslims and Islam. This is only possible in an actual conversation, not in the isolated study of texts,\textsuperscript{1010} a task his own institute follows.

Some Muslim scholars, such as Jarādī and Riḍwān al-Sayyid, distinguish between al-Ḥarīrī and what they consider more sophisticated western and Arab Christian Qur’ān scholars. It is yet noteworthy that al-Ḥarīrī's method and theory do not differ much from what has at times been produced in western scholarship that follows equivalent lines of argument often on the basis of scarce material.\textsuperscript{1011} It is not surprising then that scholars like Reynolds quote al-Ḥarīrī as a serious scholar on the subject.\textsuperscript{1012} The theory of Islam as Christian heresy or as mainly addressing Christian heretics when it addresses Christians has also been part of a strand of historical-critical scholarship in the West and has understandably been conceived by many Muslims as problematic. Evidence for the sensitivity of the theory is the fact that both al-Ḥarīrī and al-Ḥaddād have written under pseudonyms, even though al-Ḥaddād has developed his thesis to advance understanding between Christians and Muslims.

The link between polemics and historical-critical research is one of the reasons Khodr objects to theories that link Islam to Christian heresies. Former priest Mushīr Bāsīl ‘Aūn similarly rejects thinking of Islam as Christian a heresy.\textsuperscript{1013} Despite polemical attempts, such as al-Ḥarīrī's, Khodr sees Arab Christians better equipped than westerners to engage in a fruitful

\textsuperscript{1010} Šabra, “Responses,” 14.

\textsuperscript{1011} Fred Donner in \textit{Muhammad and the Believers} as well as Crone in \textit{Hagarism} work with similarly scant material. For an overview of theories of Islam starting as a Christian heresy, see Griffith, “Al-Naṣārā,” 301-322.

\textsuperscript{1012} Reynolds, \textit{Biblical Subtext}, 7-8. Compare his footnotes on p. 7. It is surprising that Reynolds quotes Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī and Yūṣuf Durra al-Ḥaddād as if they were completely unbiased scholars.

\textsuperscript{1013} ‘Aūn, \textit{Maqālāt}, 191-193.
dialogue with Muslims. He conceives of Eastern Christians as principally more sensitive to Islam and the Qurʾān and calls attention to their knowledge of Islam and contribution to Islamic civilization. Scholars who have approached Islam from within a Christian framework and had an important role in interreligious dialogue are the Maronite Catholic priests Michel Hayek (1928 – 2005) and Youakim Moubarak (1924 – 1995). Their work, though adhering to a “Christian reading,” has been more scholarly and, therefore, more acceptable to Muslims.

Khodr calls for acknowledging the “otherness” of the other and thereby to appreciate the other's experience and differences. His view rejects any universalizing reason to become dominant in society. Plurality, for him, does not need the state to mediate the different belongings of its citizens. In order for a scholarly conversation to be successful one has to start from accepting the particular Islamic frame of reference when dealing with the Qurʾān without appropriating Islam's fundamental sources. For him, engaging Muslim sources is also an emotional encounter (al-talāqī al-wujdānī), not only an intellectual affair. The Qurʾān should hence not be read disassociated from Muslims.

This stance might seem counter-intuitive to scholars who think exclusively along historical and scientific lines. It stresses, however, that knowledge production is a consensual undertaking. This is true for the western academic framework as well. Khodr sees the scholar as having responsibilities beyond the dedication to history. This stance should not be mistaken for...

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1014 Khodr, Ḩaššāš, 134.
1015 Hirvenen, Four Thinkers, 67-68.
1016 Ṣabrā, “Responses,” 6-8.
1017 Hirvenen, Four Thinkers, 67-69.
1018 Blaut and Feyerabend argue that scholarly theories and convictions only slowly change and move in a confined space, regulated by the vocabulary, technicalities, and ethos of a field. Scholarly research trusts in its own authorities: “Verification can be waived on occasion, provided that the hypothesis is both conformal to interests and nicely compatible with existing beliefs, [...] it is most unusual for a new hypothesis or theory to become accepted as a belief if it contradicts the corpus of accepted beliefs in the field.” Blaut, Colonizer’s Model, 40-41.
giving in to unscholarly views due to political exigencies but can be understood as a sense of respect *vis-à-vis* the texts and traditions with which one is dealing. His view is also owed to his own theology that does not evacuate the transcendent from human activities. Khodr's “consensual scholarship” has made him a respectable conversationalist in the eyes of his Muslim dialogue partners.

The line between historical-critical scholarship and polemics is easily conceived as blurred. For example, al-Khūṭī faulted missionaries for attributing the production of the Qurʾān to Muḥammad.1019 Of course, the authorship of Muḥammad was also for a long time the scholarly paradigm in western qurʾānic studies. Al-Khūṭī also vehemently dismissed the thesis that biblical material influenced the Qurʾān. The use of historical-critical findings in missionary literature was sometimes the channel through which Muslims came into contact with western critical theories and methods. One does not have to extensively dwell on the connection between colonialism and missionary endeavors to understand that this constitutes a burden for any attempt at an even-handed discussion of the topic.

In his introduction to the Nöldeke translation, Tamer delineated the intricacy of European and Christian dealings with the Qurʾān and polemics and discussed the difficulties that accompany scholarly treatment of the Qurʾān in that respect. While he rejected the usage of forms of historical critique for religious polemics, he did propagate a specific secular vision and believed in the neutrality and objectivity of the historical-critical approach.1020 The association between historical critique and western institutions becomes evident in that it has been either

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1020 Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xiii.
western political organizations or western founded universities – such as the AUB (American University of Beirut) and St. Joseph – that have featured scholars such as Luxenberg in their programs and projects. Particularly the AUB has recently organized several lectures that focused on the Aramaic context or subtext of the Qurʾān, and SJU invited Luxenberg to a closed meeting with Muslim scholars.\footnote{1021}

**The Absence of Critical Studies of Christianity by Muslims**

A survey of critical studies on Islam and Christianity published in the past decades in Lebanon solidifies the picture that Muslim scholars were not greatly interested in Christian theology as a subject of critical study – a situation that has recently begun to change. In stark contrast to this picture, the abundance of studies on the Qurʾān by Christian scholars, some of them highly critical, would strengthen the thesis that the Qurʾān and new approaches to it are seen as a means to advance the reform of the Muslim communities, if not Lebanese society as a whole. The dealing with Islamic and Qurʾānic studies by Christians and the simultaneous absence of studies on Christianity and the Bible by Muslim scholars indicates an imbalance in the scholarly scene in Lebanon (or even globally?).

This situation allows for different interpretations. The first would be that some of the Christian scholars negotiate their own identity in a Muslim environment by means of grappling with the Qurʾān. While Islamic thought had from the beginning a theory or even theology about Christianity, and the Qurʾān itself deals with central doctrines of Christianity, Christians had to develop their stance on Islam after the fact. Several Lebanese Christian thinkers see themselves to a certain degree as part of the Islamic discursive tradition, at least as participants in the debate

\footnote{1021 Interview Rahel Fischbach with Muḥammad Ḥasan Zarāqīt, September 22, 2014.}
over Islamic historiography, as can arguably be seen in diverse authors, such as Tamer, Khodr, Luxenberg, and al-Ḥarīrī. The methods and approaches chosen, again, concern the question of what has Mecca to do with Jerusalem. Yet, their findings and agendas can differ considerably from European approaches and shed light on the different strategies of hermeneutics they are applying, which fits their context.\footnote{Kamāl al-Ṣalībī, \textit{al-Baḥth 'an yasā‘: Qirā‘a jadīda fi'l-injīl} (Beirut: al-Shūrūq, 1999) argues that Jesus's life took place in the Arabian peninsula, which also entails that most of Jewish history occurred there. This highly political thesis challenges Jewish and Hebrew historiography and therefore makes modern Jewish claims to the land of Palestine questionable. The work was, as can be expected, well received by Arab thinkers.}

A second interpretation would be that Christians view themselves and are perceived as not being in need of such reform that could be achieved through the re-assessment of their sources; because as Christians, standing in the western tradition of historical critique, they are believed to have already gone through the necessary steps and stages of “modernity” due to a critical understanding of their original sources either carried out by western or Lebanese Christian biblical critics. In the opinion of several Christian theologians, Christians have already gone through the period of disenchanting catharsis by means of the historical-critical method. Therefore, they expect Muslims to undergo the same process with regard to the Qur’ān, especially in view of the fact that Muslims at times do apply a form of historical criticism to the Bible, but allegedly reject any critique of the Qur’ānic text.\footnote{See Haddad, \textit{Contemporary Islam}. For an example of such a view, see Khodr, “Introduction to the Mutual Viewpoints,” 15. Quoted and translated by Šabra, “Responses,” 17; Rahel Fischbach, Interview with George Šabra, November 20, 2012.}

The treatment of scripture becomes in this context the \textit{momentum} for both: measuring Muslims’ development and progress as well as being the driving engine for this progress. Not only does such a view take a teleological development of human history for granted, it also
ascribes a special role to scriptural hermeneutics within this development. While this is certainly
the view of someone like al-Ḥarīrī, other important Christian voices have a much more
differentiated view of the religious scene in Lebanon and do not confine the call for a more self-
critical reflection to Islam and Muslims.

While not explicitly calling for historical-critical scholarship of the Qur'ān, ‘Aūn deems
an engagement with “modern thinking” to be inevitable for both Muslims and Christians in order
to create a plural civil society in Lebanon. In return, he also believes that Christianity and Islam
may be able to contribute to countering the pitfalls of modern thinking (such as relativism),
particularly by emphasizing the transcendent. In his view, reflecting on modernity as a mode
of thinking as crucial for both Muslims and Christians in order to create a plural civil society.

He consequently does not assume that the Christian communities have fulfilled the task of
self-critique, while the Muslims are still lacking in this project. Rather, he addresses both in that
respect because self-critique is, by definition, an ongoing endeavor. Modernity, one can infer, is
for him originally a western thing and characterized by critique. But secularity is not a
requirement for “critique” and modernity fluid enough a concept to be thought of “with gods and
presences.” ‘Aūn's consciousness of dialogue leaves modernity as an open category to be defined
globally and in diverse ways.

One of the main problems in the Lebanese context ‘Aūn identifies are the outside
influences on internal political and religious affairs. One can infer that thinking about religious
pluralism and one's confession's future in the multi-confessional Lebanese landscape is also an
act of self-assertion that is necessary to liberate the country from being “played” by foreign and

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1024 ‘Aūn, Maqālāt, 93-102.
often more powerful countries.\textsuperscript{1025} ‘Aūn calls Christians and Muslims to adopt a more open conception of truth from “modern thinking.” They could then accept plurality as an original and permanent phenomenon and regard truth as an object of continual search rather than fixed propositions.\textsuperscript{1026} With this suggestion he does not appeal to relativism – a stance he dismisses. We encounter here the same paradox as before, namely that the way to authentic independence from foreign powers is the adoption of their very concepts of thinking, even though ‘Aūn has probably mainly Iranian policies in mind when he refers to foreign powers.

The question arises whether modern thinking is in fact more open than pre-modern one. The criteria that lead to such a statement are not clear at all and seem arbitrary. All modern states have in fact a problem with pluralism when it concerns the legal sphere, ethnicity, nationality, and even religion. The “modern” ‘Aūn calls on to contrast with the current intellectual scene in Lebanon is an ideal more so than a fact and is based on the conviction that the production of truth in Islam and Christianity minus the modern cannot yield an embrace of pluralism.

‘Aūn aims to achieve a balance between ascertaining one's own identity while still remaining open to “the other.” He sees no alternative solution to Lebanon's political problems than to separate politics from religion. He has in mind a separation between politics as the administration of government and bureaucracy and religion that maintains a central role in the structure of the country for guidance, values, spirituality, and intellectual and social development.\textsuperscript{1027} The rationale of this political vision, one can assume, is that religion is bad politics and that politics reduced to administration is somehow neutral and value-free. For many

\textsuperscript{1025} ‘Aūn, Maqālāt, 103-105, 187-191.
\textsuperscript{1027} ‘Aūn, Maqālāt, 180. See also Hirvonen, Four Thinkers, 302.
Christian scholars involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue, a self-critique of one's religion also entails the textual and historical critique. They view academic critical research as the prerequisite for reconciling modernity with religion, and only then can one proceed to postmodernity.\textsuperscript{1028}

There is a third answer to the question why there are no significant scholarly treatments of Christianity by Muslims. Muslims are perhaps not that interested in studying Christianity for its own sake. For most of the time of interreligious dialogue in Lebanon, certainly until the late 1980s, Riwān al-Sayyid remarks that while the western participants were mostly experts on Islam and had studied Islam academically, Muslim dialoguers were not convinced that the study of Christianity in itself was a worthwhile pursuit. They were content with presenting what “Islam said.” Thus Muslim participants knew only little about Christianity, taking their information mainly from the Qur’an, which obviously does not inform about contemporary Christians.\textsuperscript{1029}

While the first and second interpretation of the absence of critical studies of Christianity and Christian sources undertaken by Muslims presented here clearly attest to the view that Qur’ānic studies is a political endeavor, the third interpretation also indicates a political significance of this imbalance as expressed by al-Sammāk:

For the West, dialogue aims at knowing better how Muslims think and how their analyses evolve, so as to be able to contain and subjugate them. Whereas the Muslims' intent is to show their good faith in dealing with Christianity, and subsequently, with western civilization, or to alleviate the European guilty conscience toward the Jews, in order to break the linkage between western Christianity [...] and the Zionist movement.\textsuperscript{1030}

\textsuperscript{1028} Informal conversations with several clerics.


\textsuperscript{1030} Muhammad al-Sammāk, Muqaddima ilā al-ḥiwaʾr al-islāmī al-masīḥī (Beirut, Dār al-nafāʾīs, 1998), 80. Quoted in Dagher, Bring Down, 54.
Al-Sammāk reiterates here the fear of being controlled by means of epistemic violence, while he ignores the role of particular experiences of Arab Christians in dialogue. For Christians in the region, Muslim hermeneutics are no tool of power but a way of dealing with their own identity and situation in majority Muslim countries. Šabra has summarized it thus:

Christians in the Near East have been living in an Islamic world for about fourteen centuries. This Islamic context has been the most decisive and determinative factor in the life, thought, and whole existence of the various Christian traditions in the region. It is only natural therefore that Christianity in the Near East has felt the need to try to make sense of that religion that came upon it from Arabia in the seventh century and has remained as the most dominant one in the region until today. The Christian attempts to respond to Islam have arisen out of a mixture of needs, motives and attitudes: the search for an acceptable mode of coexistence, the exigencies of survival, and the desire of a minority for acceptance by the majority.1031

According to Šabra, there is a “fundamental asymmetry in the starting point of dialogue” because “Islam already re-conceptualized (sic.) Christianity as part of its very identity.”1032 Šabra rejects polemics and apologetics for two reasons. First, they do not yield truthful outcomes, and second, they are counter-productive. Yet his view points to the possibility of Christian readings of the Qur'ān that identify as Christian. It is important to bring Lebanese Christians into the debate for several reasons. One may be tempted to dismiss their work as simply being polemical or as ascribing to a hegemonic West. Such an interpretation ignores that they write from within a position of asymmetrical power as well. Moreover, they have their own genuine and indigenous contribution to bring to Qur'ān scholarship.

We have dealt so far mainly with the rejection of orientalist scholarship and historical-critical approaches to the Qur'ān. In the following section, we will turn to two Muslim thinkers.

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1031 Šabra, “Responses,” 1.
1032 Ibid., 14-15.
who engaged with this kind of scholarship less defensively. First, Faḍlallāh and second, Naylā Ṭabbāra, who respond to Lebanon's multi-confessional landscape. Historical critique may play no visible role in the everyday thought and practice of Lebanon's Sunni and Shi’ite faith communities. Yet, considerations of historical-critical methods in relation to the Qurʾān have not been entirely absent from Muslim discourse. They can be triggered by university education, conferences, publications of the above-mentioned kind, or interreligious dialogue for which we see an example in the debate between Faḍlallāh and Khodr, printed in Fī Afāq al-Ḥiwr al-Islāmī al-Masīḥī (1994).

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1033 The discussion was printed in Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, Fī Afāq al-Ḥiwr al-Islāmī al-Masīḥī (Beirut: Dār al-malāk li'l-ṭibā‘a wa'l-nashr wa'l-tawzi‘, 1994).
VII. The “Traditional Milieu” I: Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh

Faḍlallāh (1935 – 2010) is known in much of western literature as “spiritual guide of Hizbullah.” Others call him a Muslim “liberation theologian,” while in Shi’ite circles his legacy came to be associated with openness, modernity, and rationality on the basis of his legal rulings, which caused stir among the Shi’ite establishment. He was born, raised, and educated in Najaf, Iraq, where he was trained in fiqh and usūl al-fiqh in order to become an expert in jurisprudence (faqīh).

Faced with secular ideologies, he began, together with thinkers like Bāqir al-Ṣadr, to work toward the politicization of Islam. In the 1960s, he moved to Lebanon where he started teaching, built social and charitable institutions, and became the representative of his former teacher and by then marja’ al-Khūṭī for Lebanon. In 1987, he received the title of Ayatollah from Khomeini. Shortly after the publication of his al-Masā’il al-Fiqhīya in 1995, his followers began to refer to him as their marja’.

Faḍlallāh meant to help build a Shi’ite Islamic movement that would counter trends that he felt reduced Islam to ritual and worship and enact a cultural Islamic revolution. In particular, his circle wanted to give Shi’ites the opportunity to identify with

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1037 He also loved literature and poetry and read a variety of different thinkers, such as Rousseau, Frantz Fanon, and Paolo Freire. See Faḍlallāh, al-Islām wa filasṭīn (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-dirāsa al-filasṭīnīyah, 1995), 7. For his time in Najaf, see ‘Alī Ḥasan Surūr, al-ʿAllāma Faḍlallāh wa taḥaddī al-mannīḥ (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Nawāfīl, 1991/1992), 33-40; Jamal Sankari, Fadlallah: The Making of a Radical Shi’ite Leader (London: Saki, 2005), 71.
1038 Annabelle Böttcher, Struktur und Lehre Transnationaler Islamischer Netzwerke (Unpublished Habil., Berlin 2005), 167-169; Surūr, al-ʿAllāma, 33; Rosiny, Islamismus, 144.
1039 The form of his Masā’il is similar to Bāqir al-Ṣadr’s Risāla ʿAmaliya (a compendium of legal opinions that follows a certain format). Faḍlallāh underlined with this format his attachment to al-Ṣadr. Compare Talib Aziz, “Fadlallah and the Remaking of the Marja’iyā,” in The most Learned of the Shi’a: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlīd, ed. Linda S. Walbridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 208.
a Shi‘ite Islamism. So far, Sunnis had brought forth all Islamist writings and movements. Similarly to them, Faḍlallāh considered Islam an all-embracing system and the solution to contemporary problems (al-islām huwa al-hall).\textsuperscript{1040} In Faḍlallāh's view, Islam entailed theological, philosophical, and spiritual aspects that one also finds in other religions as well as a civic and practical side that regulates human lives on a social and political level.\textsuperscript{1041}

In contrast to Qūṭb, Faḍlallāh never romanticized the early Islamic period. This may or may not be owed to the distinctly Shi‘ite construction of early Islamic history that differs considerably from Sunni accounts, particularly in the evaluation of crucial events and persons. Although Faḍlallāh was critical of certain aspects in Muslim societies, he rejected the idea that contemporary Muslim societies were living in a condition of jāhilīya, while some form of ignorance (jahl) was indeed present.\textsuperscript{1042} Faḍlallāh explained the gap between “true Islam” and Muslims on the basis of his view of humans. Muslims have always been impacted (and at times been corrupted) by their social surroundings owing to the fact that “God created humans weak” (khalaqa Allāh al-insān ḍaʿīfan).\textsuperscript{1043}

Because of his ecumenical approach, his engagement in inter-confessional dialogue, his interpretation of Shi‘ite history, and at times unconventional legal rulings, Faḍlallāh was attacked by other members of the Shi‘ite religious establishment to which he refers as “traditional society” (mujtama’ al-mutahaffīz).\textsuperscript{1044} While Faḍlallāh’s writings were temporarily even banned in Iran, an

\textsuperscript{1040} Sankari, Faḍlallāh, 67-69.
\textsuperscript{1041} Faḍlallāh, Ḡfūq, 68-69.
\textsuperscript{1042} See, for example, Faḍlallāh, Dunya al-mar‘a (Beirut: Dār al-malāk, 1997), 35-36.
\textsuperscript{1044} For more details, see Stephan Rosiny, “Libanon,” 9-13. Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, December 5, 2008. For a summary of the interview, see “A dialogue With the religious authority Sayyed Muhammad Fadlullah” http://english.bayynat.org/Interviews/Interview_13052008.htm
increasing number of Shi'ites outside of Lebanon, especially in the West, referred to him as their 
*marja*. That he demarcated his own position against a “traditional society,” sometimes calling it “backwards” (*mutakhallif*), indicates that he envisioned a progressive Muslim society. Progress remains in his vision the ideal to be aspired but is reformulated to entail non-secular ways of being in the world. We recall that progress in liberal theory was linked to the civilizational stages of history through which people had to pass. Faḍlallāh countered this liberal emphasis on history with a concept of progress linked to ethics, endorsing a certain way of life, and a view of history that entails the divine. His ideal society combines material progress, justice, humanity, and spiritual development – what Lara Deeb calls an “enchanted modern.”

In his conversation with Khodr, Faḍlallāh granted that a dialogue about the historical-critical method for studying the Qur'an could be fruitful. This statement was a direct response to his Christian interlocutors' insistence on the need to historicize the Qur'an as a precondition for an earnest dialogue. This concerned, for example, the biblical and qur'ānic creation stories that conflict with theories of evolution. Faḍlallāh had no qualms understanding the creation narratives in Qur'an and Bible in a poetical sense, not as scientific truth. In that context, he highlighted the long tradition of Muslim scholars who engaged in a critical way with the Qur'an regarding issues that contradicted reason. In his opinion, these previous critical deliberations verified that historical studies of the Qur'an were possible within an Islamic framework. They could be in congruence with the allegoric character of the Qur'an as long as one's critical results could be inferred by means of the rules of the Arabic language.

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1046 Deeb, *Enchanted Modern*, 5. For Faḍlallāh's use of these terms, see Muhammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, *Ṭa'ammulāt Islāmiyya ḥawla al-mar'a* (Beirut: Dār al-malāk al-ṭibā'a li'l-nashr wa'l-tawzi', 2005), 35.
As he argued, “Scientific historical analysis is not in contradiction with the Qur'ānic text.” Rather, the Qur'ān itself calls for deep reflection (tadabbur) that can entail scientific scrutiny of its details. For example, the time of creation could be understood allegorically to indicate a deeper meaning. Faḍlallāh emphasized repeatedly that no topic was taboo in an honest conversation about the Qur'ān as long as it followed logical reasoning. Such conversation could entail issues of revelation and the nature of the Qur'ān. For example, Faḍlallāh welcomed Abū Zayd's reflections on the concept of the qur'ānic text, although he thought they were partly erroneous. However, continuing to develop theories of revelation and the Qur'ān were inexorable for Islam's vitality. Being challenged by other opinions was a pre-requisite for free thought. Interreligious dialogue and conversation about the Qur'ān were yet only pieces in a greater framework in which freedom of thought was difficult to be enacted.

The lack of earnest dialogue, to truly listen to radically different opinions, was no characteristic of Middle Eastern societies alone, but a symptom of “our times.” Even societies that claimed pluralism as one of their fundamental constituents had difficulties in achieving true dialogue and freedom of thought. He granted that in Islam, certain thoughts, texts, and persons were considered sacred (muqaddas). Yet, “sacred” was always to be taken as hypothetical and should not be misapprehended as flawless or perfect since only God is absolutely sacred. The imperfection of humans was universal and applied to the Prophet as well, as indicated by the Qur'ān (Q 69:44, 17:73-74). Since all humans are prone to error, engagement with people who have radically different ideas of the world could help avoid getting trapped in one's own perhaps

1049 Ibid., 29, 191-192.
baselessly held views. Neither taqlīd (blind following of opinions and traditions) nor the rigid and often unfounded clinging to one's own way of thinking were traits confined to so-called religious people but constituted general phenomena. Extremism, no matter whether religious or secular, made thinking and dialogue impossible.

Faḍlallāh insisted on the sine qua non to let other people's opinions challenge one's own thought, earnestly engage in listening, and meet humans as humans. By emphasizing that people could not be reduced to only one dimension, Faḍlallāh meant to prevent generalizations about whole peoples. For example, one had to acknowledge the diversity of Muslim societies and be careful not to make absolute claims on “Islam.” In that context, he highlighted the multifariousness within the Islamic tradition that ought to be kept alive. In that respect, he would have agreed with Abū Zayd on the necessity of a diverse Islam. Yet, he did not come to as negative an assessment of the current Islamic condition as Abū Zayd. Instead, he saw much of the diversity that characterized classical Islam as still alive.  

It becomes obvious that for Faḍlallāh critique was a complex process that rested on the belief in human freedom to think by means of dialectical engagement with divergent view-points. Part of critique is doubt and suspicion of tradition; yet its aim is not debunking along the lines of a pre-established secular framework. Accordingly, Faḍlallāh cautioned against taking scientific methods at face value since they were sadly often based on speculation or uncertainty and in opposition to logic and reason. He affirmed the veracity and integrity of the Qur'ān, unless historical-critical scholarship could produce undoubtable evidence against it.  

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1051 Faḍlallāh, Afūq, 110.
attention to the fact that methods themselves had to be investigated critically and their scholarly value deliberated since methods were infallible, too.\textsuperscript{1052}

Contrary to some Muslim scholars who denied the right of non-Muslims to study the Qur'an, Faḍlallāh encouraged Christian and Muslim scholars to study each other's foundational sources. In his view, the religious texts were not the possession of any community. He even asserted that both parties could arrive at independent judgments (\textit{yajahid}) about the other's foundational texts. Christian and Muslim scholars (both called ‘\textit{ulamā}'), he declared, did not as a matter of course fathom their own texts better than an “outsider” in each and every detail.\textsuperscript{1053} Even epistemic violence could yield positive results since it forced people to think. He granted that certain forms of knowing could rescind other forms of reason due to certain configurations of power. Yet, he cautioned Muslims not to fall into a stubborn mode of resistance or apologetics. That would only limit their freedom to think from the outset. In short, a discourse of authenticity could be self-defeating.\textsuperscript{1054}

It is noteworthy that Faḍlallāh called for both Muslim and Christian scholars to study the Qur'an. His emphasis on the work of scholars demonstrates his faith in the scholarly endeavor. In his years of interaction with all kinds of professionals (Muslim, Shi'ite, Sunni, Christian, Marxist, and Atheist) he came to appreciate the human desire for knowledge. Muslims should approach the Qur'an as well as non-Muslim engagement with it with an open mind (‘\textit{aql munfattih}).\textsuperscript{1055} The statement that Christian scholars could contribute to research on the Islamic sources might also

\textsuperscript{1052} Faḍlallāh, \textit{Afāq}, 29.
\textsuperscript{1054} Faḍlallāh, \textit{An sanawāt}, 52.
imply a warning against amateur approaches to complicated questions. Faḍlallāh engaged with “lay people” on a regular basis. His own rigorous scholarly training made him at the same time sensitive to the challenge of uninformed opinions by untrained Muslims and Christians alike for the Islamic tradition. He almost seemed to prefer Christian or other scholarly non-Muslim informed assessments to Muslim unlearned interpretations of the Qurʾān. One can sense in the above statement an ethos of community among the learned and an elitist understanding of who owns the right to form expert opinions.

In Shiʿite Islam, any untrained believer should follow an established and recognized mujtahid, who is called source of emulation (marjaʿ al-taqlīd), in juristic and ethical decisions. Following an expert opinion is not the blind following of authority but rests on the conviction that proper interpretation of the sources requires a long-acquired expertise.1056 The Shiʿite understanding of ijtihād entails that it is impermissible to follow the opinions of a dead mujtahid or marjaʿ, unless a living one authorizes them. This imperative offers possibilities for a particular dynamic of change in Shiʿite fiqh since it forces jurists to engage with the primary sources anew and prevents them from simply adopting opinions from their predecessors. This practice led in the past to the curious phenomenon that there were time and again mujtahids who came to legal or ethical opinions that deviated (at times significantly) from the dominant legal consensus. This practice also emphasizes the hierarchical structure of learning in Shiʿism. It is in this context that one can understand Faḍlallāh's confidence in the competence of learned Christian scholars when

it comes to the Qurʾān since he is aware of their often similarly rigorous training.

With regard to the question of unrestricted academic study of the Qurʾān, Faḍlallāh could be described as diplomatic. He asserted that faith in the Qurʾān as divine revelation did not conflict with rational reflection on the details and nature of the text.\(^{1057}\) Concurrently, he accentuated the difference between truth and theories and contended that one had to follow the wording of the text, unless divergent views were definitely backed by historical research or rational thought.\(^{1058}\) Faḍlallāh never explained what exactly he meant by a historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān. Perhaps he felt he had to make a concession for the sake of Muslim-Christian dialogue. It is also questionable whether he was familiar with western Qurʾānic studies. However, in all his publications, one feels the urgency for developing new thought to respond appropriately to new problems. He repeatedly warned against falling into a state of mind that accepted an intellectual or cultural status quo. Instead, “New themes have to be discovered and new problems need new solutions. The door of thinking (bāḥ al-taḥfīr) must not be closed.”\(^{1059}\)

When he declared in the framework of Muslim-Christian dialogue that he welcomed Christian scholarly contributions to the Qurʾān, he maybe simply recognized that it is Christians who have a problem with certain Islamic views of Christianity. Therefore, they could potentially provide solutions or least alternative perspectives on certain issues. In that context, Faḍlallāh underscored the exciting opportunities that the ethnic and religious diversity in Lebanon offered for the development of intellectual thought.\(^{1060}\) Since Muslim exegesis directly effects

\(^{1057}\) Faḍlallāh, \textit{Afāq}, 29.

\(^{1058}\) See Hirvonen, \textit{Four Thinkers}, 129.


\(^{1060}\) For example, he was well aware of the fear of Christians in Lebanon of the establishment of an Islamic state and spent much time addressing this issue. See Faḍlallāh, \textit{Afāq}, 67-79.
Christians, they were perhaps able to shed new light on the verses they saw as problematic.

An analogy to his declaration concerning women may be permitted in this case, where he explained why women were in a better position than men to assess their reality. According to him, it was women who lived through the degradation and oppression of society. Therefore, they were better equipped to identify the problems and solutions to their situations: “Whoever experiences and faces a problem also has an increased consciousness for the the nature of a possible solution.” If one is not affected by particular social problems, one does not look for their solution either.\(^{1061}\) For that reason, the views of Christians on those passages in the Qurʾān that directly concerned them could also lead to new perspectives and to taking actual social realities into consideration. To work out those relations, Faḍlallāh explained, was an ongoing dialectical process predicated on fixed texts whose interpretation depended on changing circumstances.\(^{1062}\) These deliberations show that Faḍlallāh showed awareness of the historical conditioning of people. Yet, he also made it a point not to reduce reality to secular history.

**History in Fiqh?**

As mentioned before, Faḍlallāh affirmed that Muslims could apply historical-critical methods to the Qurʾān in their exegesis as long as the critical methods conformed to an Islamic epistemological, intellectual, and religious framework. The following section addresses two questions this statement raises: What exactly is an Islamic epistemological framework and does Faḍlallāh use historical critique in his own work? Or, more specifically, what role does history play in his reasoning and arguments?

\(^{1061}\) Faḍlallāh, *Dunya al-marʿa*, 28.
\(^{1062}\) Ibid., *‘An sanawāt*, 51.
In Faḍlallāh's case, “Islamic framework” mainly connotes the *fiqh* discourse, on which he draws to enact social, religious, and political change. In most of his writings, there is an implied dialogue partner, a discourse he perceives as western, often referred to as “enemies of Islam.” Yet, one can state from the outset that he did not perceive of historical critique as immediately foreign or “other.” His reflections on interpretation are linked to his vision for an ideal Islamic society, in which “the condition of a real Islamic consciousness in word and deed can be generated.” A turn to true Islam was needed to overcome backwardness (*takhalluf*) and realize progress (*taqaddum*) – a common theme among Islamic revivalists.

Backwardness was, however, not confined to Muslims, but characterized the political and cultural situation of Lebanon in general. In his opinion, Islamic renewal could happen through the enlivenment of *fiqh*. Yet, jurisprudents were similarly not immune to the mentality of backwardness, and texts produced in the Islamic tradition always reflected the circumstances in which they were written. One invariably had to pay heed to the difference between the divine and the human. The highest measure in Faḍlallāh's view was the Qurān, an unchanging text, while scholars were consistently influenced by their presuppositions, even if unconsciously.

As we have seen, many proponents of historical critique accuse “traditional Muslims” of conflating the interpretation with the object of interpretation. Faḍlallāh was very aware of this distinction. According to him, *fiqh* is the human attempt to understand and discern the *sharī‘a*, the divinely defined guidance (*al-hudā*) that is known absolutely only by God. *Sharī‘a* is the sum

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1064 Ibid., *Ta‘ammulāt*, 35.
1065 Ibid., *Afāq*, 78-79.
1066 Ibid., *Dunya al-mar‘a*, 18-33.
1067 Ibid., 28, 31.
of all *akhām* (sing. *hukm*). Each human act is judged and classified by God. Such a judgment is a *hukm*. The *akhām* have, according to many scholars, been established for an “eternity,” before the respective actions even emerged and are part of this world order, a kind of *lex aeterna*. To investigate this order, which is only possible by deducing specific rulings in a particular context, is the role of jurisprudents. Faḍlallāh understands *ijtihād* mainly in its legal sense. It is the process of inferring *akhām* on the basis of the Qur'ān and “the transmission of the prophet and his family” by applying “the principles and rules of *fiqh*.” The distinction between an eternally valid divine *sharī‘a* and the legal rulings that are the product of human effort, and hence fallible accords, is predicated on the theological conviction that only God is absolute (*muṭlaq*), whereas everything else is finite (*maḥdūd*).

This cautious view should not be mistaken as relativism. As Bauer notes, legal experts almost never claimed to have certain knowledge (*‘ilm yaqīn*) concerning any rule. “Certain knowledge” can only come from sources that are *mutawātir*, i.e., reliable in their transmission, which can be claimed decisively for only a few *ahādīth* and the Qur'ān. But even a *hukm* based solely on the Qur'ān is only certain when it is unequivocally clear (which is called *nass*). Otherwise, a Qur'ānic text is not *nass* but *dalīl* (a hint) or *qarīna* that can lead to a form of probable knowledge. In fact, *fiqh* often entailed highly sophisticated discussions of the limited possibility of human understanding.

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1068 The term *fiqh* literally means “discernment,” “ability to judge,” or “comprehension.” The process of reaching an understanding (*fiqh*) of the *sharī‘a* is usually referred to as Islamic jurisprudence or Islamic law. Compare Faḍlallāh, *Fiqh al-sharī‘a*, 7.

1069 Bauer, *Kultur*, 158.


1071 Ibid., *Qirā‘a jadīda*, 42. On the change of legal precepts under varying historical conditions, see Faḍlallāh, *Afāq*, 103.

1072 Bauer, *Kultur*, 174. *Qarīna* is the term Faḍlallāh uses.
Muslim scholars also recognized the difficulty entailed in understanding the divine texts, which evinces their attentiveness to the intricacies of the process of reading and to the limitations of thinking. Classical jurists, Bauer asserts, almost never branded their opponents' deviating legal opinions as “wrong.” The multiplicity of legal opinions is typified in the motto “kull mujtahid muṣīb” (every mujtahid is correct). Since no interpretation can claim absolute certainty, one can consequently not dismiss other opinions or new interpretations only because they are new.\(^{1073}\) Remarkably, the pluralism within the fiqh discourse was usually seen in a positive light.\(^{1074}\)

According to Faḍlallāh, because of the dynamic of fiqh, legislation (tashrīʿ) cannot be static. The ideal mujtahid should take into account the socio-political context in which Qurʾān and Sunna developed as well as the circumstances and presuppositions of her own times.\(^{1075}\) There is no doubt for Faḍlallāh that the Qurʾān is infallible.\(^{1076}\) Yet, concerning the ontological status of the Qurʾān, he would have agreed with Abū Zayd that the eternality of the Qurʾān contradicts God's divine unity. He even draws on the same analogy as Abū Zayd, namely that equating the Qurʾān with the divine is an act of shirk. In the view of both, the Christian conception of Jesus as the incarnation of God's word contradicts the Islamic view of God's simple oneness. Similarly, the Qurʾān cannot literally be God's eternal word.\(^{1077}\) From Faḍlallāh's point of

\(^{1073}\) Bauer, Kultur, 175. Several scholars argued that a faqīh or mujtahid can never know what precisely the Speaker means because he is always on the side of the listener. We mostly only have hypothetical knowledge about God's laws. It is natural that different scholars come to various results. This is an integral fact of Islamic law. See ibid., 165.

\(^{1074}\) This discourse differs from the theological discourse. See Bauer, Kultur, 184-185. Opinions such as Ibn Ḥazm's, who was allergic to the multiplicity of truths, even in fiqh, were not the majority view. On Ibn Ḥazm, see Moshe Perlmann, “Ibn Hazm on the Equivalence of Proofs,” The Jewish Quarterly Review 40.3 (1950): 279-290.

\(^{1075}\) While Sunnis rely mainly on the companions of the Prophet and his wife ‘A’isha for discerning the isnād (chain of transmission), Shiʿite isnāds consist mostly of members of the Prophet's family. Thus “sunna” has a different connotation for both. Compare Faḍlallāh, Fiqh al-Šarīʿa 1, 7, 13. See also ibid., Fiqh al-Hayāt, 30.


\(^{1077}\) Abū Zayd, Naqād, 162-163, 196. For Faḍlallāh's view, see Hirvonen, Four Thinkers, 192-194.
view, these ideas, the Islamic as well as the Christian about the eternality of the word, are erroneous since they lead to the plurality of eternal beings, i.e., to *shirk*.\textsuperscript{1078}

His agreement with Abū Zayd on the ontological status of the Qurʾān does not lead Faḍlallāḥ to giving up on calling the Qurʾān “word of God.” On the contrary, Faḍlallāḥ is convinced of the absolute trustworthiness and authority of the Qurʾān as the word of God.\textsuperscript{1079} Such a view is possible by viewing history as not mainly functioning without God, as Abū Zayd does. One could, of course, assume that their difference consists in form rather than content. However, while Faḍlallāḥ and Abū Zayd agree about the ontological constitution of the Qurʾān (God's message to the world formulated in a situational language), their hermeneutics differ.

I suggest that Faḍlallāḥ's approach be termed “implicit hermeneutics” that acknowledge the historicity of the interpreter, the distance between reader and text, but are ultimately predicated on ethics instead of on history for sound judgment. Positing the Qurʾān as the word of God does not reduce it, as Abū Zayd assumes, to a static, let alone unequivocal, meaning. Over and again, Faḍlallāḥ warns against taking Qurʾān and Sunna literally.\textsuperscript{1080} As he explains, to arrive at a legal ruling one first has to examine the situation to which a ruling should be applied. From there, one proceeds to understand the texts themselves. On the basis of this assessment one can

Discern the nature of the circumstances in which the texts were active and the view that advanced from them. And we may find indications (*qarāʾin*, sing. *qarīna*) that dismiss the apparent sense of the text, and that allow another interpretation appropriate for the [current] reality; or we discover that a *ḥadīth* is weak because it contradicts the firm foundations of the *ʿaqīda* that sets [the *ḥadīth*] in contrast to the “religious necessity” (*al-

\textsuperscript{1078}Hirvonon, *Four Thinkers*, 100-101, 167.

\textsuperscript{1079} Faḍlallāḥ, *Liʿl-insān*, 294-295: “The Qurʾān represents the truth about which there is no doubt in regard to its source, i.e., concerning its chain of transmission […]. [On the other hand,] when we direct our attention to the Sunna, we find plenty of possibilities for doubt, as well as possibilities to question what the reports transmit.”

\textsuperscript{1080} For example, Faḍlallāḥ, *Qirāʾa jaḍīda*, 19.
The judgment about the weakness of a hadith here rests on ethics, not on history. All extra-
qu'ānic texts must harmonize with the principles of the Qur'ān, the most important ones being justice and the oneness of God. The Qur'ān is the “first and the final reference point and we accept everything that harmonizes with it; everything that contradicts it we reject.” While interpretation is a dialectical process between reality of the reader and the text, Faḍlallāh objects to viewing the inception of the text similarly as the product of such a dialectic. Rather, reality raises questions and determines to which cases the texts can be applied. Thus, he can emphasize the necessity of the application of the shari‘a, while accentuating the changing circumstances to which it responds. Faḍlallāh acknowledges the difficulty in always understanding the Qur'ān unambiguously. Hence, he differentiates between the Qur'ān and its naṣṣ that forms the basis for the shari‘a. Qur'ānic naṣṣ is exactly not always naṣṣ (clearly understandable qur'ānic passages).

In general, he wants to avoid the impression of adapting his interpretations to un-Islamic demands and presuppositions. A manipulation of the texts that aims at their temporization must be avoided in any case:

We do not adopt the conciliative (tawfiqi) program that springs from the desire to be in congruence with the idea of the modernization (‘āsrana) of Islam, which consists in its subordination (khudū) to accidental variables that proceed from the dominance of particular ideas or a specific power. […] Our concern is to start from the realities of Islam that the decisive (qāti‘a) qur'ānic or prophetic texts contain in order to affirm these on the level of reality on the basis of the clear elements of the texts. This is what confirms the Islamic convictions to which we are committed intellectually, and we behave in accordance with the shari‘a. When we observe the lessons of life in their original elements, we do this with the conviction that Islam does not negate reality but affirms and operates in its legislation (tashri‘i) in harmony with it. This leads us to study those texts

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1081 Faḍlallāh, Ta'ammulāt, 8.
1082 Ibid., Dunya al-mar‘a, 23.
[in the Qurʾān] that are apparently in contradiction with [those realities], in order to find some hidden elements that will lead to an alternative understanding.

As in works of other contemporary Muslim thinkers, one can see a general trend in Faḍlallāh's thinking toward emphasizing the maqāṣid (intentions) of the Qurʾān and sharīʿa, a tendency that David Johnston has called “maqāṣidī.”1083 Faḍlallāh starts from the objective of the revelation and moves in his interpretation from the universal to the particular. In Abū Zayd's words, Faḍlallāh follows a descending dialectic (diyawāliktik hābit).1084 He uses the term ‘aqīda (often translated as doctrine) to denote the general spirit of the Qurʾān, i.e., the most fundamental Islamic core values that constitute the Muslim's guiding measure which can also overrule the Qurʾān's literal meaning.1085 According to him, any view that can be considered as contingent on time and circumstances should be discussed and not be considered as eternally stipulated. The Qurʾān is not rigid and inflexible since its interpretation depends on the reader and the context in which it is read.1086 Hence, while Faḍlallāh applies a kind of implicit hermeneutics, emphasizing the distance between text and reader, the act of reading is bound to a regula fidei of sorts.

Faḍlallāh's approach to the Qurʾān is value-based. The main reason for him to reject a ḥadīth as un-sound is not its historical weakness, but the fact that it contradicts the “firm

1083 David Johnston, “A Turn in Epistemology and Hermeneutics of Twentieth Century Uṣūl al-Fiqh,” ILS 11 (2004): 255. According to Johnston and Krämer, there has occurred a change in the method and process of fiqh in the twentieth century (compared to classical Islamic jurisprudence) with a tendency to emphasize the end of the revelation over specific textual passages that have legal import. This process is accompanied by the privileging of universal ethical principles (kulliyāt), usually referred to as maqāṣid, vis-à-vis the specific textual precepts (juʿzīyāt). See Johnston, “Turn,” 233. This is a different approach than merely looking for the ratio legis behind a ruling, the illa. According to Gudrun Krämer, the maqāṣid do not simply refer to the intention of a law, but to the moral implications of the revelation. See Gudrun Krämer, “Justice in Modern Islamic Thought,” in Sharīʿa: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context, ed. Abbas Amanat and Frank Griffel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 20-38, esp. 22.

1084 See previous chapter in this dissertation. Compare Abū Zayd, Mafhūm, 29.

1085 Faḍlallāh, Dunya al-marʿa, 23.

1086 Ibid., Qirāʿa jādīda, 19-20.
foundations of the ‘aqīda.’ \footnote{1087} He does pay attention to the chain of transmission and to the possible political and social circumstances that might have led to faulty and “un-Islamic” reports and interpretation, taking historical contingency into consideration. In that respect he states that the specific details that are explicated in the ahādīth are often liable to cultural and social circumstances. If they do not conform to the universals as laid out in the Qur’ān, they demand critical scrutiny of their soundness or unreliability in order to discern what might have impacted their production. \footnote{1088} Yet, when it suits his purpose, Faḍlallāh has no qualms of quoting an unsound ḥadīth to strengthen his argument. When ‘aqīda and history conflict, ‘aqīda wins.

On the basis of a broad range of Faḍlallāh's main popular and legal works, one must conclude that historical considerations do not play a significant role in his thought. One could interpret his motto that “any Qur'ānic principle will rule any hadīth that contradicts it invalid” as giving precedence to the more ancient source (i.e., the Qur'ān over Sunna). However, the criterion for this process is ethics, not history. While Faḍlallāh places strong emphasis on the consideration of reality (al-wāqi‘) in interpreting the Islamic sources, he mainly has in mind our own contemporary reality, to which he adapts fiqh rulings quite creatively. \footnote{1089} For example, to establish the equal right to sexual intercourse for women, Faḍlallāh advances the sources creatively. He draws on a range of different ahādīth to bolster his argument, admitting their weak isnād. This seems far-fetched at first, especially in view of the fact that in the very same line of argument he dismisses another hadīth on grounds of its weak isnād. \footnote{1090} In the case of the weak

\footnote{1087} See above. Faḍlallāh, Ta'amulūt, 8.
\footnote{1088} Faḍlallāh, Dunyā al-ma‘rā, 18-33, 41; ibid., Qirā‘a jadīda, 42.
\footnote{1089} As laid out in Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, Kitāb al-nikāh: Tāqrīrān lī-baḥth samāhāt āyat Allāh al-‘uzmā as-sayyid muḥammad Ḥusayn faḍlullāh Vol. 1, ed. al-Shaykh Ja‘far al-Shākkhūrī (Beirut: Där al-malāk īl-‘ibā‘a wa‘l-nashr wa‘l-tawzi‘, 2002), 7-11.
\footnote{1090} Faḍlallāh, Kitāb al-nikāh, 37-38.
\textit{hadīth} that he, nonetheless, wants to use, he refers to the strength of its \textit{matn} (content) that then rules over the chain of transmission and with it over history (understood as historical facticity). While one can infer that contextualization on the basis of factual history is not a heuristic device in his jurisprudence, he does employ history to foster his line of argument at times.

This hermeneutical strategy can also be perceived in his \textit{tafsīr}. It was in particular, the concepts of \textit{dhimma} and an Islamic state that propelled his Christian and secular interlocutors to call for the historicization or the “de-sanctification” of the Qur'ān. It is to these two topics, the Islamic state and the \textit{ahl al-dhimma}, that we now turn. His interpretation of the Islamic view of these concepts is a good example of his overall hermeneutics that leave room for historical concerns while being based mainly on universally perceived ethical principles and hermeneutical devices known from \textit{'ulūm al-qur'ān}.

His hermeneutics give way to a non-secular state that simultaneously included core democratic values and rationalities, even in his discussion of the seemingly ancient topic of \textit{dhimma}. One could suspect, as many scholars have, that democracy was just a placeholder for him until an Islamic state would become feasible. Yet, his concept of state is the modern sovereign state that has to manage religiously diverse people and maintains the mediator role between these different identities. However, this mediator role rests explicitly not on a concept of politics perceived as secular or neutral. Against those who posited the historicization of the Qur'ān as precondition for the realization of freedom (of thought, speech, and the individual, in general), Faḍlallāh articulated his own concept of freedom that opened politics for incorporating the local and religious, rather than ascribing to an assimilation to the familiar structure of generality called secularism.
Faḍlallāh’s View of the Ahl al-Dhimma and the Islamic State

Among the various Islamist movements the question of how and whether an Islamic state should be established was disputed. In the 1980s, Hizbullah still viewed Christians as dhimmīs, who would have to pay the jizya upon establishment of an Islamic state, a position they changed later on calling Christians and Muslims citizens (muwāṭinūn).¹⁰⁹¹ In Faḍlallāh's view, a theory of an Islamic state was part of Islam more generally and should be debated as a viable political option. However, particularly against Iranian voices, he highlighted that in the contemporary state of Lebanon with its multi-confessional make-up, an Islamic state would be impractical.¹⁰⁹²

The path for an Islamic state should commence on a grass-roots level and start with individual reform of Muslim selves. More important for him were the abolition of the confessional system in Lebanon and the disempowerment of the Maronite minority by means of a democratization of the system. Only in the “fantastical” case that the Lebanese voted in the majority for an Islamic state would such a project be feasible.¹⁰⁹³ While Faḍlallāh was also thinking of Muslims who objected to an Islamic state, he in particular had Lebanon's Christians in mind whom he wanted to convince that an Islamic state, based on a kind of social contract, could be something desirable for them. As any other modern state theoretician Faḍlallāh was concerned with negotiating the particular structural location of religion between state and society.

His ambivalent stance on the exact nature of an Islamic state becomes obvious in the differences between his theoretical and practical writings in regard to his treatment of dhimmīs and mushrikūn. Theoretically, he discussed the sword verse in his Tafsīr min waḥy al-qr'ān that

¹⁰⁹³ Ibid., 222.
was published when Faḍlallāh was still in favor of the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon, a position that has since changed. Yet, his *tafsīr* is still his official exegetical opinion. History as hermeneutical tool is marginal in his *tafsīr*. It is one among other hermeneutic practices, such as linguistic, philological, and thematic considerations.

On the basis of the sword verse, Faḍlallāh argued that coexistence between Muslims and *mushrikūn* was not possible, since they rejected Islamic rule and everything that Islam stands for. Importantly, *shirk* does not primarily designate “idolators.” Faḍlallāh uses it more as a code word for anything that inhibits the progress of society, such as the clinging to traditions, idols, and fantasies or the lack of any responsible and rational thought. *Shirk* burdens society's spirit and strengthens all the elements in society that obstruct the true liberation of human thought and precipitate enslavement to “fancies, traditions, and superstitions” that Islam has come to eradicate.\(^\text{1094}\) Faḍlallāh accepts here the Enlightenment paradigm of hostility toward superstition and reverses it by claiming that religion is the driving factor behind rationalization.

*Shirk* stands for more than unbelief in Faḍlallāh's thought. It represents anything that halts the liberation of society as a whole and is not confined to non-Muslims. Rather, Muslims also fall into these forms of unbelief, for example, when they are hypocritical, place something in their heart above God, or turn to prophets or saints for their needs. Unbelief and faith can exist in the same person. *Shirk* is therefore relative.\(^\text{1095}\) Faḍlallāh clarified that the *ahl al-kitāb* cannot be thrown into the same category with the *mushrikūn*. Christians adhere to heavenly scriptures that affirm the truth of God, even if they “have been falsified (*tanḥarif*) in some details.” He sees no


\(^{1095}\) Hirvonen, *Four Thinkers*, 194-196.
obstacle to the coexistence of Muslims and the *ahl al-kitāb* since there are sufficiently common doctrinal, spiritual, legal, and ethical values that guarantee a successful co-existence. In his words, “The positive elements outweigh the negative ones.” While pluralism of opinions and creeds is permissible, the rule of Islam guarantees society's safety and cohesion. Islam cannot allow people to remain outside of its control (*sulṭa*) and rule (*ḥukm*). A society that lacks political cohesion, i.e., one that has various authorities, tends to be ruptured, weak, and corrupt, leading to “ruin and destruction.” The unity of power (*waḥdat al-sulṭa*) must be guaranteed.\(^{1096}\)

This line of argument demonstrates that Faḍlallāh thinks within the line of a modern sovereign state that represents “citizens” and exerts control over them – core democratic values that he aims to bring into the framework of Islamic legal discourse. Once Islam as a legal, executive, and judicial (state-) system is established, it follows logically for Faḍlallāh that everyone has to adhere by its rule, “just as is the case with other [political] communities.” Within such an entity not everyone has to be Muslim and abide by Islamic rules in every-day affairs. However, Islamic control must be acknowledged. While Muslims have certain duties within such a state entity, non-Muslims have duties, too. Since the state provides protection and services for its citizens, they have to give something back in return. In the case of non-Muslims this contribution is the *fīzya*, while Muslims have to pay other Muslim-specific taxes from which the *dhimmīs* are exempt. In addition, *dhimmīs* do not have to perform military duty, as Muslims do.

This argument is, of course, a reversal of traditional exegeses, in which *dhimmīs* were not allowed to enter the military, while Faḍlallāh frames it in a way that they are now guarded from this duty. In his view, the *fīzya* is in no way to be associated with tyranny (*ta’assuf*) but with the

sharing of rights and duties among the citizens of an Islamic state. Since, in Faḍlallāh's view, the jizya, or any other tax for that matter, is connected to certain duties or respectively release from specific obligations, the form of the jizya can change, too. There is then room for interpretation and legislative flexibility for changes, some might be pardoned from it or its amount lessened.\textsuperscript{1097}

Faḍlallāh takes a middle position between those who simply want to eradicate the jizya theoretically and practically, and those who want to introduce it as a punishment or humiliation of the ahl al-kitāb. Instead of abolishing the jizya and the sharī‘a, he aims to examine the concept on the basis of the sharī‘a. The “rights” (ḥuqūq) of non-Muslims ought to be respected and an atmosphere created that is most conducive for the realization of an Islamic environment. Soroush has rightly noted that one of the markers of a modern worldview is “the emergence of the ‘rights-carrier’ as opposed to the 'duty-bound' human being.”\textsuperscript{1098} Faḍlallāh combines a discourse of duties with that of rights. In Soroush's view, “With the assumption of duties the society is seen as a temple whose purpose is to please its creator. The viewpoint of rights envisions society as a marketplace where the aim is satisfying the members.”\textsuperscript{1099} Faḍlallāh's political vision can be found in between these two poles but tends toward emphasizing rights over duties, at least in his practical considerations.

Faḍlallāh clarified that his stance should not be taken as apologetic or as giving in to those who wanted to limit Islam in its legislating capacity: “We can assert the positive and bright aspect of this Islamic legislation in that area [i.e., the jizya], whereby the religious feelings of

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\textsuperscript{1097} Faḍlallāh, \textit{Tafsīr}.
\textsuperscript{1099} Ibid., 64.
\end{footnotesize}
non-Muslim people are protected and cared for.”\footnote{Fadlallāh, Tafsīr:} In his view, Islamic rule is not simply self-serving for Muslims but also provides the best system for non-Muslims who want to practice their religion freely and seriously. No other system is better equipped for the sensitivities of religious people (even of non-Muslims) than the Islamic one because it respects and protects these religions as well. Since Christianity was in its essence apolitical, it did not conflict with an Islamic state.\footnote{Ibid., Afāq, 51, 60-62. He quotes Jesus here: “One should render unto Caesar what is his, and to God what is his,” “My kingdom is not from this world.” Ibid., 61, 50-51; 59-60; 103-105.} For him, it was a paradox that Christians tolerated Marxist and communist groups in Lebanon whose loyalty was by definition with Moscow, while they opposed Islamist movements, although the latter were much more favorable toward Christians.\footnote{He asked rhetorically: “Is Marxism closer to [Christianity] than Islam? Why do they fear the establishment of an Islamic republic that does not even have a realistic program and do not fear the establishment of a Marxist regime?” Faḍlallāh, Afāq, 68. See also ibid., 49-50, 71.}

The greatest threat in his view came from the U.S. and the erosion of values and ethics, whereas an Islamic state could safeguard Christian spiritual wellbeing on the basis of their common value and belief systems.\footnote{Ibid., 61-62.} His political vision divides the world into religiously minded people and others with the aim to deprivatize and politicize religion. He accepted many democratic principles, while challenging the view of secularism as neutral toward religion. Faḍlallāh’s deliberations on the jizya elucidate how he combines a classical hermeneutic framework with the concept of a sovereign state.

A specific question that he sees raised in the Qurʾān is what it means that it describes the ahl al-kitāb at times as “lacking faith,” which several exegetes have connected to the first part of Q 9:29 “Fight those who do not believe in God an in the Day of Judgment and who do not forbid

\footnote{Fadlallāh, Tafsīr:}
what God and His messenger have prohibited.” Examining several previous interpretations of
this verse, Faḍlallāh detects the first uncertainty in the identity of “rasūluhu” (his messenger).
This designation may pertain to Jesus for the Christians or Moses for the Jews. Other
interpretations hold that rasūluhu connotes Muḥammad as the last of the prophets. Faḍlallāh
rejects this latter reading since it contradicts the overall context (jaww) of the verse that explicitly
addresses their lack to adhere to the stipulations of their kitāb. Consequently, the Qurʾān critiques
their failure to adhere to their own faith and truthful religion (dīn al-ḥaqq).

The qurʾānic statement makes logical sense only if they had been given this religion to
begin with. Dīn al-ḥaqq is safeguarded according to the belief in the succession of prophets who
essentially revealed the same truth, “even if there are differences concerning the details of a
religion due to the difference of time that contains a message.” This position comes close to a
pluralistic view that sees the phenomenal forms of religions as contextual expressions of the
same divine reality and affirms the effect of history on the shape of institutionalized religion.
With the help of linguistic considerations, Faḍlallāh neutralizes the loaded language of Q 9:29. In
his view, “Until they pay the jizya out of hand, and they are sāghirūn” simply means to submit to
Islamic rule, which constitutes a sort of liberation because the ahl al-kitāb lived previously in
“rebellion and arrogance.”

Faḍlallāh assumes that this verse refers only to a part of the ahl al-kitāb. Consequently,
there are Christians who follow their religion properly and those who do not. Accordingly, the
fighting was confined to those members of the ahl al-kitāb who were not committed to their
religion and, in addition, were hostile toward Islam. Another indication for the validity of such an
interpretation is that the Qurʾān makes such a distinction concerning the ahl al-kitāb in more than

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one verse by using the formula “minhum” (among them). With the help of historical contextualization, Faḍlallāh rebuts another strand of exegesis that sees this verse as referring to all ahl al-kitāb. He dismisses this opinion since it is mainly based on the sīra and precedents in Islamic history, whereby the ahl al-kitāb were asked to pay the jizya “as a condition to gain 'citizenship' (muwāṭana).”\footnote{Faḍlallāh, Tafsīr.} In short, Faḍlallāh distinguishes between the plain sense of the Qur'ān and later historical accretions in exegesis.

Finally, Faḍlallāh examines the view that interprets the jizya as a punishment of Jews and Christians for holding on to unbelief (kufr), as al-Ṭabaṭaba’ī argued. The latter comes to this conclusion on the basis of several Qur’ānic verses that identify any association of God with other deities as kufr (Q 4: 150-151).\footnote{See al-Ṭabāṭaba’ī, al-Mizān IX, 250. Quoted in Faḍlallāh, Tafsīr.} While al-Ṭabāṭaba’ī conceded that Jews and Christians believed in God and Judgment Day, their refusal to accept Muḥammad as prophet and holding on to their falsified religions placed them in the same category as the mushrikūn since they were not truly monotheists (muwahhidūn). Faḍlallāh rejects al-Ṭabāṭaba’ī’s interpretation because it does not harmonize with the verse and goes against its apparent meaning that plainly states that those who do not believe are those who “do not believe in God and the Day of Judgment.”

The Qur'ān suggests consequently different levels of kufr. One refers to categorical unbelief that denies God's existence and the Day of Judgment. It can, therefore, be applied only to an unbelief (juhūd) in the fundamentals of faith. The second refers to those who deviate from certain details. In Faḍlallāh's view, the verse refers clearly to those who have internalized kufr, not to those who believe, but deviate in some details.\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, in his theoretical work represented

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by his *tafsīr*; his stance on non-monotheistic people is left ambiguous and may or may not include irreligious Muslims and Christians. This ambiguity regarding the definition of someone as (a-)religious drives home the point that people in general are “weak” and leaves interpretative wiggle room.

On a practical level, while an Islamic state remained the ideal futuristic vision, Faḍlallāh over all advocated a deconfessionalized, sovereign, and representative state model. Rejecting the feasibility of emulating the Iranian Revolution in Lebanon, Faḍlallāh promoted gradual and continuous societal reform from bottom-up. He maintained that the Islamic state was theoretically a valid idea, “just as Marxists would hold on to the idea of a Marxist state.” Simultaneously, he promoted an idea he called *dawlat al-insān*, whose concrete mechanisms he left vague. His constant comparisons between Islam and other ideologies suggest that he placed them in the same category. Since his views on an Islamic state and non-Muslim citizens were flexible, one can infer that he used these Qur‘ān-based interpretations to highlight the relevance of discussing alternative models to a secular state as well as the importance of ethics.

In his *Maḥṭiq al-Quwwa* (Logic of Power), Faḍlallāh painted a positive image of the constitution of Medina on which the status of the *dhimma* in Lebanon should be based in case of the realization of an Islamic state. The *dhimmī* contract ought to be predicated on mutual trust and consent, with each religious community having specific contractual obligations, granting

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Muslims, Jews, and Christians the same rights (ḥuqūq) as long as they refrained from committing treason. He propounded that the dhimmī status granted Jews and Christians religious freedom and encouraged them to strive together with Muslims for freedom and justice. His view of state and interreligious co-existence can partly be understood against his view of history. In an almost Marxist spirit, history is a confrontation between the strong and the oppressed (mustadʿāfūn), and only the strong and powerful can implement their thoughts and principles while the weak become the imitators of someone else. Therefore, power is important and it is an imperative to build a society founded on strong principles, which are at best Islamic.\footnote{Muhammad Husayn Faḍlallāh, Al-Islām wa maṭḥiq Al-qīwa (Beirut: Dār al-ḥurūf, 1987), 245-259.}

Undergirding his vision of state is a critique of capitalism and of the commodification of religion. It is in this context that Faḍlallāh developed his concept of freedom that transcends secular rationalities. Sounding reminiscent of Quṭb, Faḍlallāh argued that anyone who worshiped God and confessed God's unity was free in her relationship to other people and institutions. Refusal to obey oppressive authorities and to let anyone declare herself the master over other people were expressions of the human potential for political, intellectual (fikrī), and social freedom.\footnote{Faḍlallāh, Ḩūqūq, 46-48, 218-219.} The revolution of the oppressed did not only pertain to Muslims but also to Jews and Christians – all of them monotheistic religions that share a common ethos.

The current challenge was not that one religion ruled over the other, but that the rich capitalist Muslims and Christians ruled over the oppressed and poor and the imperialists over the third world. For these reasons, the problem of Lebanon was a structural economic one that could be overcome by a joint Muslim and Christian effort to realize a state on the basis of the oneness
of God, in which “humans are not made into gods, but in which one human is the brother of the other.” While Faḍlallāh assumed a Marxist view of history of sorts as a dialectical movement between the oppressors and the oppressed, the telos of this process, that is, a socially just future, was not exempt of the divine. The turāth, for Faḍlallāh, were not relics of the past but part of the present, which emphasizes the “now” of time. In Faḍlallāh's view, their renewal or interpretation did not rest on their historicization but on an ethical vision that foregrounds the human as being in relation with the divine. He rejected a view of historical time that posits certain elements in the present as “anachronistic.” In other words, his approach defies the temporal structure to think “the West first and then the rest” and instead presents a coeval view of time in which one can engage western thought earnestly without having to adopt it entirely.

The religious diversity in Lebanon did not require to be managed by a secular state that claimed to transcend these religious identities. On the contrary, religious diversity was actually an enriching experience. The ideal state for Faḍlallāh would grant all citizens (whether Communist, nationalist, Islamist, or liberalist) equal rights and duties, a fair representative political system, and freedom to any form of thought and political vision. Thus, in his writings that addressed the actual situation in Lebanon, not the theoretical case of an Islamic state, Faḍlallāh acknowledged the same rights and duties for all citizens independent of religious affiliation. In the 1990s, he saw such equality frustrated by the Maronite pre-dominance in politics. While he held on to the term dhimma, he suggested that this was merely one form of possible contract mentioned in the Qurʾān. Rather then dispensing with the concept altogether,

111 Faḍlallāh, Ajīq, 73, 78-80, 95-96.
112 Ibid., 67, 77, 101.
he redefined its meaning and reversed the traditionally given rationale for the institution. In that respect, he acknowledged the fears of Christians and other religious minorities of becoming marginalized and politically isolated under an Islamic governing entity.

One sees in these deliberations that Faḍlallāh refused to accept the marginal and private role that theories of modernity and secularization had predicted for religion. He objected to the separation between public and private morality and challenged the assumptions about state and market as being exempt from normative considerations. The effect of his stance is the re-politicization of the private and moral spheres and the normativization of the public economic and political sphere. As Casanova has demonstrated, such deprivatization of religion does not necessarily obstruct the differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms.¹¹¹³

It seems counter-intuitive to assume any kind of secularism for an allegedly Islamic state. However, if one accepts social differentiation as essential part of secularization, Faḍlallāh's vision can at least partially be described as secular. In addition, if we recall Taylor's characterization of secularism as a consciousness of alternatives to one's own truth and the freedom to choose among those alternatives, one can argue that Faḍlallāh falls into this category. This is not to suggest that the categories of secularism and religion are simply meaningless and can refer to just anything, but that his vision of politics shares important features with those traits that are often associated positively with secularism. What makes his state Islamic is his rejection of the necessity of an allegedly neutral secular state as mediator between religious identities that, in his view, would lead to the privatization of religion (both of Christianity and Islam) and the gradual secularization

¹¹¹³ See Casanova, Public Religions, 5-6.
of society. Faḍlallāh's vision of an Islamic political modernity brings together different logics of power: the logic of the quasi-liberal legal and institutional frameworks and the logic of another set of relations that are defined by fiqh and usually work on the basis of a hierarchical structure of society. Ironically, to achieve this alloy, non-Islamic religions have to be at least partially depoliticized and molded into a concept of religion that derives from the secularized forms of Christianity so central to the liberal-secular state model. In other words, Faḍlallāh views them as mainly spiritual without a claim to political power. Yet, he also grants them jurisdiction over personal status affairs while maintaining the dominion of Islamic rule.

To call Faḍlallāh's politics “traditional” would only makes sense if one posited modernity as uncompromisingly secular in regard to state, society, and thinking. It is worth keeping in mind that the centrality of fiqh for discussing the constitution of Islam and the organization of society is itself a modern phenomenon. Fiqh has come to hold a dominant claim to authority in the current historical moment. Acknowledging that this situation owes more to modernity than to the long history of Islamic thought and practice, Ahmad insists, “Law is a leitmotif of the modern human condition in a manner and degree unprecedented in any prior period of history.”

This is the case because modern states are based on structures of law and have the means to enforce them efficiently. Law defines modern humans “to a historically unprecedented degree as homo juridicus.”\footnote{Ahmad, \textit{What is Islam?}, 125.} It is a characteristic of the modern discourse among Muslims to define Islamic identity along the lines of sharī‘a and fiqh, which is often perceived as the normative discourse of Islam per se. In this context, and in anticipation of the subsequent Lebanese authors we will encounter, it is worth quoting Ahmad at length:
It is striking that so much of the discourse of modernist reformist Muslims – who have, for the most part, received the norms of modernity second-hand and by force of arms and coercive administration of European colonialism – about (what is) Islam has been about rethinking the Islamic state by rethinking Islamic law, and not about rethinking theology, philosophy, ethics, poetics, and Sufism as a hermeneutical means to modern Islamic norms. The relative lack of concern on the part of even the most self-consciously critical modern Muslims to re-think or reform normative Islam in terms of theology, philosophy and ethics – let alone Sufism and poetics – is one of the most peculiar, but also symptomatic, elements of Muslim modernity as modernity.\footnote{Ahmad, \textit{What is Islam?}, 125-126.}

There exist then different strategies to formulate a Muslim modernity. \textit{Fiqh} and history are both part of these strategies. To include a completely historicized view of the Qur'ān into the system of \textit{fiqh} is close to impossible since it would relativize \textit{shari'a} rules. As we have seen, history is present in Faḍlallāh's thought that entails, for example, the limitedness of human understanding and the conditionality of exegesis and some Islamic sources (e.g., the Sunna). \textit{Fiqh} presupposes the acceptance of historical situatedness of the interpreter and accepts a certain relativity of legal rulings. The validity of the \textit{fiqh} discourse depends yet on the authority of the Qur'ān and on the production of informed religious opinions. While historical considerations do not impeach the Qur'ān's authority, the acceptance of a complete historicization renders any form of epistemic authority impossible. The authority of the ‘ulamā’ would be threatened, too.

In the following sections, we will examine some Lebanese thinkers who want to rethink Muslim modernity outside of the \textit{fiqh} discourse, or at least see the Muslim condition less determined by straightforward jurisprudential questions. In particular, we will turn toward Sunni scholar and activist Naylā Ṭabbāra, who challenges the predominance of the \textit{fiqh} discourse and crucial features of Faḍlallāh's political thought. She does so on the basis of ‘\textit{ulūm al-qur'ān}, while she also draws on western historicizing approaches.
VIII. Constructing an Islamic Theology of “the Other” with the Help of Nöldeke: Ṭabbāra

It seems to be common sense today to assume that the choice of hermeneutics is closely tied to one's view of the ontological nature of the Qur'ān. Whether Abū Zayd, Wielandt, al-Ḥarīrī, or the Rand report, they all agree that without reconsidering the ontological standing of the Qur'ān, Islamic thought will remain in a deadlock. Abū Zayd, in particular, wants to revive the age-old theological debate over the createdness and uncreatedness of the Qur'ān and adapt it to a modern philosophy.1116 The Rand report views historical hermeneutics and foregoing the dogma of the Qur'ān as the word of God as necessary for Muslims to produce what the report calls “moderate readings.” According to the Rand study, such a hermeneutical shift will ideally lead to secular (and therefore presumably non-violent) societies.1117 The question whether considerations regarding the metaphysical nature of the Qurʾān actually impact the way we think about interpreting the qurʾānic text is an important inquiry. How one answers it may or may not decide over the hermeneutical approach one chooses for the Qurʾān and whether one considers theological questions or not. Does it make a difference for understanding the Qurʾān whether one deems its content and (possibly) form to have been eternally determined or not?

Ṭabbāra's approach suggests that viewing the Qurʾān as word of God is no obstacle to a historicizing approach or to challenging such concepts as dhimmitude, the jīzā, and theories of salvation. On the basis of her work, one can contend that ʿulūm al-qurʾān do not conflict with certain forms of historical-critical scholarship as long as the dogma of the divine authorship of the Qurʾān is kept intact, but that such an approach does not embody the full scale of western


1117 See Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam*, 37.
historicization. Ṭabbāra's work demonstrates that in order to achieve new readings compatible with a pluralist context a complete historicization is in fact not needed.

What is often taken to be the Islamic common-sense view of Christians and Christianity has for the most part been determined by tafsīr dismissive of Christians. Ṭabbāra addresses this interpretative situation by incorporating and utilizing the methods and presuppositions of tafsīr; instead of discarding them plenarily. She argues for a theology of religious pluralism on the basis of the Qurʾān and (to a lesser degree) ḥadīth and presents a powerful counter-example to the assumptions of the Rand report. Ṭabbāra's recent book Al-Raḥāba al-ilāhiyya: Lāhūt al-ākhir fīl-masihīyya waʾl-islām (Divine Hospitality. “The Other” in Christianity and Islam), is a contribution to Muslim-Christian dialogue that draws constructively on historical-critical scholarship, in particular on Nöldeke. Although Ṭabbāra uses Nöldeke in her work, she bypasses discussions about the Qurʾān's divineness or its historicity: “My idea is that it is not through the status of the text that you change, it is through the interpretation of the text and your relation with it.” For her, there is no sacred interpretation; yet, there is a sacred text.

Ṭabbāra does not touch upon ontological questions regarding the Qurʾān and refrains from metaphysical discussions, which makes it easier for her approach to be accepted in a more conservative environment. This, however, does not prevent her from utilizing Nöldeke's work on the chronology of the Qurʾān. One may assume that it is approaches such as Ṭabbāra's that would fall under Felix Körner's critique of many literary studies of the Qurʾān. He criticizes them for not

1118 For a survey of legal commentaries related to Christians, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Legal Exegesis: Christians as a Case Study,” in Islamic Interpretations of Christianity, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin Press, 2000), 54-78.


1120 Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Naylā Ṭabbāra, December 17, 2012.
being concerned with theology that he seems to identify with discussions about the ontological status of the Qurʾān. In Körner's view, these literary studies mainly view the Qurʾān as “deontic thou-shalt message.”

Ṭabbāra's work demonstrates that bypassing reflections on the exact process of wahi and the nature of the Qurʾān is not as reductive as Körner suggests.

To take the Qurʾān as a fait accompli and word of God can in fact be a meaningful way to achieve a theologically enriching and at the same time textually critical reading. Her work portends a certain irrelevance of discussions over the metaphysical status of the Qurʾān when it comes to hermeneutics – a claim that needs yet further exploration. Leaving aside discussions of ontological nature of the Qurʾān does not make Ṭabbāra's approach less theological. Far from it, her starting-point is a theological reflection based on the Qurʾān. Her focus on theology also does not exempt her work from political import. On the contrary, her political vision entails Islam as a public religion, without granting it hegemony over other religions (as Faḍlallāh does).

Ṭabbāra's approach elucidates once more that Qurʾān hermeneutics are in effect political since they always concern the polis and are particularly crucial in mediating religious belonging in a confessionally highly diverse context like Lebanon. Significantly, Ṭabbāra, as other thinkers presented in this thesis, believes in the change of society by means of qurʾānic interpretation. She has principally the interreligious situation in Lebanon in mind that still needs reconciliation. Her vision for Lebanon is one of lived religious pluralism. Her approach has no claim to impartiality and starts from explicitly social and political concerns. In Ḥanafi's words, she is a “problem-solver,” albeit no mere pragmatist either. Rather, she grounds her argument in

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1121 Körner, Koran Hermeneutics, 45.
1122 http://www.adyanvillage.net/Profile (accessed September 12, 2013)
1123 Ḥanafi, “Method,” 204.
Qur‘ān, Sunna, and the interpretive tradition while giving priority to the Qur‘ān.

Ṭabbāra is especially critical of the fiqh discourse that is often seen to be most indicative of Islam. In her view, the Qur‘ān's function and purpose have become static and curtate in modern society. Although the Qur‘ān is quoted to justify rulings, opinions, and politics, she detects a loss of dynamic in interpretation.\textsuperscript{1124} The Qur‘ān is referenced constantly and taken into the service of all kinds of projects, but debates are often led on the basis of what Kermani has called sūra-ping-pong – “a verbal exchange by means of qur‘ānic quotations pulled out of context.”\textsuperscript{1125} Verses are used without placing them in their immediate qur‘ānic, historical, or cultural context and thus lend themselves to whichever interpretation the reader likes.

Ṭabbāra discerns a general tendency to reduce the Qur‘ān to one among other sources in the fiqh discourse, even if it remains an important one, which has led to a loss of its multiple dimensions. Most contemporary approaches neglect the Qur‘ān qua Qur‘ān, that is, as valuable in itself. In her view, the modern turn toward law has led to the marginalization of the Qur‘ān and qur‘ānic studies\textsuperscript{1126} – a criticism that affirms Shahab Ahmad's observation and will also concern the subsequent thinkers in this thesis. To recall, Ahmad criticized the modern tendency to view Islamic law or shari‘a as emblematic of Islam. Islamic law and legal discourse have come to be seen as representing the authentically and normatively Islamic. Ahmad calls this the “totalizing legal-supremacist conceptualization of Islam as law,” in which fiqh comes to be viewed as the constitutive denominator of Islam. This conceptualization ignores that historically, Muslims came to terms with reality in multiple ways. This tendency to privilege the fiqh discourse neglects that

\textsuperscript{1124} Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Naylā Ṭabbāra, December 17, 2012.
\textsuperscript{1126} Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Naylā Ṭabbāra, December 17, 2012.
Muslims have always taken recourse to other normative discourses that were at times in conflict with the *fiqh* discourse. The exaggerated focus on *fiqh* lacks correspondence with a Muslim historical reality in which other norms sensibly competed with the legal discourse.

Instead, Ahmad demonstrates that *fiqh* was just one piece in the greater mosaic of at times conflicting Islamic normative discourses. It is worth remembering that the authority claim of Islamic law was partly due to the rise of the modern nation-state that is constituted and regulated by law. Its members are significantly more defined by law and subdued to its mechanisms than pre-modern people.\(^{1127}\) This realization commends taking Ṭabbāra's call for a move away from the *fiqh* discourse seriously as an attempt to re-introduce dimensions of Islam that have come to be omitted in the modern context. She actively, though implicitly, questions the modern self-constituted authority of *fiqh* to subsume Islamic discourse and aims to revive dimensions of other (and previously equally) normative discourses\(^{1128}\) in the construction of Islamic realities, in particular the Sufi one.

Besides the point that the *fiqh* discourse is disproportionally taken as authoritative today, Ṭabbāra, moreover, asserts that certain jurisprudential views are socially or politically not acceptable anymore. Often, it is greater theological assumptions that undergird those views. To efficiently change those views, one also has to embark on rethinking theology. One important aspect of her work is to open the debate for the endorsement of alternative Islamic realities that have, in particular during modernity, come to be neglected in the process of the “appropriation of reality” by Islamic legal theory.\(^ {1129}\) She claims that Islam has witnessed the loss of the symbolic,

\(^{1127}\) Ahmad, *What is Islam?*, 117-125.

\(^{1128}\) Ahmad argues that Sufi, Illuminationist, artistic, and other often marginalized Islamic discourses claimed and established Islamic normativity for themselves. See Ahmad, *What is Islam?*, 44, 54, 62, 71, 73, 80 etc.

\(^{1129}\) The “appropriation of reality” refers to Aziz al-Azmeh, “Islamic Legal Theory and the Appropriation of Reality,”
which has always figured prominently in Sufi exegesis. Her aim is consequently to appreciate anew the deeper meanings and rich imagery of the Qurʾān.

According to Ṭabbāra, drawing on pre-Islamic poetry and biblical material can in addition help to invigorate constructive interpretations of the Qurʾān and retrieve the symbolic that she encountered in her work on the Sufi tafāṣīr of sūrat al-Kahf.\textsuperscript{1130} She stresses that critiquing one's own tradition, its interpretations and methods, is a hermeneutical necessity. Theology is a human endeavor (even if concerned with the divine) and must, therefore, constantly be rethought.\textsuperscript{1131}

One of the reasons she has long focused on Sufi interpretations is their emphasis on the individual relation between believer and Qurʾān and the way they allow for a personal dialogue with the text.\textsuperscript{1132} The individualization of Qurʾānic interpretation can subvert the authority of the ‘ulamā’. In that respect, the Qurʾān and the direct treatment of it are very empowering in the face of an Islamic religious establishment that Ṭabbāra perceives as rigid. Implicit in Ṭabbāra's approach is thus a critique of the monopoly of interpretation that the Islamic religious establishment exerts. Ṭabbāra's exposition is an excellent example for the possibility of combining ‘ulūm al-qurʾān with historical considerations.

In the preface to their book, Ṭabbāra and her colleague Catholic Priest Fādī Ďaw declare that a major reason for its publication is to rethink the theological stance of Christianity and Islam on other religions and “otherness” more generally. Following Imām ‘Ali's statement that

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\item Johanna Pink argues convincingly that strong convictions about other-worldly salvation of non-Muslim religious groups influence how they are treated in practice, which means that theology, exegesis, and jurisprudence are interrelated on several levels. See Pink, “Monopol.” 59-81.
\end{itemize}
“the human is the enemy of what he does not know,” they want to familiarize both Muslims and Christians with their own religions as well as with each other’s. They note that ignorance is not the only reason for the hostility of many believers toward outsiders; political struggles and tensions have had their share, too, often going back centuries. Among the factors that impact intercultural relations, they list the presence of violence and extremism in the name of religion, mistrust toward western societies and associations (particularly when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian question) and, finally, ramifications of cultural frictions as well as despotism in many Muslim countries. The authors see both Islam and Christianity in need of revising their stance on other religions, indicating that violence is a problem for both. Such joint reflection takes the emphasis off Islam as solely in need of reform and posits it as a general intellectual requisite.

The two authors do not intend to present a comprehensive solution to all the problems at hand. Rather, they consider their own work as one among other possible solutions. While certainly not every social problem stems from theology, they contend, theological considerations in Islam and Christianity have had their share in creating a hostile environment for lived religious pluralism.\footnote{Tabb\'ara, Daw, Rah\'bat, 7-9.} As Thomas Scheffler asserts, throughout history,

Those who displayed the most rigid and hostile attitude towards any compromise and syncretism in religious matters were usually the professional “representatives” and specialists of religion: priests who were interested in preserving the ritual purity of their community, and theologians who, concerned with the intellectual purity of their beliefs, tried to develop them into a coherent body of strict norms and unambiguous regulations and, hence, tended to exclude or devaluate deviating norms and regulations.\footnote{See Scheffler, “Neither East Nor West,” 2.}

If one accepts Scheffler’s observation, Tabb\'ara and Daw’s theological approach gains relevance. They want theology to be a part of the solution, not the problem. As such, thinkers who argue and
reflect from within their religious traditions have the responsibility to provide reflections on the principles of their faith and provide constructive insight into the view of “the other.” As Ṭabbāra and Ḍaw enunciate, the religious thinker's task is to define “God's will responsibly.” Again, as will become obvious in the following deliberations, the authors do not reduce “God's will” to a simple set of rules or ethics but present a more holistic approach.

Both regard the conflation of identity and faith as a crucial problem in the Lebanese conflict that led even non-religious people to identify strongly with their particular confession. Ṭabbāra and Ḍaw criticize that the spiritual aspect of religion is being neglected in favor of identity politics. The importance of one's religion as identity fuels fears and poses a particular challenge for theology. Political tensions hamper the ability to perceive of “others” from a perspective of faith instead of politics.¹¹³⁵ In their view, theology can fulfill a critical function in correcting “human perversions in their various forms,” even if theology's efficacy vis-à-vis the political reality is limited. Venturing into theological reflections on other religions from the perspective of believers, Ḍaw and Ṭabbāra explore what either tradition expresses about the other on the basis of the premise that reflecting on other religions can draw believers closer to God.

Their endeavor is not simply meant to create respect and love for adherents of other religions but also to gain a better grasp of one's own religious truth. The authors are convinced that no one has to “water down” one's religious convictions to appreciate religious pluralism as well as one's own religious identity. They wrote this book jointly by using a method they call “dialogical theological disquisitions.” Taking the questions asked by outsiders from within their own tradition as their starting-point, the authors intend to move toward “coming into agreement

¹¹³⁵ Ṭabbāra, Ḍaw, Rahābat, 8-9.
with God's will.”¹¹³⁶ They alternated in writing the chapters that address such themes as theological foundations, the covenants between God and humans, the view of the other, soteriology, and religious pluralism.

Ḍav and Ṭabbāra do not shy away from asserting to be engaged in the search for truth. They reject the idea of relativism, while they acknowledge the limitations of human understanding and the influence of history and culture on human thought. It must be emphasized again that the acceptance of the partiality of human knowledge is not a modern phenomenon but is firmly rooted in Islamic tradition, not only in the fiqh discourse. For example, Mullā Ṣadrā considered all experiences of reality as partial even when knowledge seemed certain. In his view, the search for truth was unfathomable since reality is endless:

For Truth cannot be confined to a single (man's) intelligence and cannot be measured by any single mind. [...] Nor do I indeed claim that I have said the final word in what I have said, not at all! Because the ways of understanding are not restricted to what I have understood [...] for truth is far too great for any single mind to comprehend.¹¹³⁷

Ṣadrā's statement bespeaks the relativity of human insight. His view, of course, does not negate truth or declares a Cartesian-like doubt. To accept the partiality of human knowledge does not have to entail the total negation or privatization of any truth claims. This point is important to stress since it refutes the conviction of many post-Enlightenment thinkers, whom we have encountered so far, who see in history a tool to dispense with truth claims. The concession of the relativity of truth claims does not render Ḍav and Ṭabbāra's examination of Qur'ān and Bible relativistic. Rather, they intend to “counter a view of religion that is static and that negates

¹¹³⁶ Ṭabbāra, Ḍav, Rahābat, 9-11.
reality.” Their book provides the reader “with a source that states freely that the darkness of ignorance, extremism, and terrorism can never overrule the sun of truth and the good.” These bold final words of the introduction elucidate the urgency of Ṭabbāra and Dāw's approach. Their aim is to intellectually reclaim religion from people who have hijacked, politicized, and instrumentalized it. As Lebanese and followers of religions in a context in which Muslims and Christians have lived together for centuries and share a common history, they see their hermeneutic work as a common responsibility while acknowledging the boundaries between the two religions. Since we are concerned with Qur’ānic exegesis, I will focus on Ṭabbāra's account.

**God, the Qur'ān, and the Non-Muslim**

Ṭabbāra starts out from the conundrum that the Qur’ān contains many passages about adherents of other religions that seem confusingly contradictory. On the one hand, the Qur’ān entails verses that interdict to take Jews and Christians as friends or allies and even calls for killing them. On the other, the Qur’ān praises and celebrates those same religions and their adherents and talks about the unity of humanity before God, about respect, mercy, and openness toward other people as well as the vicegerency of all humans. The Qur’ān seems to present mainly two kinds of views with regard to other religions. One depicts them as brother (*akh*), the other as rival (*munāfis*). The Qur’ān simultaneously calls for tolerance (*tasāmuh*) and for subduing the other in the framework of an “Islamic society.” In the past, these apparently contradictory statements in the Qur’ān often resulted in exclusivist and degrading interpretations of Christianity and Christians. Ṭabbāra claims that many of the *tafāsīr* available today reflect an

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1139 Ibid., 33.
Islamic “discourse of empire” and power structures that functioned to the detriment of Christians and other ahl al-dhimma. She calls for a novel tafsir that is able to account for changed circumstances.\footnote{See her “Lecture of Nayla Tabbara,” at Notre Dame University, published December 17, 2012. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFLlQuizTg} This argument bears parallels to Faḍlallāh's explanation of un-Islamic attitudes Muslims developed from early on that reflected their social milieu and dynastic power struggles.\footnote{Faḍlallāh, Dunya al-mar'a, 18-33.} Indicating the influence of hegemonic discourses on interpretations is, therefore, no prerogative of thinkers like Abū Zayd or Arkoun who are, at times, branded as modernizers.

Ṭabbāra approaches the Qur'ān diachronically. She reads its verses in their immediate inner-qur'ānic context as well as against their historical background since “the verses depict the changeable (mutaḥawwal). They treat, oppose, and interact with the changing circumstances that were subject to a continuing interaction over the period of twenty-three years of the prophetic apostleship and the qur'ānic wahy.”\footnote{Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 44.} Note that Ṭabbāra does not state that the Qur'ān reflects those circumstances but depicts them. By insisting that verses reference a specific reality, Ṭabbāra avoids reducing them to these very circumstances. Alternatively, she understands the qur'ānic passages in light of the context they addressed and by paying attention to their semantics and inner-qur'ānic position.

Ṭabbāra's point of departure, however, is not the historical and circumstantial but the “absolute unchangeable,” as delineated in the Qur'ān. From the absolute she moves toward the specific and thus follows what Abū Zayd criticized as a descending dialectic.\footnote{See previous chapter in this dissertation. Compare Abū Zayd, Mafhūm, 29.} This is also the method taken by many fuqahā', such as Faḍlallāh, and philosophers like Jarādī, as we will see.
Ṭabbāra starts from the relationship between God and humans, “the arrangement of dhikr (remembrance) in the divine design”\(^{1144}\) that rests on two principles: “the search for God and the remembrance of an inner norm that becomes known through the behavior of humans and their relationships with their surroundings.” These two principles have accompanied humans since they were created and even before. As Ṭabbāra declares, “According to the Qurʾān, the history of humans with God began with a word – the word the human receives and the word she directs to God.” Following a common Sufi interpretation, the Qurʾān proclaims that all humans existed as souls before they became bodies on this earth. During this “existence before existence” (\(wujūd qabla al-wujūd\)), which Sufi and Ṣādiqian philosophy calls ‘ālam al-dhikr; God addressed all people, asking, “Am I not your Lord?” (Q 7:172). The “selves (\(dhawāt\)) were delighted […] and they answered with one voice: 'Yes (\(balā\)), we testify.’”

In Ṭabbāra's view, this exchange indicates that every human being (\(kāʾin basharī\) par took in this affirmative answer “\(balā\),” upon which God breathed His spirit (\(rūh\)) into them and bestowed His grace upon them (Q 9:32). Humans are God's preferred creatures whom he sustains consistently (Q 17:70).\(^{1145}\) For Ṭabbāra, these verses that tell of the human affirmation of God's initiative and love connote a fundamental covenant between God and humans in which all humans participate. According to Islamic theologians, this ur-pact between God and humans becomes reality in human \(fitra\) – their innate disposition toward God. Humans are naturally believers and monotheists.\(^{1146}\)

\(^{1144}\) Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 33.
\(^{1145}\) Ibid., 44-45.
\(^{1146}\) “So direct your face to the religion as \(hanīf\), [according to] the \(fitra\) of God, which he implanted in all people” (Q 30:30). According to the scholar al-Tirmidhī (d. 905), \(fitra\) is a divine trait or primordial nature with which God immersed all humans. See Ibid., 46.
This first “yes” of humans is not the end of the story. Thereupon, God “offered the Trust (al-amāna) to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and were afraid of it, but humans took on to carry it” (Q 33:71). Ṭabbāra is well aware that there exist several interpretations of this verse. In her opinion, three meanings of the verse should be kept together, namely that the Trust entails 1) responsibility, 2) consciousness, and 3) accepting right conduct. The entire human race entered this covenant and was endowed with agency over creation by God, becoming God's vicegerent (khalīfa) on earth. Humans can answer this call to responsibility in two ways. They can either accept or reject it.\textsuperscript{1147}

The qur'ānic story of the angel Iblīs who became an unbeliever and Shayṭān (satan) exemplifies this choice. All angels were ordered by God to bow before Adam. Only Iblīs refused, because he considered himself to be better than humans, which yielded God's rebuke. Iblīs' disobedience and arrogance (istikbār) was what turned him into a “disbeliever.” While there exist various interpretations of this qur'ānic narrative, all exegetes concur that satan's refusal to obey God's command and act accordingly represents arrogance which is also a characteristic of humans when they fail to worship God and lose the right conduct (al-taqdīr al-ṣāḥīḥ). Ṭabbāra emphasizes that vicegerency is based on both modesty and service.\textsuperscript{1148} These are the two covenants between God and humans, as explained in the Qur'ān and hadīth.\textsuperscript{1149}

Once humans entered the world of multiplicity (‘ālam al-kathra), they were impelled to remember their original disposition toward God. Remembrance is achieved on a personal level

\textsuperscript{1147} Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 47. For a similar view, see Izutsu, God and Man, 149-151.
\textsuperscript{1148} For the story of Iblīs, see Q 2: 30-34, Q 7:11-12. Compare Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 48-50.
\textsuperscript{1149} As deduced from Q 31:18 “Do not turn your cheek away from people in contempt and do not walk exultantly through the earth. God does not like every self-deluded and boastful one.” Also the hadīth transmitted by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī: “No one enters paradise who has in his heart as much as a grain of arrogance/self-conceit (kihr)”
through encountering blessings and tribulations that remind people of God. On a social level, wahy functions as such a reminder. While the Qur'an does not posit a form of “original sin,” it does know of human disobedience and weakness. God's involvement with history is not an act of salvation but of reminding people of who they really are and ought to be. In that context, obeying God and His revelation means to return to one's true self and fulfill one's innate potential to be human, in other words, to act according to one's fitra. The Qur'an also refers to itself as dhikr and thus places itself in a line of previous revelations. God sent messengers to all people in order to guide them.¹¹⁵⁰ While most of the prophets known are from Christian and Jewish tradition, the Qur'an also mentions some Arab and non-Arab prophets whose identity is not entirely certain. Al-Biruni, for example, possibly identified one of the mentioned prophets, Dhū al-Kufl, with the Buddha.¹¹⁵¹ The unnamed prophets open up a broad range of interpretative possibilities with regard to the qur'ānic view of religions beyond Christianity and Judaism.

According to Ṭabbāra, there are two essential points that materialize in the prophetic mission: “The call (da‘wa) and return (‘awda) to the worship of the one God through remembering, without referring to other gods; [...] and reminding humans of the fundamentals of a right ethical norm which the Qur'an calls the balance (al-mizān).”¹¹⁵² The mizān comes to accompany the revelation of God, which entails the messages of previous prophets, not only Muḥammad's. Importantly, the verses that reference the mizān are often linked to justice and right

¹¹⁵¹ It is not entirely clear whether al-Biruni actually identified the founder of the Sabean religion with Buddha. He calls him Yudhasaf. However, there seems to exist an approximate consensus among modern Iranian scholars that he indeed referred to the Buddha by that name. See Taymaz Tabrizi, “Ritual Purity and Buddhists in Modern Twelver Shi‘a Exegesis and Law,” Journal of Shi‘a Islamic Studies 5.4 (2012): 460-461.
¹¹⁵² “The sky He raised and established the balance, so that you do not infringe the balance, but measure in fairness/justice and do not shortchange the balance (mizān)” (Q 55: 7-9). See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 53.
ethical conduct toward others, especially the downtrodden and the oppressed. It may be
remarked that Ṭabbāra's interpretation of the mīzān bears significant parallels to Faḍlallāh's
ambiguous concept of shirk, which is precisely not to be reduced to a religious identity, but is
linked to conduct and one's disposition toward God. In his deliberations, however, Faḍlallāh can
not completely bypass the question of religious identity. The fiqh discourse partly functions on
the basis of categorizing people according to their religious belonging. Ṭabbāra, on the other
hand, opens up the possibility to conceptualize sharī'a outside of the fiqh framework without
giving up its normative claim.

She observes that the Qurʾān does not simply list some laws that resemble a canon. The
concept of mīzān denotes a justice that does not refer to some good deeds, but to becoming just in
one's innermost self, retrieving one's inner potential (al-qadr al-bāṭin) for true justice and equity
(qist). Mīzān, as a central Qurʾānic concept, entails “measuring out as well as consciousness, or
conscious sensitivity for measure/right degree (miqdār).” Mīzān applies to humanity universally,
because God has endowed all human beings with dignity. Since all humans are equal any person
and the entire earth have to be met with respect. Further, God refers to humans as one soul (nafs
wāhida). The Qurʾān summarizes this fourfold relationship between God, humans, the earth,
and the self with the expression “faith and the righteous work” (al-imān wa'l-'amal al-ṣāliḥ).

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1153 “We sent Our messengers with clear evidences and sent down with them the kitāb and the balance that the people
may maintain [their affairs] in fairness” (Q 57: 25); “It is God who has sent down the kitāb in truth and the
balance” (Q 42:17). Exodus 3:1 and Q 26: 181-183, Q 83: 1-3 state this similarly. See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 56. For
the link between justice and right conduct see Q 6: 152-153. Ibid., 53-54.

1154 She gives the following references: “When you judge, judge between them with justice. Indeed, God loves those
who act justly” (Q 5: 42, similarity, Q 49:9), Q 17:70, Ḥadīth: “The people from Sānūsīya are like the people from
Mashat. No one is above the other except in regard to devoutness.” “And when he goes away, he strives
throughout the land to cause corruption therein and destroy crops and animals. And God does not like corruption”
(Q 2:205). “Your creation and your resurrection be that of a single soul” (Q 31:28). Ḥadīth: “No one among you
has believed until you love for your brother what you would love for yourself.” See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 54-55.
For Ṭabbāra, these explications clarify that “doing what is right” is not merely a legal imperative; “doing what is right” indicates an existential and inseparable connection between work and faith that is predicated on and leads to human responsibility and agency. Combined with a desire to meet God in the hiddenness of one's self, this moral and religious imperative is the reason for revelation. The Qur'ān is essentially a continuous questioning of the human by God, consisting in “Am I not your Lord?” (a-lastu bi-rabbikum) eliciting a human response. This question is accompanied by a universal promise to meet Him (84:6). Thus, for Ṭabbāra, the Qur'ān is not to be reduced to a deontic thou-shalt message, a historical document, or law book. Rather, its function has cosmic implications that do not at all conflict with Ṭabbāra's historical hermeneutics. In fact, her historical considerations serve the purpose to be true to the cosmic dimension of the Qur’ān.

The Importance of Chronology

In order to say anything meaningful about the Qur’ān's relationship with non-Muslims, Ṭabbāra situates the particular verses chronologically, according to their approximate date of revelation. It is chronology where she draws on Nöldeke, whose classification of sūras she follows and modifies slightly.1155 For this project, Ṭabbāra does not need to historicize the Qur'ān to the degree that it becomes disenchanted. She takes seriously both its divinity (not just its divine origin) and its particularity as a revelation transmitted over the period of twenty-three years and thus remains in the framework afforded by Islamic tradition. Her reasoning is firmly Qur’ān-centered with some explanations taken selectively from ḥadīth.

There are two ways for humans to meet God. The first is divine providence that guides

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1155 Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 52-53.
humans to their fitra and instills in humans love for God without the medium of wahy. The second takes place through wahy that allows humans to discover their fitra through a particular religion.1156 In the second case, the human passes by way of Islam to faith and, finally, to doing what is beautiful (ihsan). This dimension of Islam entails serving God as if one saw Him, as laid out in the famous hadith of Gabriel.1157 Importantly, following Sa‘ūd al-Mawla's argument, it is not God Who reveals Himself after being hidden, but it is the human whose veils of obscurity are lifted in order to become the human she ought to be by means of rationality (‘aql).1158 Ṭabbāra sees this Qur'ānic incentive confirmed by Ibn Ṭufayl's (d. 1185) story of Ḥāyy Ibn Yaqzān, who lived alone on an island where he came to recognize God's oneness on his own.1159

The Qur'ān also exemplifies the notion of coming to see God in the narrative of Abraham, who shunned any other gods and found God.1160 In Ṭabbāra's view, Abraham symbolizes both the way of fitra and that of a particular religion, in his case the ḥanīfīya, which can be seen in the

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1156 Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 57.
1157 The hadith of Gabriel reads as follows: ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said: One day when we were with God's messenger, a man with very white clothing and very black hair came up to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, and none of us recognized him. Sitting down before the Prophet, leaning his knees against his, and placing his hands on his thighs, he said, “Tell me, Muḥammad, about submission (islām).” He replied, “Submission means that you should bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is God's messenger, that you should perform the ritual prayer, pay the alms tax, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to go there.” The man said, “You have spoken the truth.” We were surprised at his questioning him and then declaring that he had spoken the truth. He said, “Now tell me about faith (imān).” He replied, “Faith means that you have faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you have faith in the measuring out (qadar), both its good and evil.” Remarkably that he had spoken the truth, he then said, “Now tell me about doing what is beautiful (iḥsān).” He replied, “Doing what is beautiful, means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.” [...] Then the man went away. After I had waited for a long time, the Prophet said to me, “Do you know who the questioner was, ‘Umar?” I replied, “God and His messenger know best.” He said, “He was Gabriel. He came to teach you religion. Quoted in Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 58. Translation into English from Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, The Vision of Islam (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1994), xxv-xxvi.
qu‘ānic incentive to “direct your face toward the religion (dīn), inclining to truth (ḥanīf).” Adhere to] the ʿfiṭra of God upon which He has created [all] people.”¹¹⁶¹ Ḥanīf has traditionally been a difficult term, on whose exact meaning the Qu‘ān commentators disagreed. They even labelled it as yarību‘l-Qu‘ān – one of those words whose exact meaning is unknown. Following the majority opinion of the mufassirūn,¹¹⁶² Ṭabbāra understands ḥunafā’ (Sing. ḥanīf) as referring to monotheists before the founding of Islam; for example, when the Qu‘ān states that “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a ḥanīf and muslim (submitting to God). He was not of the polytheists.”¹¹⁶³ This interpretation concurs with post-qu‘ānic Arabic lexica in which ḥanīf is usually understood as “Muslim before Islam.”¹¹⁶⁴ Ṭabbāra calls the Islam of Abraham “Islam in its broad sense,” that is, submission to the one God. It is symbolic for other religions that are not practically Islam, but are, nevertheless, monotheistic and, therefore, approved by God, in distinction to its restricted form as an exclusively defined religion.¹¹⁶⁵

The qu‘ānic verse “The religion of God is submission (islām)” (Q 3: 19) is of particular relevance for Ṭabbāra's argument. Many exegetes, whom Ṭabbāra calls “the rigorous ones” (mutashaddidūn) or the traditionalists (taqlīdīyūn), interpret this verse as establishing and solidifying the superiority of Islam that is the only truly valid religion before God. Mainstream

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¹¹⁶¹ Q 30:30. Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 60.
¹¹⁶² François De Blois states in this respect, “In eight of its occurrences (2:135, 3:67, 3:95, 4:125, 6:6161, 16:120, 16:123) it refers explicitly to 'Ibrāhīm, the Abraham of the Bible and in all but one of these the verse goes on to say that the hanīf Abraham was 'not one of the associators' (mā kāna mina l-mushrikīn, or words to effect), that is to say, not one of the polytheists, who associate others with god.” See De Blois, “Naṣrānī and Ḥanīf: Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 65.1 (2002): 16-18.
¹¹⁶³ For Abraham's and Ismael's prayer see Q 3:67. Also Q 2:128, “Our Lord, make us in submission to You and from our descendants a nation in submission (muslim) to You. And show us our rites and accept our repentance. Indeed, You are the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful.” See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 60
¹¹⁶⁵ “Who is better in religion than one who submits himself to God while being a doer of good and follows the religion of Abraham, a hanīf. And God took Abraham as an intimate friend” (Q 4: 125). Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 61.
medieval exegetes solved the problem of apparent contradiction with the help of abrogation (naskh). Many muḥассirūn held that this one verse abrogated those verses that promised salvation to Jews and Christians. In the rationale of these muḥассirūn, whose tafsīr are still often followed today, the Qurʾān's depiction of Christians changed gradually, the later verses abrogating the earlier ones. Their theory of abrogating the particular verses that are in favour of Christians presupposes a particular chronology of the Qurʾānic verses.\footnote{For the use of naskh in Qurʾānic interpretation, see Powers, “The Exegetical Genre,” 117-139. On the persistence of tafsīr that follow this line of argument in the contemporary context, see Brunner, “Kein Zwang,” 1-22. A good example of a scholar who groups Jews and Christians under “unbelievers” is al-Jassās who followed a certain chronology of the Qurʾān and, moreover, held that the Sunna could abrogate the Qurʾān in particular circumstances. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Legal Exegesis: Christians as a Case Study” in Islamic Interpretations of Christianity, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin Press, 2000), 62-64.}

Ṭabbāra contends that the interpretation of this verse most congruous with the Qurʾān's overall theology, language, and semantics must be that this passage refers to islām as submission rather than to Islam as restrictedly defined religion. To fortify her argument, Ṭabbāra draws on the several other verses and the qirāʿāt literature, quoting the qirāʿa of Ubayy that substitutes the word islām in the same verse with the term hanīfiya. Ubayy's reading contains not only a change in pronunciation, but in the rasm itself. She concludes that islām in its broad sense entails any individual, social, or spiritual experience that affirms the oneness of God and submission to Him.\footnote{See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 62. See in particular footnote 12. “They say, ‘Be Jews or Christians [so] you will be guided.’ Say, ‘Rather, [we follow] the religion of Abraham, inclining toward truth, and he was not of the polytheists’” (Q 2: 135).} Further, the Qurʾān considers Abrahamic religions as true (kāliṣ).\footnote{Ṭabbāra, quotes a range of Qurʾānic passages to make her claim: Q 10:72, 12:101, 3:52, 10:84, 7:126, 2:133, 27:44. See ibid., 64.} For Ṭabbāra, the religiously responsible thing to do is consequently not to safeguard the hegemony of Islam over others but to safeguard the continued dhikr of God.

In the second step of Ṭabbāra's exposition, Nöldeke's chronology becomes central to her
argument. She notes that the Qurʾān does not mention many other religions besides Judaism and Christianity. The ones it names, such as the Sabeans and the majās, do not only have in common that they worship several gods, but are also represented as religions with oppressive traits. The reason for rejecting them is, hence, social not theological. Ṭabbāra focuses on the Qurʾān's stance toward Christians and Jews as well as the mushrikān. Thus starts Ṭabbāra's exposition:

For the period of twenty-three years of the prophetic mission, the qur'ānic wahy accompanied the nascent community: vertically by reminding them of the divine unity and closeness concerning the right measure and the return to God; horizontally by considering the requirements of the historical, political, geographical, and social circumstances together with the new community.\(^{1169}\)

One may note that this quote sounds similar to Tamer's understanding of the Qurʾān as a vertical communication process between God and humans, while the message becomes historical (and therefore tangible) in the course of its interaction with society, culture, and society.\(^{1170}\) While Ṭabbāra adopts a similar language, she does not reduce the Qurʾān to this historical context. She merely states that the Qurʾān addresses a concrete historical situation and leaves room for divine providence in this process. In other words, she does not conceptualize history as secular linear homogenous time devoid of God.

In order to discern the proper qurʾānic view of non-Muslims, Ṭabbāra pays close attention to the chronology of the qurʾānic discourse. Ordinarily, the Qurʾān is divided into two major periods: the Meccan and Medinan. Even by accepting this rather rough division, one can detect a substantial difference between Meccan and Medinan sūras that has been duly noted in the Islamic tradition and was included in the qurʾānic discipline naskh wa mansūkhuha.\(^{1171}\) In modern

\(^{1169}\) Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 123-127. Quote on p. 127.
\(^{1170}\) Tamer, “Muqaddima,” xx-xxii.
\(^{1171}\) An example for such a view is Sayyid Qutb, Milestones, 63-87.
times, some scholars, most famously the Sudanese Maḥmūd Ṭāḥā, reversed this central element (i.e., the priority of later verses over earlier ones) of fiqh by prioritizing Meccan over Medinan verses. It may be noted that Ṭāḥā did not directly refer to naskh wa mansūkhahu, but utilized the division to differentiate between the Qurʾān's universal and particular rulings.1172 Nevertheless, the fact remains that his diachronic reading of the Qurʾān is crucial to his central claim. In his opinion, the Meccan sūras embody the essential message of Islam, while the Medinan sūras reflect how Muḥammad implemented a system contingent on time.1173 While the Meccan sūras can still provide some normative direction, Ṭāḥā's theory amounts to reducing most of the legislation in the Medinan sūras, or at least privileging Meccan legislation in case it conflicted with Medinan precepts.1174 Ṭāḥā's approach is problematic since his reduction of the Medinan legislation seems arbitrary and relying on ethics external to the text.

Ṭabbāra takes a different path. In her words, the Islam in Mecca is the one of new believers, often the down-trodden, who “dreamt of a more just world without oppression,” and who had yet to endure patiently the hostilities of the Meccans. This phase in Islam represents the pure Abrahamic Islam that had almost no specific practices and no laws yet. In Medina the new Muslim community found itself in a more amicable position. They encountered other believers, the Jews in Medina and the Christians from the surrounding areas, whom they considered

1172 I am grateful to Felicitas Opwis for pointing this difference out.
1173 Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāḥā, “al-Risāla al-thāniya min al-Islām,” in Nahwa maskrā’ mustaqbalī li’l-Islām, ed. Ṭāḥā (Beirut/Kuwait: al-Markaz al-thaqāfī al-‘arabī, 2002), 149-156, 167-173. For a discussion of the at times arbitrary classification of Meccan and Medinan verses in Ṭāḥā’s work, see Annette Oevermann, Die “Republikanischen Brüder” im Sudan: Eine islamische Reformbewegung im Zwanzigsten Jahrhundert (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1989), 124-143. There is a parallel here to the problem that the Old Testament poses for many Christians who see a “angry vengeful God” in the Old Testament.
1174 Felicitas Opwis recognizes in Ṭāḥā’s emphasis on the “general guidelines” of the Qurʾān embodied in the Meccan sūras a reflection of al-Shāṭibī’s maṣlaḥa theory who stated that the universal intentions of the Qurʾān are present in the Meccan sūras. See Felicitas Opwis, “Maṣlaḥa in Contemporary Legal Theory,” Islamic Law and Society 12 (2005): 207-208. However, Ṭāḥā’s intention is almost anti-legalistic and thus differs greatly from al-Shāṭibī’s.
brothers at first. According to Ẓabbāra, while there were some tensions in the beginning, a close reading of the Qurʾān suggests that Muslims first desired a unification of the three religions, calling Jews to accept Jesus as a prophet and sign from God while rebuking Christians for the dogma of the incarnation of God in Jesus. Gradually, the Muslims developed their own identity distinct from Christians and Jews and established their own symbols, rites, and laws until Islam in its restricted sense took shape. A tension remained between the desire for unification of the faith communities, on the one hand, and the reality of separation that made it necessary to establish Islam's distinction, on the other. Ẓabbāra analyzes the Qurʾān's stance toward Christians on the basis of three points of contention: dogmatics (ʿaqāʾid), ethics (akhlāq), and politics (siyāsa). While the dogmatic standpoint of the Qurʾān remained consistent throughout, its stance on political configurations changed.

One finds two different discourses in the Qurʾān regarding the ahl al-kitāb. The first is the use of Jewish and Christian narratives; the second is when the Qurʾān addresses the ahl al-kitāb directly.1175 The Meccan period is filled with the first kind of these two discourses, while the structure of the Qurʾān in the Medinan period is more dialogical. The Meccan period stresses the unity of the community of believers, for example, when it states, after enlisting a variety of prophets, “Indeed your community is one community and I am your Lord.” (Q 21:92). In the same passage, the Qurʾān indicates the internal division of that community and yet declares, “All will return to Us.” Hence, while the Qurʾān does not present the division of the religious community as something positive, Ẓabbāra infers, it accepts its reality. Toward the end of the Meccan period, we find the famous Qurʾānic command,

1175 Ẓabbāra, Rahābat, 128-129, 144. The direct engagement is indicated by formulas such as yā ahl al-kitāb.
Do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, “We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one; and we are in submission (muslim) to Him.” (Q 29:36)

At this point, the Qurʾān depicts the ahl al-kitāb as distinct religious community with a particular way of worship that differs from Islam, while it maintains that they, too, worship God. All other passages that deal directly with the ahl al-kitāb stem from the Medinan period that begins with sūrat al-Baqara. Even in the opening of al-Baqara, the unity of believers is still proclaimed\textsuperscript{[1176]} – a situation that was soon to change as time proceeded.

Those whom Ṭabbāra calls extremists (mutashaddidūn) consider the promise of salvation for Jews and Christians in Q 2:62 as being abrogated once Islam (in its restricted sense) was established and the ahl al-kitāb had failed to become Muslims. This argument is based on Q 3:19: “Indeed, the religion in the sight of God is Islam.” Having already referred to the variant qirā’a of that verse, Ṭabbāra understands it as connoting islām in the sense of submission – Islam in its broad sense. This interpretation seems to be further corroborated by the Qurʾān's general denunciation of those who link the promise of salvation to a particular religious identity.

Islam in Medina suffered from not being acknowledged by the other religious communities. A literal reading of the Qurʾān reveals that the conflict during that time was a struggle with individuals, not with whole communities. The Qurʾān clarifies this distinction by using formulations such as “a part, faction, group, or many of them.”\textsuperscript{[1177]} an argument that Faḍlullāh equally employed.\textsuperscript{[1178]} Ṭabbāra's interpretation is based on semantic considerations. The

\textsuperscript{[1176]} See Q 2:62, Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 131. For the emphais on the unity of religions, see Q 52: 53: “And indeed this, your religion, is one religion, and I am your Lord, so fear Me." But the people divided their religion among them into sects - each faction, in what it has, rejoicing.”

\textsuperscript{[1177]} Q 2: 111-113. Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 132-133.

\textsuperscript{[1178]} Faḍlullāh, Taṣfīr. See previous chapter.
Qurʾān in this period also laments that some of the *ahl al-kitāb* deliberately misunderstood the word of God: “Do you expect them to believe [...] while a party of them (*farāq minhum*) used to hear the words of God and then distort (*yuḥarrifūn*) it after having grasped its meaning?” (Q 2: 75). For Ṭabbāra, *taḥrīf* here refers to the mis-interpretation of the Bible and the Torah since the verse doubtlessly references “a group among them.” If this passage referred to the whole of the Torah or Bible, it would not use such differentiated language. This interpretation is not absent from older *tafāsīr*. For example, al-Ṭabarī quotes it as one possible option. 1179

Despite the tensions with Jews and Christians, the Qurʾān in the Medinan period maintained the discourse of Islam in its broad sense, which may be most apparent in Q 2:135: “They say, 'Be Jews or Christians [so] you will be guided.' Say, 'Rather, [we are of] the religion (*milla*) of Abraham, inclining toward truth.” While the Medinan verses still reflect the desire for unity, they also exhibit an awareness of the distinctiveness of the religions that constituted an obstacle to institutional unity. Simultaneously, the Qurʾān repeats its invitation to form a single community under Islam. The failure to unite the various communities led gradually to the crystallization of Islam as a self-defined religion, symbolically manifested in the change of the *qibla* (direction of prayer) from Jerusalem to Mecca. 1180

Islam now became an autonomous religion. The Qurʾān acknowledged the disagreements with Judaism and Christianity without adopting an exclusive attitude toward their adherents. 1181

The *jizya* mentioned in the Qurʾān was a result of the conflict with the Christians of Najrān and

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the Muslims. Whether this story is historically true or not, Ṭabbāra highlights that the Qurʾān, nonetheless, continued to address the Christians directly in an amicable way: “Say, 'O ahl al-kitāb, let us rally around a word common to us and you – that we will worship none but God and not associate anything with Him, that we do not take each other as lords apart from God.' But if they turn away, then say, 'Bear witness that we are Muslims’” (Q 3:64).

Two elements accompany the discourse during that period: 1) the rebuke of the ahl al-kitāb for forfeiting the original covenant with God, and 2) not recognizing and even antagonizing the Prophet and his community. The animosity of the ahl al-kitāb toward the Muslims seems to have grown stronger during that time and eventually led to a separation commanded by God.\(^{1182}\)

Yet, the language of the Qurʾān is still highly differentiated and its criticism only referred to “groups among” the ahl al-kitāb. Moreover, the Qurʾān does not only reprimand the conduct of some groups and individuals, but also the infidelity of the ahl al-kitāb toward their own religion.

In Ṭabbāra's view, the Qurʾān thus understands its role as safeguarding the ur-covenants between God and humans, while still considering those others as ṣāliḥūn by stating that not all of the ahl al-kitāb are the same. When the Qurʾān refers to groups of the ahl al-kitāb as “those who disbelieve” (al-ladhīna kafarū) in this period, their disbelief does not refer to God, but to one of the prophets, Muḥammad or Jesus. The Qurʾān never refers to the ahl al-kitāb as kuffār or mushrikūn collectively. When it does address their disbelief it uses the differentiated phrase “those who disbelieve.”\(^{1183}\) Ṭabbāra thus presents a linguistically differentiated analysis of Qurʾānic references concerning the ahl al-kitāb. In the second of the Medinan periods, the Muslim

\(^{1182}\) Q 3:99-100. See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 139-140.

\(^{1183}\) Ibid., 141-144. See Q 3: 55, 75, 112-115, 98:1-5.

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community came to be distinguished from the others by several features, rites, and practices. Until that time, the community of believers still also entailed Jews, as can be seen in the constitution of Medina. By the third year of the hijra, Islam had become its own religion.\textsuperscript{1184}

The most intense conflict with members of the \textit{ahl al-kitāb} centered around the alliance of certain Jewish tribes with the Meccans. Ṭabbāra notes that the verse that refers to this situation calls the traitors “those who were given \textit{a portion of the scripture},” adding yet a further differentiation. \textit{Sūrat al-Ḥijr} describes the pact between the Jewish tribe Ibn Naḍīr and the Meccans, but also criticizes the same tribe for plotting to subvert the new Islamic \textit{umma} from within. After the defeat of the Ibn Naḍīr, they retreated and were under siege until they converted to Islam or “submitted.” Again, the respective Qur'ānic language singles out only some among the \textit{ahl al-kitāb}: “It is He who expelled \textit{the ones who disbelieved among} the People of the Scripture from their homes at the first gathering.”\textsuperscript{1185}

The worst affliction during that time, according to the Qur'ān, came from the hypocrites (\textit{munāfiqūn}) – those among the Muslims who first believed or pretended to be Muslims, but were traitors. The Qur'ān depicts the hypocrites as the antithesis to the believers by characterizing the former as arrogant. They turned away from God and His mercy and, thereby, ignored the ancient covenant (\textit{mīthāq}). The height of hostility between the Muslims and their adversaries is reached in \textit{sūrat al-Tawbā} that also contains the “sword verse.”\textsuperscript{1186} As mentioned before, this verse


\textsuperscript{1186} Q 9:29. Ṭabbāra mentions that \textit{sūrat al-Tawba} is the only \textit{sūra} in the Qur'ān that is not preceded by the basmallah. See Ṭabbāra, \textit{Rahābat}, 146-148. See for the previous line of argument Q 63:2-7.
elicited much discussion among exegetes. According to a majority of Qur’ān commentators, the sword-verse “is the final, most authoritative statement in the Qur’ān on Islam’s relation to the polytheist Arabs and more generally to all those who refuse to accept the Islamic call.”

Scholars who accepted this view (for example, Ibn Kathīr) saw their interpretation affirmed in aḥādīth that convey a similar message: “I have been commanded to fight the people until they say, ‘There is no god but God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God,’ and they establish prayer and pay the alms-tax.”

There have, however, always been scholars who were disconcerted by the assumption that a single verse was capable of abrogating such a great number of other qur’ānic verses. Many commentators refused its abrogating ability altogether. Even those who accepted it were busy limiting its effectiveness in a context in which Muslims were faced with a significant non-Muslim population. Ṭabbāra considers it to be highly unlikely that one verse is able to abrogate such a large part of the Qur’ān – altogether 124 other verses. She also notes that the historical context for this verse, represented by the asbāb al-nuzūl, is not clear at all. Instead, she considers the place of the verse within the sūra that seems to refer to the Jews of Medina alternatively. Whichever the actual historical circumstances of the verse were, this passage came to be the justification for Muslims to fight the ahl al-kitāb and, under Islamic rule, to oblige them

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1189 Ibid., 92-3.
1190 Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 149. The sword-verse is the verse in the Qur’ān that abrogates the greatest number of verses. Some scholars consider the verse itself to be abrogated. See Powers, “Exegetical Genre,” 131. Most sources connect this verse to the battle of Tabūk in Syria against the Christian tribes there who finally payed a form of tax to the Muslims that later became the jīzya.
to pay the jizya. The context of the verse itself indicates that the jizya is a form of war booty. In Ṭabbāra's view, to declare the sword verse to abrogate so many others had ideological reasons that henceforth marked the Christians and Jews as ahl al-dhimma, which is in any case not a term the Qurʾān uses with view to Christians.

This period, filled with tensions, was accompanied by an intensification of dogmatic differences between Islam and the other communities. The major theological point of contention was the person of Jesus in regard to both Jews and Christians. While the Qurʾān rejects Jesus's divine nature, it confirms him to be the word and spirit of God. The Qurʾān also denies a threefold god (not the trinity [thālūth] explicitly) but seems to connect this statement to the worship of Jesus and Mary.1191 It similarly accuses the Jews of worshipping al-ʿazīz as God, whose exact identity is contested but mainly held to be Ezra in tafsīr. Western scholarship has spent much effort speculating how the Qurʾān arrived at these distorted views of Judaism and Christianity. Ṭabbāra tackles another point. She examines what counts as disbelief in the following verse that does not criticize the Christians but the Jews for failing to believe in Jesus:

We cursed them for their disbelief and their saying against Mary a great slander, and [for] saying, “Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of God.” They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but it appeared [to be so]. Indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except following their assumption. And they did not kill him for certain. Rather, God raised him to Himself. [...]. There is none from the ahl al-kitāb but that he will surely believe in Jesus before his death. And on the Day of Resurrection he will be against them a witness (Q 4:156-159).1192

In Ṭabbāra's view, it is remarkable that the verse predicts that all of the ahl al-kitāb will believe in Jesus as the word, messiah, and spirit of God, when read in connection with Q 4:171. Islamic

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1191 Q 4:171, Q 5:116. Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 149-150.
1192 Ibid., 150-152.
exegetes often interpreted this controversial verse in a way that Jesus was not actually crucified but someone else in his stead.\textsuperscript{1193} The earliest tafsīr did not deny that Jesus had been crucified and risen from the dead, which seems to be confirmed by Jesus's statement about himself in Q 19:33: “And peace is on me the day I was born, the day I will die, and the day I am resurrected, alive.”\textsuperscript{1194} However this may be, the important point for Ṭabbāra is that the Qurʾān directs its rebuke against the Jews and expresses high regard for Jesus. By deemphasizing some of the differences between Islam and Christianity regarding Jesus, she opens up some points of connection. While the Qurʾān affirms again that salvation depends on righteousness, good deeds, and faith, not religious belonging, it also critiques specific details of the behavior of the ahl al-kitāb, such as their lack of piety and faith, tahrīf, bad conduct, mis-measuring, the injustice and wastefulness of monks and priests, and monasticism.\textsuperscript{1195}

Ṭabbāra notices that some very sudden developments occurred in the last years of the prophetic mission that was marked by a principle of qualified religious pluralism (tanawwu’). To make sense of these shifts she introduces a third period to the Meccan and Medinan that is represented by sūrat al-Māʾida and some other sūras that were revealed in the last three years of Muḥammad's life, among them the important verse: “As for those who believe, the Jews, the Sabeans, the Christians, the majūs and mushrikūn – God shall judge between them on the Day of Resurrection” (Q 22:17). On one side of the interpretive spectrum, the mufassirūn claim that only


\textsuperscript{1194} That Jesus was actually crucified is mentioned as one among other opinions in al-Ṭabarī and Ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1973). Ṭabbāra, \textit{Rahābat}, 153. See also Q 3:55.

\textsuperscript{1195} For tensions among the religions, see Q 9:34, 9:34, 4:46, 4:54-55. See ibid., 154. For the promise of salvation, see “Paradise is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the ahl al-kitāb. Whoever does wrong will be recompensed for it, and he will not find a protector or a helper beside God. And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, being a believer – those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed.” (Q 4:123-124) See ibid., 155.
Muslims are being saved which contradicts directly the literal wording of the Qur'ān (Q 4:123-124; 2:62).\footnote{Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 156.} Some held that Jews and Christians are saved, too. Others also included the Sabeans and majūs. Only some rare Sufi voices held that the mushrikūn are also saved by virtue of the original pact between God and humans. They mainly base this interpretation on Q 22:34, “For every community we have appointed a place of sacrifice.”

While Ṭabbāra favors the last interpretation, she interprets the varying qur'ānic statements concerning the mushrikūn on the basis of their shifting relationship with the Muslims. First, the Qur'ān proclaims a form of religious pluralism.\footnote{“Say, ‘O unbelievers (kuffār), I do not worship what you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. Nor will I ever worship what you worship. Nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your religion and I have mine’” (Q 109: 1-6). See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 157.} This stance came to be covered under a history of fighting with the mushrikūn, whose climax is reached in the qur'ānic statement that “the mushrikūn are unclean (najas)” (Q 9:28). The threefold qur'ānic discourse \textit{vis-à-vis} the mushrikūn can be seen in its rhetoric. During the Meccan period, the Qur'ān addresses people universally with “yā ayuḥāl-nās,” while the discourse in Medina is more specific. This rhetoric indicates the gradual separation of the Muslims from the other communities, before the third period reveals a new openness toward those mushrikūn who did not fight the Muslims.

Upon conquering Mecca, the Qur'ān declares inclusively “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another” (Q 49:13). This verse indicates what Ṭabbāra calls unity in diversity or the acceptance of differences while asserting Islam's truth. Indications of both the universal message of the Qur'ān and its openness to diversity are also given in other passages. Several verses suggest that no religion can claim superiority as to owning the “truth” or “nearness to God.” While the last
revealed *sūrat Al-Mā‘ida* falls into the period of openness (*infīṭāh*), it does not shy away from rebuking the *ahl al-kitāb* for their ritual, behavioral, ethical, and dogmatic shortcomings. These passages often seem to introduce particular theological themes which, for Ṭabbāra and Faḍlallāh, shows that the Qurʿān uses the *ahl al-kitāb* rhetorically to clarify its own positions.\(^{1198}\)

Ṭabbāra substantiates this position further with the help of the *ḥadīth* “All creation is dependent on God. The most beloved of them to God is he who is most beneficial to his dependents.” Hence, humans have a universal duty to love, serve, and respect the religious devotion of any person. Spiritual presumptuousness, arrogance, and restriction contradict the Qurʿānic *da‘wa*, that is, to remind people of God – a principle the Qurʿān clarifies by praising the antithetical qualities to these traits in non-Muslims and Muslims alike. Equivalently, “The Qurʿān's rebuke of the *ahl al-kitāb* also applies to Muslims,” seen in the fact that the Qurʿān also calls Muslims hypocrites.\(^{1199}\) The openness of the concept of *shīrk* is directly linked to social and ethical behavior and can apply to all humans, as also indicated by Faḍlallāh and Soroush.

When the Qurʿān refers to *shīrk*, it does not confine its meaning to a wrong form of belief but importantly highlights its social dimensions. *Shīrk* connotes a lack of social equality and the neglect of the right balance and worship of God. Lexicographically, *shīrk* conveys various meanings. One of them is *shīrāk*, which means pitfalls, snare or artifice, something that appears a certain way but is different in actuality. *Shīrāk* can also refer to a move or action that burdens the

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\(^{1199}\) Q 5: 28, 5:18, 5:82. Here, Ṭabbāra quotes Soroush without adopting his overall hermeneutics and theology: “No dogma of Muslims is free from *shīrk* nor is Christian belief. Our world is filled with identities contaminated with the impure. There is no clear pure truth and there is no absolute intense wrong either. Once we accept this truth, acceptance of pluralism becomes possible.” See ‘Abd al-Karīm Surūsh, *al-Ṣīrāṭ al-mustaqīma*, trans. Aḥmad al-Qabānī (Beirut: Dār al-ʾIntishār al-ʿArabī, 2009), 52. Quoted in Ṭabbāra, *Raḥābat*, 162-163.
connection or bond (habl) between God and humans and may lead humans astray from God. From the Qur’anic perspective, it is not enough to abjure shirk in regard to God. Shirk also refers to the evil (shirr) humans commit that cuts them off from their Creator.

In Ṭabbāra's view, although Muslim exegetes have long attempted to limit the definition of shirk to all religions but Islam, such a restriction of the meaning contradicts the Qur’anic discourse. Some exegetes confirmed that the ahl al-kitāb are not mushrikūn but excluded other religions. Yet under Islamic rule, adherents of other religions were historically often subsumed under the category of the ahl al-kitāb depending on the contingencies and likings of the exegetes, as Farid Essack has noted. Ṭabbāra concludes that whether religions were considered monotheistic or not depended on the historical context, as the example of al-Bīrūnī shows. According to Essack, the two terms kufr and imān are linked in the Qur’ān to the journey of any human whose faith increases and decreases. The issue of disbelief then revolves around dynamic principles that are not fixed. Faith and disbelief are no static social and political categories characterizing humans definitely but terms that signify the dynamic of each human's journey in her relation to God.

In these deliberations, one sees how carefully, yet determined, Ṭabbāra weighs in historical considerations, linguistics, rhetorical analysis, and the textual structure of the Qur’ān. She fulfills what Abū Zayd called the reviving of omitted voices in the Islamic tradition. None of

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1200 Q 29:41, “And hold fast, all of you, to the rope of God and do not become divided.” (Q 3:103) This link is also sometimes called handle (urwa): “Whoever surrenders his face to God and acts righteousness — has held fast to a handle most secure. To God belongs the outcome of [all] affairs” (Q 31:22). See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 170-171.

1201 On the difference between the mushrikūn and ahl al-kitāb, see, for example, Hashmi, “The Qur’ān;” Tabrizi, “Ritual Purity;” 455-471.


1203 See also Tabrizi, “Ritual Purity;” 455-471.

1204 Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 172-176.
her arguments moves outside of Islamic exegesis, even when she refers to Christian authors. While she rejects prevalent interpretations, she does so from within the rationales provided by the Islamic core disciplines and critiques the practice of the mufassirūn on their own terms.

While the Muslims were striving in the Medinan period toward unity with the other religions and came to recognize plurality of religions as a problem, in the final period, the Qur'ān demonstrates both awareness and acceptance of that pluralism. Thus, the verse that promises salvation to the righteous adherents of all religions is repeated again in this last period. The Qur'ān asserts the ideal of unity that consists in returning to Him:

To you We revealed the kitāb with the truth, confirming whatever was already present of the kitāb and as a guardian over it. So judge between them according to what God has sent down and do not follow their whims [turning you] away from what has come to you of the truth. To each We prescribed a law and a way of life. Had God willed, He would have made you a single community (umma), but [He intended] to test you in what He gave you; so race to [all that is] good. To God is your return all together, and He will [then] acquaint you concerning with that over which you differed (Q 5:48).¹²⁰⁵

This last revealed sūra summons divine hospitality (raḥāba) in which humanity accepts its differences. The sūra is called the “Table-spread” in reference to the wish of the disciples of Jesus that God may send down a table-spread from heaven. The sūra indicates a second table-spread, this time ascending from earth to heaven in which believers from different religions share: “This day good foods have been made licit to you, the food of the ahl al-kitāb is licit to you and your food is licit to them” (Q 5:5). Muslims and the ahl al-kitāb are called to live together and to participate jointly in realizing God's will. While humans may find the divinely willed pluralism mysterious or even unsettling, the Qur'ān promises that something good comes

¹²⁰⁵ See also “Indeed, those who believe and the Jews, Sabeans and Christians – those who believed in God and the Last Day and did righteousness – no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve” (Q 5: 29). See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 164-165.
out of it that points to a higher truth, namely the joint return to God. Through the perspective of a common origin and return to God, believers from different religions find unity in this world.\textsuperscript{1206}

In order to clarify her deliberations on the \textit{ahl al-kitāb}, Ṭabbāra refers to Madigan's study \textit{The Self-Image of the Qur'ān}, in which he examines the self-reference of the Qur'ān as \textit{kitāb}, a term often translated as “book.” One denotation of \textit{kitāb} is an ever-present connection (irtibāt) between the divine and the human. The Qur'ān also implies the idea of a pact or covenant within the concepts of \textit{wahy} and \textit{kitāb}.\textsuperscript{1207} The \textit{ahl al-kitāb} are not only people who have a scripture. More than that, they belong to the \textit{ahl al-mīthāq} (those who have a covenantal relationship with God). This leads Ṭabbāra to conclude that the Qur'ān considers itself as a recommencement of the previous covenants, not as a replacement of them. She recognizes that no Islamic consensus on religious pluralism exists. Yet, the Qur'ān strongly indicates the validity of other religions beyond Islam that fulfill the work of “reminding” people of God.\textsuperscript{1208}

An important question is whether the acceptance of the truth of other religions preceding Islam can also be concluded by analogy for religions that emerged after the establishment of historical Islam. Muslim tradition has usually answered this question in the negative, seeing Islam finalized in Muḥammad as the “seal of the prophets” \textit{(khātim al-nabīyīn)}. As noted by various scholars, seal denotes finality but also confirmation or fulfillment.\textsuperscript{1209} Ṭabbāra favors the interpretation of the Maronite priest and scholar Michel Hayek. According to Hayek, the verse in

\textsuperscript{1206} “To God is your return all together, and He will inform you concerning that over which you used to differ” (Q 5: 48), “Your creation and your resurrection will not be but as that of a single soul” (Q 31:28). See Ṭabbāra, \textit{Rahābat}, 166-168.

\textsuperscript{1207} Q 33:7-8: “Muḥammad is not the father of any of your men, but the Messenger of God and the seal of the prophets.” See Ṭabbāra, \textit{Rahābat}, 169-170.

\textsuperscript{1208} Ibid., 173, Q 4:124, 25:34.

question discusses Muḥammad in relation to the prophets who preceded him. In his opinion, the verse supports that the prophet came to confirm (yuṣaddiq) the earlier messages and their truth.

Khātim in that context functions like muṣaddiq (sanctioning) rather than in the sense of “ending something.” This interpretation leaves room for further divine interaction in this world after the Qur’ānic revelation. The Qur’ān, avoiding generalization about whole communities, often adds that good deeds must accompany faith (Q 2:62; 5:69), and repeatedly affirms that salvation is not linked to religious identity (e.g., Q 4:123-124). This view is also affirmed by a ḥadīth qudsī that asserts that salvation consists in “doing what is beautiful” (iḥsān), which in itself is a mirror of the divine in the life of any person.

Ṭabbāra concludes that the Qur’ān prompts Muslims to accept the principle of pluralism as God's will in its “educational economy.” It also calls upon Muslims to accept the limited nature of their understanding and knowledge. While they simply do not have the means to judge other religions, they do have the ability to engage with people and do what is beautiful. There still remain some practical questions to be asked, for example, what should happen with

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1211 For example, “Paradise is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Scripture. Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it, and he will not find besides God a protector or a helper. And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer – those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged” (Q 4: 123-124). See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 175.
1212 “God will say on the Day of Resurrection: Oh son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. He said: Oh Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He says: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He says: Oh Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that (the reward for doing so) with Me? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink. He says: Oh Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds? He says: My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found that with Me” (Hadīth Qudsī 18, related by Muslim). Quoted in Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 175.
1213 “And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ” (Q 11:118); “For each is a direction toward which it faces. So race to good. Wherever you may be, God will bring you forth [for judgement] all together.” (Q 2:148). See Ṭabbāra, Rahābat, 177.
prescriptions for *dimmās* or *ahl al-kitāb* that differ from those for Muslims (e.g., marriage laws)? These questions remain unanswered due to the preliminary nature of Ţabbāra's Qurʾān project.

**Significance of Ţabbāra's Qurʾān Hermeneutics**

Ţabbāra does not need a theological balancing act to arrive at a pluralistic reading of the Qurʾān. Overall, she takes the Qurʾān at face value. Ţabbāra is a scholar of qurʾānic interpretation and knows her subject well. In this particular work she refrains from elaborating on her hermeneutical method. Her writing style is rather narrative and could almost be called “preachy.” She substantiates her claims with ample citations mainly from the Qurʾān and, to a lesser extent, the Sunna and does not claim to use a “new” method or lays out any theory regarding revelation. While she implies a connection between the Qurʾān and the circumstantial developments of the Muslim community, she makes this connection from within the Islamic tradition, even if she refers to some western scholars. The vagueness regarding her methodology and her simultaneous adherence to the traditional Islamic exegetical devices are strengths in Ţabbāra's account that make her work more accessible and acceptable to a general Muslim readership.

She combines historical considerations with a theological approach that is well grounded in Islamic literature and *ʿulūm al-qurʾān*, utilizing the traditional partition of the Qurʾān into Meccan and Medinan sūras, as elaborated and developed further by Nöldeke as well as the practice of *nāsikh al-Qurʾān wa mansūkhahu*, which refers to the exegetical conviction that some verses of the Qurʾān restrict, modify, or even nullify other verses. One may object that her partitioning of the sūras is arbitrary and driven by her aim to arrive at a pluralist reading. However, Ţabbāra's exegesis based on chronology is no less convincing than the original abrogation theories of classical Muslim exegetes. One must first notice that abrogation (and what
it entailed) varied between legal exegesis and _fiqh_ on the one hand, and _tafsīr_, on the other.

Second, there has been considerable disagreement in regard to the precise nature of _naskh_ and which verses were in fact abrogating or abrogated. Some Muslim scholars even pertained that none of the Qur’ānic verses were revoked at all.¹²¹⁴ For example, al-Khūṭi rejected the idea of _naskh_ altogether.¹²¹⁵ Third, following David Powers, the theory of abrogation arose as an answer to discrepancies between _fiqh_ and Qur’ānic injunctions. Consequently, abrogation does not reflect an actual chronology but explains contradictions between legal practice and the Qur’ān by means of abrogation in hindsight.¹²¹⁶ Similar conclusions can be drawn for the _asbāb al-nuzūl_. For discerning the Qur’ān’s chronology with the help of the occasions of revelation, Rippin asserted that the chronological conclusions follow logical ones. He yet maintained that the chronology is the prerequisite for the arrangement of the verses.¹²¹⁷ On the contrary, according to Tillschneider, the identification of chronological data was only the third of three steps that followed the juristic assessment of the Qur’ānic text and was meant to safeguard its coherence.

On the basis of the influential work on _naskh_ by Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām al-Harawī (d. 838), Tillschneider concludes that it was the juristic interest that produced dates and chronology. Jurists often related one verse chronologically to another to build a legal argument. He emphasizes that these dates are relative, not absolute. The particular date of a revelation was of no concern to Abū ʿUbayd.¹²¹⁸ Even if one disagrees with this last point, the fact remains that a precise chronology of the Qur’ān is difficult (if not impossible) to establish. In that light,

¹²¹⁵ Al-Khūṭi, _Prolegomena_, chapter on _naskh_.
¹²¹⁸ Tillschneider, _Typen_, 211-214.
Tābbāra's own chronological approach follows a tradition of logical reasoning well established in Islamic *tafsīr*. The only difference is that her logic deviates from most *mufassirūn*, whereas the epistemological framework remains constant.

Tābbāra's work can be seen as a starting-point for the creative utilization of *tafsīr* with the help of critical reflection and historical material. Her exposition demonstrates that historical consciousness does not conflict with engaged scholarship that is invested in politics. In her historical considerations Tābbāra does not exceed the framework of *nāsikh wa mansūkhuhu*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, situating the Qur'ān chronologically according to the *sīra*, other Islamic historical material, and examining the linguistic terminology and structure of the Qur'ān. She refrains from going into complicated detail concerning the chronology of the Qur'ān or sorting out the *nuzūl* material systematically, an aspect criticized by Muḥammad Amīn Farshūkh, whose general evaluation of Tābbāra's work was on the whole positive.\(^{1219}\)

However, given Tilschneider's previous remarks about the *asbāb al-nuzūl* genre, it is in fact unlikely that one can arrive at a waterproof chronology of the Qur'ān on the basis of this particular material. Acceptance of the presence of a chronology in the Qur'ān and confidence that we have the means to discern it are the presuppositions for Tābbāra's approach. Arguably, without the *sīra*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *ahādīth*, and Muslim historiography, no convincing chronology of the Qur'ān can be established – all of which revisionist scholars reject as historically unsound. One may respond to them with Harald Motzki's statement: “On the one hand, it is not possible to write a historical biography of the Prophet without being accused of using the sources

uncritically, while on the other hand, when using the sources critically, it is simply not possible to write such a biography.1220 Views on naskh – which verses can count as abrogated and in which sense – have differed greatly, and the Islamic tradition gradually limited the number of abrogated verses. Utilizing chronological considerations as central device in Qur'ān hermeneutics can lead to very different results from those suggested by Ṭabbāra as soon as one allocates the abrogated verses and Meccan and Medinan sūras in a different way. A classification that leads to results contrary to Ṭabbāra's can be seen in Quṭb's interpretation of the same verses. As is well-known, he arrives at diametrically converse conclusions and at the universalization of the divine command to fight the “unbelievers,” and the jāhilīya more generally.1221

In that context, Ṭabbāra's Qur'ānic theology becomes crucial. By emphasizing certain principles as unchanging and fundamental to the Qur'ān, she builds a hermeneutic framework for understanding its varying statements. By establishing a sort of maqāsid (aims), principles (mabādi'), and values (qiyyam) of the text, she privileges certain moral implications over others and sidesteps some thorny details – a strategy that is well established in contemporary Muslim and Islamist discourse.1222 Her approach demonstrates that the question of which chronological classification one accepts may hinge more on one's own presuppositions than on historical accuracy. Nevertheless, her work shows that historical research as well as literary criticism can help in sorting out the chronology and revise theories firmly rooted in 'ulūm al-qur'ān. Farshūkh's critique suggests that an examination of the Islamic classical disciplines is a desideratum for

1220 See Motzki, The Biography of Muhammad: The Issues of the Sources (Leiden: Brill, 2000), xiv. Gudrun Krämer summarizes this dilemma similarly: “One must write the history of Muḥammad and his community on the basis of Muslim source material, or one cannot write it at all.” See Krämer, Geschichte des Islam (Bonn: Lizensausgabe für die Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2005), 17.
1221 Quṭb, Milestones, 73-81.
qu’ranic studies. Without extra-qu’ranic material, no chronology of the Qur’ān can be discerned. Historical consciousness also comes into play when Ţabbāra indicates political circumstances that contributed to particular interpretations. These considerations are not radical but common in Islamic literature, as we have seen in Faḍlallāh's work. All in all, her tone is conciliatory, not condemning or attacking anyone, and follows the spirit she sees as central to the qu’ranic message. In the course of her study she refers to western and Lebanese Christian thinkers when she finds their findings logically and philologically convincing without accepting a Christian reading of the Qur’ān.

By staying within the framework of discussions about Meccan and Medinan verses and abrogation, Ţabbāra avoids metaphysical questions. These questions are not important for her. What is important for her is how one can arrive at an understanding of the qu’ranic text that makes sense and that is in favour of religious pluralism. This element makes her hermeneutics explicitly political. Pluralism is inherently political, since it entails working out the polis. Ţabbāra's vision aims at reclaiming religion from those people and organizations that have taken possession of it for political, sectarian, and military purposes, such as the annexation of religion by military and para-military groups during the Lebanese Civil War or the emerging religious extremism in the post-war period.

One could form the assumption that Ţabbāra is an example of the de-politicization of scripture. While such a conclusion is not outright wrong, it misses the political import that the de-politicization of religion inherently entails. With her Qur’ān hermeneutics Ţabbāra partakes in the debate over religion's place in society. Furthermore, she is involved in the project of forming a particular moral subject and religious subjectivity that adheres to a pluralistic society free of
social hierarchies based on religious identity. In this process, she partly strips Islam of its legalistic import and thus confines it to a more (but, as we will see, not merely) spiritual function. Ţabbāra is concerned with the politico-legal space of religion in a society, whose social practices and structure are very much defined by confessional legislation. She redraws the connection between religious theory and practice, which, as Asad contends “is fundamentally a matter of intervention – of constructing religion in the world (not in the mind) through definitional discourses, interpreting true meanings, excluding some utterances and practices, and including others.”  

While Ţabbāra's work definitely constitutes such an intervention, she does not reduce Islam to something merely spiritual, internal, and private or even only to an attitude toward the world – a state of mind, as religion came often to be seen in the course of Enlightenment debates on religion. Belief is a constituting activity for Ţabbāra, a site of producing both personal and social discipline.

Religion, so the conviction of Ţabbāra, can help to raise people's capacity to embrace diversity. Importantly, she does not promote a clear separation between private and public religion. Religion is not strictly a-political. Rather, religion can have a place in the public sphere, but “not in the sense of hegemony of one religion over every other with one religion being in control.” Religious people should enter the public sphere to have a positive impact on society – beyond identity politics. The Qur'an is one aspect among many that figure in the polis.

Scholars such as Ţabbāra easily escape the radar of western academic scholarship on Muslim Qur'ānic studies. They are at times dismissed as not being representative of “mainstream”

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1223 Asad, Genealogies, 44-45.
1224 Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Naylā Ţabbāra, August 23, 2013.
Islam or as being politically motivated. In addition, she is active in a field that is not usually associated with mainstream Islamic religious learning and teaching. This observation can, however, not lead to the conclusion that her interpretation is in any sense “less Islamic” than that of, say, Sayyid Quṭb or other modern Islamic intellectuals who have significantly influenced the contemporary discourse on Islam and its relations to other religions. Neither of them is part of the ‘ulamā and both partly write against this establishment. Ţabbāra has, moreover, thorough training in Islamic Studies. While she is not considered a “religious authority” in the common sense, she helps create new spaces for expressing Islamic identity and faith.

Through teaching in universities and schools, Adyan and its members teach their version of Islam and qur'ānic studies to a broad audience. For example, Adyan utilizes a variety of activities and online and offline programs on a regional and international scale, including conferences, study trips, academic programs, consultancies, and workshops. The academic programs in particular seek cooperation between various universities in order to create a spirit of social academic responsibility. In the process, they raise awareness of the importance of working toward “religious diversity and integration in the Mediterranean region, introduction to intercultural and interreligious dialogue and religious minorities and Public Life in Europe and the Arab World.”1225 Through publications, a wide internet and media presence (in English, Arabic, and French), and participation in inter-theological dialogue, Ţabbāra and Ďaw engage in the wider academic theological debate in Lebanon while seeking to disseminate those theological debates at the grassroots level. This is spelled out in Adyan's vision statement:

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Adyan believes in the positive contribution of religions at both individual and social levels. In fact, religious experience can help individuals in opening up to others. Religion can also play a role in developing social relations between religious communities which are greatly needed for harmony and brotherhood between humans as well as for peace between nations. On the other hand, Adyan considers that the extremism of certain religious groups, the tension between religious communities and the manipulation of religion and its exploration for political interests deprive individuals from living their faith with awareness and a sense of responsibility. These situations may prepare the ground for conflicting relations that threaten stability and peace, damaging both religion and society.1226

At the heart of Adyan's mission is hence the liberation of religion from those groups and organizations that have hijacked it for their own political purposes. Their danger is not merely to be seen in “threatening stability and peace” but in the transformation of religion under modern influence into a quasi-ideological identity giver. While Adyan emphasizes the individual and a practice of religion that has come to be challenged by its politicization, Adyan does not reduce religion to a merely privatized and interiorized thing. On the contrary, Adyan's approach can be understood as exploring the possibility of Islam and Christianity as public religions in the modern world.

A particular focus of Adyan is youth and education. Since the Lebanese educational system continues to be one of the major obstacles to overcoming sectarian prejudices and an impediment to reaching rapprochement between the communities,1227 Adyan has reached out to Lebanon’s educators and the education system. Their School Education on Coexistence Department has as its core aim “to foster education on inclusive citizenship, religious pluralism, and coexistence in schools.”1228 To achieve this goal, Adyan has chosen a multi-level approach

that addresses the several strands of the education sector at once. One strand of the organization focuses research on education, particularly regarding religious pluralism, co-existence, and diversity in Lebanon and publishes the results in papers, books, and a youth journal. Another strand focuses on developing course modules for various educational institutions in order to impact the politics of education and reach a broad grassroots level. Adyan has developed a module on pluralism that is currently being taught in twenty-one schools in Lebanon.

By training school teachers and other educators on topics such as pluralism, co-existence, and interreligious thought, Adyan targets one of the major impediments to surmounting interreligious tensions. Furthermore, Adyan strives to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience. In April 2012, Adyan initiated a long-term research project and educational program in order to achieve public reform in Lebanese national educational policies. With the official support of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Adyan has recently launched a project on a National Strategy for Citizenship and Coexistence Education, which “works toward reforming the current Lebanese educational policies and programs in order to promote solid coexistence in the framework of inclusive citizenship.”

The outcome of this project will depend on its implementation by teachers, public and private schools, students, official bureaucrats, and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Therefore, Adyan has attempted to include these institutions and groups from the beginning by incorporating their assessment of the situation. Adyan has also trained young educators in order to provide a corps of professionals who will teach the programs in schools.

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They see education as the key factor in a sustainable reconciliation of the Lebanese people. One could carefully state that Adyan and its members are part of the formation of a new group of religious authorities in Lebanon.

That Ṭabbāra is not a traditionally acknowledged religious authority should not lead to the premature conclusion that she is in any respect more “liberal”, “modern”, “western” or “secular” than other thinkers who are recognized as “representing Islam” more easily because they function and operate in a more traditional Islamic environment. Ṭabbāra wants to open up the discussion about the Islamic texts and how we view religion, partly drawing on methods she encountered in the western academic context but especially through her own meticulous studies of Qurʾān hermeneutics. Her Qurʾān project should not be reduced to, or mistaken as, the westernization of thought and method. Ṭabbāra carefully and genuinely grounds all her findings in the Qurʾānic text and uses the most accepted Islamic exegetical material. When she draws on theories of western thinkers she does so consciously and indicates the connection.1232

Similarly, so-called Islamists frequently borrow language from their western “counterparts” to which they are declared opponents.1233 It is important to bear in mind that authors are situated in complex and multifold discourses (Islamism, nationalism, socialism, feminism, etc.) that produce tensions and contradictions. Very often, authors hold positions that can only be identified in relation to other authors who oppose them. In this respect it is very difficult and indeed questionable from an epistemological point of view to categorize and classify authors by reducing certain characteristics to the dominant aspect of the respective thinker. These

1232 For example, she quotes the works of Fred Donner, Daniel Madigan, Farid Essack, and Genevieve Gobillot. She also refers to Muslim modernist thinkers.
ascriptions are already part of the struggles between different positions about legitimacy and Islamicity. Attributes like conservative, liberal, progressive, or modern make only sense in reference to other dimensions (political stance, gender ratio, etc.). The positions of similarly labeled persons on these different fields can vary extensively.

Martin Sing suggests viewing the actors as competitors who are positioning themselves in social, and one may add ideological, struggles. The various Qur’an hermeneutics represent negotiations about the place of religion in a post-colonial world, in which the nation state with its secular practices is already in place. The various sides are to the same extent westernized, alienated, rational or modern though such labeling might not accord with the self-conception of the respective actors. Even if the different actors of these discourse families use bipolar descriptions for themselves and their counter actors (e.g. progressive/reactionary; infidel/Islamic, etc.), one cannot take these dichotomies as either absolutes or objective antipodes. The actors use these descriptions to mark their positions in distinction to others.  

Given the fact that many influential Islamist thinkers have not been religious authorities in the traditional sense, it is not far-fetched that Ṭabbāra, though lacking the religious “regalia,” represents a Muslim strand of thought and practice that often remains invisible in the broader debates over Islam and academic representation of Muslim actors and thinkers.

1234 Sing, Progressiver Islam, 31-33.
IX. The “Traditional Milieu” II

While Faḍlallāh had remained vague as to what he meant by historical critique, an important point in his considerations was his concern with the relationship between an Islamic worldview and method. The following chapter demonstrates that it is the underlying worldview of historical-critical approaches that makes their full-scale inclusion into Islamic Qurʾān scholarship difficult. Epistemic violence is more than a theory and is recognized as such by serious thinkers in Lebanon. The resistance in particular to Higher Critique exceeds mere apologetics. This chapter adds weight to the conjecture that the meaning of the Qurʾān does not mainly hinge on its ontological status but is tied to greater epistemological considerations, above all, the ontology of humans. Nevertheless, I contend that historical and philological considerations can be included and made fruitful for reading the Qurʾān even by those who posits transcendence as an epistemological category in a serious way.

What will become obvious in the following pages is, moreover, that scholars from the same tradition adhere to different epistemological presuppositions, while all (Faḍlallāh, Zarāqīṭ, and Jarāḍī) demand to read the Qurʾān from within an Islamic framework. This does not mean they would call each other non-Islamic or that they are writing outside of an Islamic discursive consensus. Their differing epistemological frameworks evince different modes of producing truth while presupposing a common sense of an Islamic regula fide in order to read the Qurʾān.

One can assume that Faḍlallāh never dealt in depth with historical critique but mainly knew of these theories via Christian interlocutors and Muslim scholars who dealt with orientalist or western scholarship. A new generation of clerics has now emerged, who venture into new

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1235 Faḍlallāh, Afūq, 167.
hermeneutical territory and have taken up Faḍlallāh’s allusion to the binary of “method versus religion.” In particular, Shafi’ī Jarādī has recently identified this binary as the new challenge that has come to replace older dichotomies, such as religion versus philosophy, or religion versus science.¹²³⁶ In the present chapter, we will in particular examine Jarādī’s thought.

The following thinkers operate mainly in the Shi‘ite milieu. The works with which we will be dealing respond, on the one hand, to the interreligious milieu in Lebanon, and in particular interfaith dialogue. Thus, for some of the texts we will be examining, an interreligious meeting or symposium gave the incentive. On the other hand, these works answer to the intellectual debate in Iran. There may not, in fact, be a great reception of western Qur’ānic studies among Muslim religious authorities and institutions in Lebanon, in particular not of historical-critical studies. This does not mean, however, that historicizing approaches are completely unknown to Muslim-Arab scholars who do not speak a European language.

It seems to be the case that most authors who utilize western approaches received some philosophical, linguistic, or humanistic training in western institutions. However, to be trained in a western institution does not necessarily lead those scholars to accept or be uncritical of western approaches. Subḥī Ṣāliḥ is a case in point. His works on ‘ulūm al-qur‘ān, reprinted numerous times, can be counted among the most widespread and well-known standard works on that subject matter in the Arab and Muslim world. Ṣāliḥ had received his training in Qur’ānic studies in France under Régis Blachère, yet his life-time work until his murder during the Lebanese Civil War was highly critical of orientalist and western Qur’ānic studies.

A second observation is in order. We saw that when Faḍlallāh cautioned against the “free

interpretation” of the Qur’ān, he was actually addressing the non-specialists, the non-ʻulamā’. Authors, such as Soroush, Abū Zayd, and Arkoun consciously aim to influence traditional as well as modernist Islamic discourse. Consequently, these authors do not write for an abstract, specialized academic audience. Instead, they actively address the discourse at the hawza, state-sponsored Islamic establishments (as in the case of Abū Zayd in Egypt), or other Islamic religious institutions. Simultaneously, none of these latter thinkers is affiliated with a traditional Islamic learning institution, and none of them received their training in such a context. For example, Soroush never received a traditional hawza education. One can infer that for thinkers operating in the Islamic traditional framework, addressing authors who can somehow be situated in an Islamic milieu (which can also entail Christian authors) takes precedence over abstract, western qur'ānic studies. This is the case because all of them compete, so to speak, for the same audience and move within the same religious “market-place.”

Several Islamic scholarly journals have emerged that deal with hermeneutics, revelation, and historical-critical methods. For example, “revelation” was the theme under which al-Maḥajja No. 25 was published in 2012. Among the contributors were also two Christians, George Šabra and Johnny ‘Awwād, who offered different versions of the concept of revelation in Christian theology. Al-Maḥajja is a Shi‘ite theological and philosophical journal published by the Ma’had al-Ma’ārif al-Ḥikmīya (The Sapiential Knowledge Institute), founded and led by Jarādī. It may be a coincidence, but only some years before Al-Maḥajja’s issue on wahy appeared, Jarādī

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1238 The same, of course, can be stated for many of the most famous and influential Islamist thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first century, such as al-Bannā, Qūṭb, and ‘Alī Shari’ati.

had given a paper on the “critique of religious texts” in the framework of the interreligious Forum of Muslim-Christian Thought organized by NEST that also published the lecture.  

Another example is the Shi’ite intellectual journal *al-Ḥayāt al-Ṭayyiba*, founded in 1996, that translates western and Persian works into Arabic and provides space for discussions on hermeneutics and western Islamic and Qur’ānic studies. 

While some responses to historical-critical methods may be merely apologetic or politically motivated, one also finds religious scholars in Lebanon who strive to understand and further the debate, and who hope to engage those methods fruitfully, yet critically, within an Islamic scholarly framework. One such example is Muḥammad Ḥasan Zarāqīt, whom we already encountered in the debate over Luxenberg. Zarāqīt is the head of the *Ma’had al-rasūl al-akram li’l-dirasāt al-islāmīya* (The Honorable Prophet Institute for Islamic Studies), which is part of the *mu’assasat al-muṣṭafā al-‘ālamīya*. He is the administrator of research studies and publications in Islamic Studies and also works at the *markaz al-hadārā li-tanmīyat al-fikr al-islāmī* (Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought). Zarāqīt is mainly active in the field of translations from Persian into Arabic and is responsible for the area of translations of Qur’ānic studies. He is, moreover, the director of *al-Ḥayāt al-ṭayyiba*. The *markaz al-hadārā* is an independent scholarly institution that has as its main purpose the “reviving” and the reforming of the Islamic sciences.

Today, Zarāqīt teaches at the *ḥawza* and at SJU and is engaged in interreligious dialogue. Similarly to Tamer, Zarāqīt considers the revival of Qur’ānic studies in the Muslim world as indispensable for its flourishing. In his view, as a “civilization of the text,” Muslims must

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interpret the Qur'ān anew continuously. The expression of the civilization of the text indicates that some aspects of Abū Zayd's work have by now become common sense among Islamic scholars, even if they do not embrace his entire work or thought. Similarly to Ṭabbāra, Zarāqīṭ sees the Qur'ān neglected as a serious object of study in favor of jurisprudence, perhaps because fiqh seems to be more directly linked to the practical life of Muslims.

He indicates that there is a current in fiqh that wants to make the Qur'ān more central to discussions over the sharīʿa and assert its authority more succinctly against the Sunna. Zarāqīṭ criticizes this trend that materializes in discussions over the maqāṣid of the sharīʿa. In his opinion, the maqāṣid discourse is partly lip-service in favor of the Qur'ān that neither examines the Qur'ān qua Qur'ān nor from within the tradition of Islamic Qur'ānic studies. Zarāqīṭ detects a greater need for serious engagement with the Qur'ān, both legally and culturally. Culture and civilization are key terms in the work of his institute. The objective of the institute announces "civilization" as crucial in the contemporary debate over Islam, Muslim lives, and world politics. Facing competing civilizations, the markaz views the development of Islamic thought as essential for the survival of Islamic culture, but also believes that Islam is able to enrich such civilizations. The institute's members have in mind what they call "materialistic culture" that seems to dissolve "cultures" everywhere, the Muslim one included. With "cultures" they connote the specifics of communities that do not fit easily into a capitalist market idea of profit and efficiency.

Zarāqīṭ agrees with Ṭabbāra's critique of the pre-eminence of fiqh that degrades Qur'ānic studies to a mere assisting instrument for arriving at legal rulings. Zarāqīṭ experienced the “rule

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1242 Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Muḥammad Ḥasan Zarāqīṭ, 2013.
1243 Booklet of the Markaz al-hadāra li-tanmiyat al-fikr al-islāmī (Beirut: Center of Civilization for the Development of Islamic Thought, without date).
of *fiqh*” when he wanted to open a Qur'ānic studies seminary in Beirut. As long as these studies were not connected to the more practical (and maybe also more prestigious and economically lucrative) area of jurisprudential studies, he could not find enough students.\textsuperscript{1244} The intellectual crisis in which he sees Muslim societies is therefore also an economic problem.

In agreement with Abū Zayd, Zarāqīṭ asserts the potential of new methods and theories in language and philology for approaching the Qur'ān. He finds that a book such as Nöldeke’s can indeed be of help within inner-Islamic discussions concerning Qur'ān hermeneutics, without the need to accept all of its premises unreservedly. The difference to Abū Zayd is that Zarāqīṭ does not reduce the Qur'ān to its function as a message from God. For him, literary studies are one among other methods to approach the Qur’ān.

In that line of argument, Zarāqīṭ warns against reductionist historical-critical approaches that promise to “decode the Qur'ān” through a single method.\textsuperscript{1245} As we have seen in his response to Luxenberg, Zarāqīṭ in particular faults western Qur'ān scholars for their literalism (*harfīya*) rather than for their epistemological assumptions. They are pre-occupied with words and their etymology without taking into consideration the specific character of the Qur’ān and neglect its history as an Islamic text. He levels the same criticism of literalism against fundamentalists. Meanwhile, he leaves no doubt that the Qur'ān is the word of God. In his view, western Qur'ān scholarship often makes the Qur'ān one-dimensional. According to Zarāqīṭ, the “opening of the Qur'ānic text” for novel readings happens when one accepts that the Qur'ān has various dimensions and depths, for whose understanding one draws on a variety of methods, not by

\textsuperscript{1244} Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Muḥammad Ḥasan Zarāqīṭ, November, 29, 2012; December 19, 2012.

\textsuperscript{1245} Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Muḥammad Ḥasan Zarāqīṭ, December 19, 2012.
applying a single method that “imprisons” the interpreter in mono-valence.\textsuperscript{1246} It is thus the “closing of the text” that Zarāqīṯ laments in certain historical-critical approaches.

Remarkably, while he politely but resolutely disagrees with Luxenberg, at the end of his examination of Luxenberg's work, Zarāqīṯ still calls for a scholarly debate in Lebanon concerning western Qur'ānic studies. He calls for the establishment of a scholarly center that makes western Qur'ānic studies available to an Arab audience. He laments that studies of the Qur'ān in western academia and the Muslim world are completely detached from each other and envisions that Muslims, too, make an effort to become a voice in the academic discourse,\textsuperscript{1247} a desideratum formulated similarly, but from another perspective, by Neuwirth. It is important to emphasize at this point that Neuwirth's wish reverberates among Muslim scholars and should be taken as an incentive to further these debates. Zarāqīṯ would agree with Soroush that “religion is too important to leave it to lovers alone.”\textsuperscript{1248} The following section looks more closely at Shi'īte scholar Jarādī 's discussion of hermeneutical approaches to the Qur'ān and examines how these considerations relate to his vision for religion in society.

\textit{Shafīq Jarādī: Philosophy as a Necessity for Islamic Renewal (Tajdīd)}

Jarādī is a graduate from the \textit{hawza} in Qom, a prolific writer, and an engaging thinker. In his scholarly career he has focused on the philosophy of religion. In that sense, he is not a specialist in Qur'ānic studies. However, as a scholar of philosophy of religion he takes a special interest in the reality of revelation and how the transcendent can be retrieved as a meaningful category for the study of religion.\textsuperscript{1249} Being well-versed in western hermeneutics, philosophy, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1246} Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Muḥammad Ḥasan Zarāqīṯ, December 19, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{1247} Zarāqīṯ, “Qirā'at armānīya līl-qur'ān ,” 321.
\item \textsuperscript{1248} Soroush made this statement at the 2011 AAR meeting in San Francisco in conversation with Andrew Rippin.
\end{itemize}
theology, he is familiar with the major questions that (western secular) modernity raised regarding the relation between the contingent and the transcendent, history and eternity, faith and reason etc. In recent years, Jarādī has participated in discussions about the epistemological endeavors of Abū Zayd, Sorough, Shabestari, and Arkoun. Jarādī at times alludes to their thought, at times he cites them directly.

He is greatly indebted to the works of al-Ṭabarānī, Ruholla Khomeini, and Bāqir al-Ṣadr, placing himself in their legacy and elaborating on their thought. While Jarādī does not speak any European language, he has read what is available in Persian and Arabic with regard to Qur'ānic studies, which once again stresses how crucial and powerful translations are. Moreover, personal discussions with Christian theologians made him familiar with contemporary Christian theologians, such as Karl Rahner, Jürgen Bultmann, Paul Ricoeur, and Paul Tillich, all of whom have been translated into Arabic, some by Jarādī's employees and students.\(^{1250}\)

Jarādī is familiar with their writings, in dialogue with their thought, and able to integrate their findings into his own epistemological system. The fact that Jarādī refers to western theologians and philosophers for his considerations about the application of historical critique to the Qur'ān, rather than to western Qur'ānic studies, is noteworthy. This orientation might simply reflect his philosophical and theological interest in the questions these approaches pose. One can also assume that these authors, and how they tackled the subject matter in relation to the Bible, inform much of his knowledge regarding historicizing approaches.

Jarādī's institute specializes in a strand of philosophy that follows Mullā Ṣadrā's

thought, as developed further and made popular mainly by the Islamic thinker and philosopher al-Ṭabatābā’ī but also by figures such as Soroush and Khomeini. Although Jarāḍī is an affiliate of Hizbullah, he views himself mainly as a philosopher. His institute is engaged in publications and translations of philosophical and hermeneutical works from Persian and European languages into Arabic and teaches Islamic (Ṣadrian) philosophy to more than 200 students. Only recently has the institute expanded to include its own mosque complex and a larger library. A sister institute is currently being opened in Iraq. Jarāḍī, himself well-versed in western hermeneutics, philosophy, and theology, has been active in interreligious dialogue and in conversation with secular forums.

When it comes to the production of religious knowledge, Jarāḍī calls Lebanon a “consumer country,” whereas he sees the actual intellectual activities happening in Iran. Yet, while Lebanon may have less human and financial resources than Iran in terms of Islamic scholarship, its multi-confessional population forces thinkers from all confessions to review their own faith in light of the coexistence with adherents of other religions. The intellectual life can happen in close contact with different-minded people. For example, Jarāḍī has Christian

1251 Mullā Ṣadrā’s full name is Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Yaḥyā al-Qawāmī al-Shirāzī. He was one of the most prominent post-Avicennan figures in Islamic philosophy and among the most important philosophers of the Safavid period. His “school of thought” is called transcendental philosophy or “al-Hikma al-Muta‘āliyya,” a name used by Ṣadrā himself who strove at a synthesis of philosophical and Sufi thought.

1252 According to Joseph Ellie Allagha, some party members label Jarāḍī their “minister of culture.” Allagha calls Jarāḍī a Ḥizbullah ideologue. Compare Allagha, Hizbullah’s Identity Construction (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 42. I could not verify this information during my research.


1254 Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Shafiq Jarāḍī, September 29, 2014.
theologian friends like Būlus al-Khūrī, and sometimes sends his own students to the former Catholic priest to discuss theological questions. Jarādī also teaches at the Jesuit SJU where he has students from various confessional backgrounds.1255

He identifies strongly with philosophy, which for him implies the moral imperative to also reflect on society. Tajdid (renewal) of religion and Muslim society are central themes in his thinking. Islamic tajdid, moving forward in religious thought, is absolutely urgent to not fall into “repetitiveness, which traps one's civilizational identity in senility.”1256 Jarādī is thus in agreement with Tamer (and principally all Islamist and secular reformers) that contemporary Muslim societies are in need of fundamental renewal (tajdid), and he sees the crux of the problem similarly in the treatment of the turāth and especially the Qur'ān.

However, where he clearly disagrees with Tamer is in just what will bring such a renewal about and what the nature of renewal is. Similarly to Tamer, Jarādī speaks of reviving and rereading religious traditions and calls for “creativity and originality.” However, Tamer most probably did not have in mind a “reform of people” that would culminate in “the civilization of the Qur'ānic Man,”1257 an expression that already suggests the centrality of the Qur'ān in Jarādī's thought. He envisions a “civilization of connection and reunion with revelation (wahy) in the very values of life,”1258 in which the Qur'ān takes center stage. As we will see, the Qur'ān is not simply a guide book for Jarādī or a blueprint for an Islamic “constitution.” The function of the Qur'ān cannot be reduced to a justifying instrument for any sort of social organization. Rather, the Qur'ān is a necessity for the ontological well-being of humans, and hence, in Jarādī's view, it

1258 Ibid., 6.
cannot be ignored by any Muslim when discussing the renewal of society.

For Jarādī, renewal and modernization are two distinct affairs. Modernity, “taken neutrally, as renewal and contemporaneousness [through a culture's own experience and values] poses no problem.” But modernization as “[assuming] the experience and values of another to justify itself, [would lead] to fake subjection and blind imitation (taqlīd).” Jarādī's calls for authenticity and political as well as ethical responsibility do not imply a crude rejection of “foreign cultural influences” or anti-westernism.

Rather, in his philosophical thinking, Jarādī ponders the usefulness, coherence, as well as the underlying assumptions of concepts, theories, and methodologies in order to evaluate whether they can be applied to the Islamic body of texts and thought. He takes seriously the power of epistemological changes and is convinced that “ideas have consequences.” As will be demonstrated shortly, Jarādī's hermeneutics and epistemology inform his political vision for the relationship between religion and society.

One of the main objectives of Jarādī's institute is to theoretically further the ijtihād fikrī (intellectual ijtihād). As previously noted, most discussions on reforming Muslim societies center on the reform of fiqh (or more abstractly on shari'a) without taking farther-reaching epistemological, theoretical, and theological questions into consideration. For Jarādī, ijtihād does not merely refer to the legal discourse but embraces a broad spectrum of thought: “It is urgent

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1260 This phrase is taken from Richard M. Weaver, Ideas have consequences (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Weaver argues that metaphysics impact politics and society; and so does epistemology.
1261 Jarādī's definition of ijtihād reads as follows: “Ijtihād is usually taken in a jurisprudential context, to mean the exertion of effort in understanding the meaning of scripture so as to derive legalistic verdicts. Its main attribute is being renovating, in the sense of deploying the mind in answering to contemporary questions while relying on scripture, and having it as a yardstick. Here, ijtihād is suggested as an ideal to be utilized in domains other than just jurisprudence.” See Shafiq Jarādī, “al-Dīn wa'l-falsafa wa'l-su'āl al-muhājara,” (unpublished article), 4.
today that we renovate our philosophical views and values, our ijtihādī religious beliefs, our outlook concerning existence, life, death, agony, hardship, and the future.”¹²⁶² Already al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī had critiqued fiqh as incapable of meeting the theoretical and practical requirements of the day.¹²⁶³ Yet, as mentioned earlier, fiqh has not lost its importance. On the contrary, fiqh has almost come to be seen as the only discipline authentically representing Islam.¹²⁶⁴ Jarādī's effort can well be understood as aiming to counter this movement among Muslims by calling for a more holistic Islamic spiritual and intellectual ijtihād that would entail critical and logical pondering of crucial existential questions without falling into a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Jarādī's critique addresses various strands of thought. He exercises “internal criticism” of the Shi’ite religious establishment by challenging their sometimes simplistic and mechanical treatments of fiqh. Internal criticism is a form of critique that does not have to be secular, liberal, or Islamist to contest certain forms of religious authority and conceptions of Islam. By striving to give philosophy a more meaningful voice in the evolving discourse on Islam, Jarādī frames his critique and authority by referencing “a hallowed scholarly tradition, to put it to particular uses, and to reorient it in various ways.”¹²⁶⁵ In other words, he opens up new spaces for public Islamic debate by attempting to redirect it to a form of thinking long established in his tradition. He does not, in the process, simply fall back on old paradigms, but engages these ideational practices with other contemporary thought and concepts. In that context, he claims that the active engagement with western methodologies, while always subject to scrutiny, can help further the inner-Islamic

¹²⁶⁴ Ahmad, What is Islam?, 120, 123-124.
¹²⁶⁵ On internal criticism, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2-3.
task of reforming the fundamentals on which fiqh and usūl al-fiqh rest.\textsuperscript{1266}

While so-called Islamic modernists, liberals, and Islamists often entail an assault on the ‘ulamā’ in their critique,\textsuperscript{1267} Jarādī, for obvious reasons, chooses a different path. He affirms the expedience of the ‘ulamā’ as religious authority, while attempting to redirect the intellectual discussion that undeniably overlaps with social and political concerns. Consequently, he rejects authors outside of the learned establishment who threaten the coherence of Islam.\textsuperscript{1268} He has in mind “secular” Muslim intellectuals who aim to apply hermeneutical or historicizing methods to the Qur’ān, such as Soroush and Arkoun, but who fail, in Jarādī's view, to place their efforts in a sound Islamic framework. Nevertheless, he gives those authors a voice and takes their questions and theories seriously in his own considerations about a critical engagement with the Qur’ān, which will be discussed in the following section.

\textit{Method and Text: Possibilities of Historicizing the Qur’ān}

Jarādī addresses the question of applying historicizing approaches to the Qur’ān from a theoretical-philosophical perspective. According to him, in order to approach the Qur’ān the Muslim scholar must be aware of the text's inherent vision and of the presuppositions any method carries. At the core of Jarādī's critique are two connected issues: the relationship of the Qur’ān with history and the validity of any given methodology. He does not dismiss a critical engagement with the Qur’ān. On the contrary, he calls for a critical reading. Yet, Jarādī cautions, any method is conditioned by history as well as by the mental and intellectual context in which it was developed. The language of facts and objectivity is often part of a political maneuver. For

\textsuperscript{1266} Jarādī, “Ishkāliyat,” 61, 68.  
\textsuperscript{1267} Zaman, \textit{Modern Islamic Thought}, 3.  
\textsuperscript{1268} Jarādī, “Ishkāliyat,” 59-61.
Jarādī, there exists a “relationship between methodology and weltanschauung (ru'ya) in the formation of any critical or epistemological structure” which raises the crucial question, “To whom does the final verdict (hukm) over the text belong – to the vision or the method?”  

Given the inherent instability and bias of method, he wants to safeguard a certain form of knowledge production over and against new methods and their assumptions. He stresses that no method is neutral, but “turns into a theory that turns into a normative framework, which is not merely an objective formulation for thinking.” These statements display Jarādī's awareness of postmodern critiques of objectivity. It is worth reiterating Feyerabend's findings in that respect: “Observational reports, experimental results, 'factual' statements, either contain theoretical assumptions or assert them by the manner in which they are used.” In other words, how we speak and phrase things reflects and shapes our conception of the world. In a detailed revision of historical methods, he demonstrates that those methods changed continuously according to new findings in psychology, history, anthropology, and philosophy. That the presuppositions of the critical methods were revised continuously due to historical circumstances and cultural influences elucidates the contingency of methodology.

For example, at some point, western Qur'ānic scholars (like Nöldeke) emphasized the imaginary genius of the Prophet who was responsible for the creation of the text. Another theory posited multiple authorships; yet another traced the Qur'ān back to ancient, disconnected sources.

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1270 Ibid., “Ishkāliyat,” 56.
1271 Feyerabend, Against Method, 14.
1272 Jarādī, “Ishkāliyat,” 51-68. In his critique of “methods” Jarādī is, of course, not alone. One may even state that the fluctuation of theories and methods is at the core of science, as Max Weber stated: “In science each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. That is the fate to which science is subjected; it is the very meaning of scientific work [...] Every scientific 'fulfillment' raises new questions: it asks to be 'surpassed' and outdated.” Quoted in Ira J. Cohen (ed.) Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 11.
Jarādī points to a real problem in western Qur'ānic studies, namely the existence of completely disconnected and contradictory hypotheses that easily create confusion. The historical-critical approach, as the central method of western Qur'ānic studies, touched upon the textual and symbolic core of Islam, and some approaches threatened to deconstruct its coherence entirely. As soon as one deconstructs the Islamic original setting and the unity of the Qur'ānic text (as is the case with Luxenberg), Jarādī asks, how can one speak of the historicity of the Qurʾān at all?

At the same time, overemphasizing the historical context is similarly not desirable. By reducing the Qurʾān to the purely circumstantial needs and opinions of its “authors” and its “original meaning” one runs the risk of “establishing a great divide between the text and the reality today,” in which the text becomes an artifact reflecting merely a past “cultural vision.”

Jarādī's critique resonates with Chakrabarty's problematization of historical objectification. The latter reasoned that the construction of historical objects required to be

Able to deny them their contemporaneity by assigning them to a specific period in a calendrical past, an act by which we split the present into the “modern” and the “traditional” or the “historical,” and thereby declare ourselves to be modern [...] History is therefore a practice of “monumentalizing” objects – from documents to sculptures – of simultaneously acknowledging and denying their existence in our “own” time.

Monumentalizing entails creating a barrier between the subject and her object that cannot conceivably be part of the same time. In other words, historicization is often used to silence things conceived as belonging to the past and deny them their equality to participate in the present. Jarādī is concerned with “de-monumentalizing” the Qurʾān, so to speak. He aims to protect the Qurʾān from becoming historicized to an extent that reduces it to merely reflecting a

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particular moment in the past that is now truly dead. He rightly wonders how such a “frozen” text could still speak to modern humans. To see the Qur'ān as an all-too-human and historical document would render it effectively mute, while it is supposed to speak. Jarādī suggests that the actual issue does not hinge on the method but on the vision that creates the method.

Tamer had argued that the historical-critical approach only appeals to reason since the transcendent cannot be proven. Jarādī reverses the argument by stating that no historical method can take account of the transcendent because the historical is always contingent. In his view, in the field of historical-critical methods, “the empirical evidence judges the invisible.” Any science (‘ilm) has its specific field of expertise, and Jarādī sees the historical discipline as simply unfit to expand its findings to the “content of the holy text.” As a solution, he suggests a critical revision of historical-critical methods, to examine to what extent they can be useful. In this evaluation, however, the possibility of the transcendent as an epistemological category must at least be entertained. Jarādī rightly states that history, as an epistemological tool, will never be able to grasp the infinite, because it axiomatically evacuates the divine from any examined object.1275 His argument about the absence (or even the impossibility) of a transcendent category in academic discussions of the Qur'ān suggests that the transcendent belongs to the “unthought” in western Qur'ān scholarship. From his perspective, the transcendent has to be made thinkable again.1276

The problem with reductionist methods, among which Jarādī also counts historical critique, is that they ignore the holistic character of the Qur'ān, Islam, and by extension the human itself. They presuppose an utterly limited understanding of the human, who is trapped in

1276 Jarādī does not use the vocabulary of the unthought and the unthinkable. Nevertheless, those terms essentially fits his argument, understood in the Arkounian sense.
her historicity. Jarāḍī holds that both the Islamic core disciplines as well as the modern methodologies have to be revised. The latter tend to be reductionist and atomistic due to the specialization of methodological, philosophical, and historical disciplines in the past century that often function entirely disconnected from each other. This observation seems apt if one considers that mainstream western Qur'ānic studies has traditionally dispensed with philosophical questions, a fact that Arkoun similarly lamented. Yet, most scholars of Islamic Studies are still convinced of pursuing research neutrally, a claim that Jarāḍī challenges.

In particular, the postmodern turn has led, in his view, to “textual anarchy” and the disempowerment of the text in favor of an all-powerful reader, who can “bend the neck of the text” as she likes. In the process, the concept of text itself changed. Jarāḍī objects to a mode of reading in which “everything goes.” For that reason, he passionately rejects approaches of the like of Ḥanafī, who claimed, “There is no true or false interpretation, right or wrong understanding. There are only different efforts to approach the text from different angles with different motivations.” According to Jarāḍī, while the Qur'ān is the highest standard for its own interpretation, taking the Qur'ān without situating it within an Islamic context (i.e., tradition) will turn the text into a mere instrument to justify whatever the reader wants. This situation

1278 One may add here the view of S. Ahmad who stated, “The approach of the field of Islamic studies' has been equally hampered by what one might call an over-textualization and outright disinclination to theorization.” See Ahmad, What is Islam?, 114. Similarly, Kevin Jaques, “Belief,” in Key Terms for the Study of Islam, ed. Jamal J. Elias (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), 53-71.
1279 Arkoun found this state of affairs especially astonishing in view of the fact that any research on cultures and societies of the occident is usually embedded in philosophical questions. Ursula Günther, Ein moderner Kritiker der Islamischen Vernunft (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2005), 119.
has led in Islam to what Jarādī calls a “crisis of representation.” His principle of reading the Qur'ān from within an Islamic framework does not translate into a claim to be in possession of a single true interpretation. He accepts the inherent plurality of meanings of verses in the Qur'ān, welcomes new readings and an “opening of the text,” a term perhaps taken from Abū Zayd. \(^{1283}\)

Jarādī is in particular favorable of the *tafsīr mawḍū‘ī* (thematic *tafsīr*), as explained by Bāqir al-Ṣadr. Accordingly, new circumstances require novel methods to approach the Qur'ān, which safeguard qur'ānic interpretations from exhaustion. The goal of *tafsīr* is the striving toward infinity. \(^{1284}\) The Qur'ān moves in time and conveys meaning by way of language that is always limited. At the same time, the Qur'ān is not limited by time and circumstances. Jarādī strongly emphasizes that the Qur'ān is *qayyūm* (everlasting, intact, perfect, and sustained). The following section clarifies how Jarādī can understand the Qur'ān as *qayyūm*, in that its “elevated meaning is not exhausted […] despite the limits of language”\(^ {1285}\) that is, in his and al-Ṣadr's view, necessarily contingent. Because language is finite, linguistic *tafsīr* can only lead to so many interpretations. Interpretation is always the result of human contingent reflection upon the “elevated Qur'ān” (transcendent in origin, made intelligible through human language). Yet, interpretations of the Qur'ān are endless. Hence, new circumstances need novel methods to read the Qur'ān, such as the *tafsīr mawḍū‘ī*, explained and justified by al-Ṣadr thus:

* Tafsīr starts out from reality and proceeds toward the Qur'ān. It does not start from the Qur'ān and ends at the Qur'ān. An act [of interpretation] that is isolated from reality is also separated from […] the human experience. By means of (such a dynamic) the Qur'ān maintains its capacity to offer something new. The capacities of linguistic *tafsīr* are not infinite. However with regard to the Qur'ān, narratives (*riwāyāt*) indicate that the Qur'ān is inexhaustible, and the Qur'ān itself expounds that the words of God are infinite. Yet the

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linguistic *tafsīr* is finite because language only has limited capacities, and within language there is no innovation concerning the linguistically signified (*madlūl*). Well then, the presentation of that which is not finite is possible through the *tafsīr mawdū‘*.

Jarādī would agree with Abū Zayd as well as with Mu'tazilites that language is human and finite. Language is a human notion not a “divine gift to man,” as some of the anti-Mu'tazilite thinkers held with reference to certain verses in the Qur'an, such as Q 2:31-33:

> And He taught Adam all the names, then presented them to the angels; He said: Tell Me the names of those if you are right. They said: Glory be to Thee! We have no knowledge but that which Thou hast taught us. Surely Thou art the Knowing the Wise. He said: Oh Adam, inform them of their names. So when he informed them of their names, He said: Did I not say to you that I know what is unseen in the heavens and the earth?

Jarādī understands these verses metaphorically. Language is in fact human. However, for Jarādī, language is less restricted than its historical contingency suggests. It can transcend and rise beyond itself. Similarly, Jarādī's idea of humans does not subscribe to the Cartesian ideal of an autonomous, self-possessed subject. Instead, humans can achieve a mode of being that disrupts human limitedness and calls attention to their in-betweenness and interrelationality with the world and with God. The finite (i.e., the text) can give way to infinite meanings, independently of the ontological status of the Qur'an before it was being embodied in a human text. The metaphysical question of the created- or uncreatedness of the Qur'an does not matter for Jarādī. What exactly this means will be teased out shortly based on Jarādī's ontological epistemology.

As will be seen, Jarādī's deliberations concerning the link between method and worldview as well as between human ontology and text have implications for his treatment of historicizing approaches to the Qur'an. Jarādī has reflected on the applicability of the historical-critical

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approach to the Qurʾān on various occasions, for example, in an article called *Naqd al-naṣṣ al-dīnī* (Critique of the Religious Text). The incentive for this article came from the organizers of the Forum at NEST where Jarādī first presented this paper, which emphasizes again the importance of interreligious dialogue for the discussion of hermeneutics. He starts his exposition by examining whether anything prevents Muslims from applying the same critique to the religious texts (i.e., the Qurʾān and Sunna) that has been used for interpreting the Bible. He poses the following questions:

First, how do Muslims view the fundamental Islamic religious texts (Qurʾān and Sunna)? Second, do Muslims differentiate between the Qurʾānic text and the explanations of that text [...]? Third, what is the opinion of the Muslim ʿulamāʾ regarding contemporary methods and visions? Where can we place the Qurʾānic text in the dynamic between text and reality? And fourth, to which extent can we imagine [...] applying a critical and hermeneutical method to the foundational Islamic text?1288

According to Jarādī, in order to understand the dialectic between text and reality that generates meaning(s), the interpreter has to know 1) what kind of text she approaches, 2) what the circumstances (*al-wāqiʿ*) are that pose the questions to the text, and 3) what role the “historical reality” (*al-ḥaqīqa al-tārīkhīya*) plays into which the text was first revealed. One may call this approach, similar to Faḍlallāh’s, “implicit hermeneutics.”

It is significant how Jarādī organizes his material. The structure of his questions shows that it does matter how Muslims define and understand the Qurʾān; not how they come to an understanding of its content, but simply what kind of text the Qurʾān is, or to put it in biblical studies jargon, to which *genre* it belongs. Based on the Qurʾān, and in line with al-Ṭabaṭabāʾī, Jarādī establishes the reason for its revelation (*tanzīl*), that is, to guide humans to happiness by

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realizing their original disposition (fitra), which leads them to Islamic din and the grace of God. Din, as al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī defines it in its Qur’ānic sense, applies “to a way or pattern of living.”  

While the Qur’ān refers to the hereafter, it also places strong emphasis on worldly affairs. Both “worlds” (al-ʿālamayn) have to be kept in mind when approaching the Qur’ān which aims at the whole person guiding her to fulfill humanity's end, that is, submission to God. The Qur’ān contains the sources for dogmatic (iʿtiqādi) knowledge as well as ethical and practical rules. Its language (kalāmuhu) does not have the same origin as ordinary speech, which is proof of the Qur’ān's divine origin. Therefore, it is not easy to derive its meaning. Rather, one has to ponder (tadabbur) its structure, language, and content, while the speech is clear enough to be understood by an intelligent Arabic speaker.

Jarādī’s emphasis on the learnedness necessary for interpreting the Qur’ān is in accordance with his general concern to safeguard the Qur’ān from “wild” interpretations that force upon the Qur’ān what the reader wants. His stance also implicitly strengthens the position of his own guild – the ‘ulamā’. He affirms the authority of the ‘ulamā’ and the consensus (ijmā’) of Muslims on crucial Islamic matters when he bases his own opinion on their judgment. By appealing to other ‘ulamā’ when it comes to questions of applying new methods to the Qur’ānic text, Jarādī places himself in the framework of Shi’ite authority. Yet, the highest authority to interpret the Qur’ān is the Qur’ān itself. While some “ambiguous” verses (mutashābihāt) have an inner meaning (bāṭin) that is not obvious for everyone, this meaning can never contradict the outer (ẓāhir) meaning.


1290 Jarādī dedicates a whole chapter to language in the Qur’ān in Jarādī, Muqārabāt manhajīya fi falsafat al-dīn (Beirut: Ma’had al-Ma’ārif al-Ḥikmiyya, 2004), 199-247.
The *mutashābihāt* should be understood in light of the clear verses (*muhkamāt*). Its *maqāsid* (intentions) are stable, while its rules (*aḥkām*) have unfolded through time, which guarantees that it will convey meaning for all times.\footnote{1291}

Besides having provided a concise summary of al-Ṭabaṭaba'i's deliberations of the fundamental Islamic principles concerning the Qur'ān, Jarādī establishes here the purpose of the Qur'ān and its “genre.” He responds implicitly at this point to the demand of some Islamic Studies scholars to read the Qur'ān “as any other text” and denies that such a reading is possible. Jarādī's critique is in line with some critics of biblical scholarship and literary studies, more generally. As Barton writes, no text can be read without at least identifying its genre implicitly. No one can ever sit down and simply write or read a “text.” Even if we read an unknown text, we are fast to follow an intuition and, based on its semantic field and structure, come to a judgement as to what this text is about.\footnote{1292} Therefore, one can understand the Christian readings of the Qur'ān that we encountered in the last chapter not merely as polemics but as expressions of reading the Qur'ān as belonging to a different semantic (Christian) field.

However, as Jarādī emphasizes, the Qur'ān has a *history* as an Islamic text. The Qur'ān conveys grace and helps humans fulfill their destiny to live according to God's will. It has to be read and understood with that purpose in mind.\footnote{1293} When Jarādī summarizes the fundamental Islamic views on the Qur'ān and its interpretation, he does not merely reiterate a dogmatic standpoint. Rather, he establishes a hermeneutical frame of reference that builds the foundation for any further epistemological considerations. The text is not simply *a text*. The meaning of the

\footnote{1291}{Jarādī, “Naqd al-Naṣṣ,” 95-96, 99. This is called the theory of *jarīf*. Jarādī, Interview, September 29, 2014.}
\footnote{1292}{Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 16.}
\footnote{1293}{Jarādī, “Naqd al-Naṣṣ,” 95-97.}
Qurʾān does not consist in its content alone. How so? To understand Jarādī's position we have to look at his theory of revelation that depends on the ontology of human nature and even language.

**Jarādī’s Understanding of Wahy**

As mentioned before, Jarādī is a Ṣadrian thinker who adopts Mullā Ṣadrā's ontological epistemology. This becomes lucid even in the layout and structure of Jarādī's article on wahy. Ṣadrā's works feature the unmistakable structure of beginning with a qurʾānic verse that can be seen as an opening to each argument and by closing his arguments again with a qurʾānic passage that is immediately relevant to his discussions. This structure emphasized for Mullā Ṣadrā the rootedness of every philosophical argument in the Qurʾān. Without the Qurʾān, the final and perfect revelation of the divine to humans, any philosophical argument would be incomplete.

Following the literary and logical structural expositional style of Mullā Ṣadrā, Jarādī begins his text with a qurʾānic phrase that can be seen as programmatic for everything that follows: “Iqrā” – Recite. Each argument is bracketed by qurʾānic verses. While those verses may seem at first taken out of context, they are always thematically linked to the argument. By following Mullā Ṣadrā's literary textual structure, Jarādī obviously, yet subtly, positions himself in the tradition of the Shaykh al-Ishrāq.

According to Jarādī, and in line with Mullā Ṣadrā, all existence emanates from God. The true existence of human beings (and of all creation) is rooted in the Being of everything, which is God. Creation and revelation, both issuing from God, are closely linked. The process of revelation comes to its fulfillment in the Qurʾān. While the first revelation occurs in and through nature and the world, realized by means of God's command “be” (kun), the second revelation
comes to completion through the imperative “recite” (iqrā’), which takes form in the Qur‘ān.1294

The human being – whose identity and nature are dynamic not static1295 – is not simply a passive vessel in this process,1296 but changed in the process, coming closer to God.

The human being is ontologically not in complete opposition to God or separated from Him. Her natural disposition toward God and her yearning for Him (an upward movement) are answered by God through revelation (a descending movement). Humans are ontologically “open” and can be reminded through wāhy of their embeddedness in larger orders. Wahy turns the human into God’s vicegerent on earth through activating what is already in her self (nafs)1297:

Wahy is not the human, at the same time it is not his opposite, rather [wahy] is the ultimate perfection. Revelation is not an essence separate from the human, rather it is the luminous emanation (fayd) that evokes for him the hidden treasures and illuminates before him the courses of question, contemplation, and answer.1298

This statement, rooted in Sufism and Şādhīan philosophy, rests on the premise that the ground of all true reality is Being. Life appears in different stages of that Being and, by gradually turning its potentialities into actualities, can strive toward perfection. In accordance with Ibn Sīnā,

The procession of possible existents is inscribed into the very essence of God […] and is translated into the fundamental goodness of everything that exists, insofar as it exists.

That is why “evil has no essence” but is privation of substance […] Existence, constitutive

1297 Nafs can refer to both soul and self. Jarādī in his article plays with the word and in one passage even falls into the Lebanese dialect to drive his point home that humans have in themselves a divine spark and to indicate that his theory blurs the line between subject and object.
1298 Jarādī, “Wahy,” 18. Differing from other Shi‘īes, Jarādī is not opposed to Sufism, which becomes clear in the following statement: “What one finds in Islamic philosophy and Sufism is a depiction of (man’s) annihilative union with the Absolute as a mere extinction of all personal aspects. This reveals an interaction, or acculturation, between Islamic and non-Islamic manners of thought and mechanisms of inquiry, without this driving the Muslims away from the horizons made open by scripture (the Qur‘ān and the Sunnah); for we find in every idea and every view an attempt at verification practiced through scripture.” See Jarādī, “Death as awakening,” 5.
in and through God, is pure good, and God is indeed the real, since necessity of existence
found its reality in Him, from which the being-real of all things emanates.\textsuperscript{1299}

While creation is distinct from its Creator, “All of being effuses out of Him, while remaining in
Him.”\textsuperscript{1300} It is important for Jarādī's understanding of the Qur'an's language and constitution that
both are inherently linked to the divine. This explains why he can take full account of history and
the human in the Qur'an while holding on to its divinity:

And here [i.e., in the moment the Prophet received the command to recite the Qur'an], the
truths of the self are not outside of the courses of history, time, the borders of geographic
history, and place. \textit{Iqrā' }is a revelation that indicates to the self of the Prophet to read his
self. This is a message (\textit{khitāb}) that penetrates any wall of time and its limitations,
because language here is like the thoughts, i.e., it strengthens its identity through [...] its
ascending unification to a perfect whole (\textit{takāmul}).\textsuperscript{1301}

Jarādī does not object to calling the language of the Qur'an “human.” God addresses humans in a
way they can understand. Jarādī sounds similar to Tamer. Both hold that “scripture speaks the
language of man.” However, to say it in Funkenstein's words, with most medieval scholars,
Jarādī affirms that, “the language of revelation uses elements of familiar and natural order to
transcend them.”\textsuperscript{1302} The human element of language makes the Qur'an understandable, yet it does
not make the Qur'an “human.” Everything strives toward an end and perfection: knowledge,
faith, humans, and language. Language reaches its perfection in the Qur'an, just as the perfection
of man is realized in the Prophet. The self that reads itself in this process of revelation acts
according to her natural disposition that strives toward divination: the “human carries in herself a

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{1299} Paraphrased by Christian Jambet, \textit{The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mulla Sadra} (New York:
Zone Books, 2006), 136. I am concerned with how Jarādī uses Mullā Šadrā's thought. For that concern, I have
found Jambet most helpful, regardless of how accurate his understanding of Mullā Šadrā is.

\textsuperscript{1300} Quoted in ibid., 136. Jambet further explains: “This (obviously Neo-Platonic) concept of effusion (\textit{fayd}) is
absolutely central: it clarifies the notion of providence (\textit{'ināyah}) and is inseparable from it.”

\textsuperscript{1301} Jarādī, “Wahy,” 17.

\textsuperscript{1302} Funkenstein, \textit{Scientific Imagination}, 219.
\end{footnotesize}
true divinizing aspect while the knowledge that comes through revelation also resembles the knowledge of God.”¹³⁰³ God connects to His creatures through wahy.¹³⁰⁴

From Jarādī's faithfulness to Mullā Ṣadrā's concept of knowing, one can infer that the former would reject Gadamer's notion of hermeneutics. To recall, for Gadamer meaning is produced where the horizons of the person who wants to know and the thing to be known overlap. There is consequentially no meaning without a knower. This view of the production of meaning is opposed to Mullā Ṣadrā's concept. The latter follows Ibn ‘Arabi’s deliberation:

Sound knowledge is not given by reflection, or by what the rational thinkers establish by means of their reflective powers. Sound knowledge is only that which God throws into the heart of the knower. It is a divine light for which God singles out any of His servants whom He will, whether angel, messenger, prophet, friend, or person of faith.¹³⁰⁵

Jarādī's hermeneutics rest on Ibn ‘Arabi's maxim that “he who has no unveiling (kashf) has no knowledge” (man lā kashfā lahu al-‘ilmā lahu). Kashf as the “disclosure of existence and intelligibility” presupposes meaning to be inherent in things that can be uncovered “by removing the barriers of material embodiment and ignorance.”¹³⁰⁶ Obviously, such a process of understanding is very different from the concept of modern hermeneutics, in which there is no meaning without a person who produces it. Hermeneutics accept the metaphysics of capitalist modernity, in which “the world is experienced in terms of an ontological distinction between physical reality and its representation – in language, culture, or other forms of meaning. Reality is material, inert, and without inherent meaning, and representation is the non-material, non-

¹³⁰⁴ Ibid., 18-19.
physical dimension of intelligibility.”¹³⁰⁷ Jarādī's hermeneutics defy such a binary understanding of reality that has been so central to the structuring of (western-centered) political modernity and that rests on a certain understanding of the world and the individual's place in it.

Hermeneutics are predicated on the apparent separation of the world into things in themselves from one side, and their meaning or structure, from another. In that framework, it is the individual who bestows meaning, structure, and significance to things. Entailed in hermeneutics is then a restructuring not only of time (by means of history) but of space. More explicitly, the space humans share in becomes reordered as something apart from the subject that reads it. The subject makes sense of the object by defining the reality to which the object belongs and thus also acquires control over it. This view of the world lends itself to commodification since the act of reading is more of a consumer choice than an event in which one is grabbed by a transcending and transforming reality. For Jarādī, rather than “creating meaning” things become apparent to the mind through what Şadrā calls presence, illumination, and witnessing.¹³⁰⁸ For the latter, witnessing (shuhīd) and unveiling (kashf) are the most reliable tools of knowing the reality of things. In this context, the use of the word ījād (God's bestowal of existence upon contingent beings) implies the idea that all things have an inherent meaning because God created them for a specific purpose to begin with. Ibrahim Kalin explains in that regard:

This is where Şadrā unites the argument of “what-ness” (mā-huwa) with the argument of “why-ness” (limā-huwa) because to be able to say properly what a thing is, is to be able to say why it is and acknowledge its source. The unassailable relationship between the existence of something is established by the intrinsically intelligible reality of existence.¹³⁰⁹

¹³⁰⁷ Mitchell, Colonising, xiii.
Jarādī takes issue with what he sees as the three Islamic currents in regard to wahy: the classical philosophical Islamic view, the Islamic traditional view, and the view of modernizing Muslim reformers. The traditional view of wahy, Jarādī asserts, ignored the human element that is important to understand the process of wahy. The classical philosophical view is too abstract; and both views ignore that revelation is linked to time and place, and unfolds through history.\(^{1310}\) The Qur'ān is not something “supernatural.” Rather, “its speech is colored by the touch of the human realm, […] something natural is transformed into a reality that is above nature or which humans perceive to be above nature.” In Jarādī's theory of ījāz something natural and human, i.e., language, is taken and transformed into something that transcends human natural language.\(^{1311}\)

This statement is no contradiction for Jarādī since the Qur'ān, formulated in language, has a divine source and a divine end through which humans strive toward God. Jarādī's conceptions of language and human nature collide with a Cartesian view of the cosmos that emphasizes the distance between the human and the divine while he also strongly objects to a Spinozian identification of nature with God.\(^{1312}\) Mullā Ṣadrā keeps that distinction even when he posits existence as the ground of all existing things.\(^{1313}\) To read the Qur'ān is not an act performed by a subject on an object and can hence not result in controlling the text.

Something else, much more existential, happens in the moment the reader is addressed by iqrā'. Both are read in the act of reading: the Qur'ān and the self. When Jarādī states that “everything human is divine,”\(^{1314}\) he does not mean to conflate God and humans but indicates that

\(^{1311}\) Ibid., 32, 35.
\(^{1312}\) See ibid., 39.
\(^{1313}\) Kalin, Knowledge, 233.
\(^{1314}\) Interview Rahel Fischbach with Jarādī, September 29, 2014.
the true nature of humans carries being (i.e., the divine ground) in itself which comes to this
nature through the act of reading, or rather listening and receiving. As Mullā Ṣadrā formulates it:

All existence [is united] in a single relationship by which some parts of it are related to
some others [...] in spite of their external diversity. Their unity is not like the conjunction
of corporeal bodies whereas their goals are conjoined and their surfaces linked. Rather,
the whole universe is one single animate being [...] like a single soul [...] Man is the last
being with which the world of nature is sealed. [...] In man are gathered the truths of the
higher and lower worlds and it is he who has added to the total truth of the world the
truths of the One from His names and attributes with which man's great vicegerency in the
macro-cosmos is affirmed after his lesser vicegerency in the world of nature.1315

Jarādī contends that because the human is also divine (in the sense of being), even atheism can be
an expression of God in some ways. In Jarādī's view, humans, just as the world, are in a constant
state of “becoming.”1316 This is Ṣadrian at its core, yet one can also think of Soroush's early
writings on Mullā Ṣadrā. Similarly to Jarādī, Soroush interpreted Mullā Ṣadrā to the effect that
motion is an inherent feature of all things that introduced the historicity of humans.1317

That Jarādī includes considerations about the impact of time, place, and circumstances on
the Qurān in his exposition results from his engagement with what he calls “modernizing” or
“secular” Muslim approaches. Ṣadrian philosophy would not have thought to include such a
sentence or category. We see here a slight transformation of a traditional theory and the power of
the concept of history, which Jarādī modifies to entail the transcendent. For him, history does not
determine the religious text. In particular, he takes issue with Soroush's most recent view of

1317 See Abdolkarim Soroush, Ahmad and Mahmoud Sadri “Intellectual autobiography: An Interview” in Reason,
Soroush stated: “For the first time, the doctrine of substantial motion introduced two fundamental elements to
Islamic thought: first, the historicity of existence; second the concomitant internal tumult and restlessness and
external calm and tranquility of the phenomenon [...] Rather than being a thing, the world is an unremitting
process of becoming [...] The inner transformation recreates the phenomenon anew in every given moment [...] God
manifests his presence in the perpetual demise and birth of the universe.” See Soroush, Nahād-e nā-ārām-e
jahān (Tehran: Qalam, 1982), 65. Quoted in Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 93.
Wahih, the Qurʾān, and epistemology. Especially in his dealing with Sorosh, it becomes obvious that Jarādī does not merely defend the “sacredness” of the Qurʾān but a view of Islam and the Islamic learned establishment that he considers to be most valid or “orthodox.”

Soroush: Religion, Religious Knowledge, and the Expansion of Prophetic Experience

Soroush is arguably one of the most influential Shiʿite thinkers in the Iranian context. Especially since the late 1980s, those who aimed to found institutions of civil society were either directly or indirectly influenced by him. His most controversial works dealt with the concept of religion, the prophetic experience, and the formation of religious knowledge. On several occasions, Soroush emphasized that he perceives himself merely as a “theoretician” without political ambitions. However, he contributed significantly to the emergence of a civil community that became important in Iranian politics and society and published several articles that were directly concerned with politics and the constitution of society, most notably his Siyāsat-Nāmeh and Adab-i Qudrat Adab-i ʿEdālat. In these works, he laid out his vision of a democratic society that allowed for a free exchange of ideas.

Despite the focus of most of Soroush's books on epistemological questions, his work was perceived as being highly political, and rightly so. As Ghamari-Tabrizi states, for the new

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1319 Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 241.
1320 Ibid., 188.
1322 Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 195.
1323 Soroush, Siyāsat-Nāmeh Vols. 1-2 (Tehran: Serat, 2000). I am grateful to Navid Hassanzadeh for directing my attention to these writings.
generation of intellectuals and thinkers, hermeneutical Islam was a “deeply political issue […] rather than being an epistemological or cognitive matter.” The Iranian revolution had placed religion at the center of Irianian politics and identity construction. Hence, any approach to religion that somehow questioned the version of Islam by the regime, and maybe even challenged its authority, would inevitably become political as well. Soroush's life and thought elucidate how a hermeneutical view is closely tied to a particular vision of society and politics.

The following section introduces Soroush and those works that are relevant for our initial question. It will become obvious that his hermeneutical program is linked to, if not determined by, political convictions and a secular vision for society that confines religion to the private sphere and challenges its significance for social and political questions. We will then look at Jarâdî's response to Soroush and how the former's response translates into his own political vision. Soroush came to be noticed in more conservative Islamic milieus as a knowledgable Islamic scholar of the thought of Mullâ Šadrâ, Fayż-i Kâshâni, Hafez, Rumi, and al-Ghazâlî.

Soroush acquired his knowledge of the Islamic sciences, particularly Qur'anic exegesis, mainly informally. In the United Kingdom, he was drawn toward the history of science and grappled with Marxism that he viewed as the major intellectual challenge for Islam. In his view, Marxism had led to the alienation of Iranian thinkers from their own religion and culture, a perception other Shi’ite figures shared with him. Soroush criticized the Marxist deterministic

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1326 Soroush's philosophical considerations of Marxism were en gros not based on Islamic premises. He aimed at exposing inconsistencies within Marxist arguments and theories and warned against the totalitarian claim Marxism demanded from its adherents. See Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent*, 92.
view of history that could lead to totalitarianism. At the same time, he was wary of a view of
humans that overemphasized the rule of the sub-conscience, which suggested that people did not
ever know what they were doing and why. He agreed with others that colonialism had led the
colonized to lose perspective of what was good for them and alienated Muslims from themselves:

Colonization had created a condition of non-correspondence between [the worldview of
the colonized] and their realities. […] Often individuals mistake their limited physical
experience of the world for the totality of their universe. […] This is the moment that a
human being acquired a false “I” in place of a real “I.” As our contemporaries observed,
he becomes “alienated,” “estranged,” and according to its more precise Qur’anic
interpretation, he forgets his true self.1327

The cure for this alienation was authenticity. True consciousness, in Sorosh's view, could only
be achieved through ”connecting with God.” In that context, Sorosh adamantly rejected history
as a source of ethical values and emphasized God as the true source of ethics.1328 In his earlier
writings, Sorosh did not specify who could derive those ethical principles. Ghamari-Tabrizi
reads Sorosh's earlier writings in a way that considers the clerical establishment fit for that task.

By drawing on Mullâ Şadra's philosophy, Sorosh placed himself in a philosophical
tradition that had also considerably influenced Khomeini.1329 It was perhaps their common love
for Mullâ Şadrâ that prompted Khomeini to appoint Sorosh as a member of the Cultural
Revolution Council (CRC) in 1980. However, Khomeini deviated from Mullâ Şadrâ concerning
the role of the mujtahid in society. Mullâ Şadrâ certainly did not view the mujtahid as a guide to

1328 Sorosh, Satanic Ideology, 151-152. Quoted in Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 105.
1329 Ibid., 93-94. Michael Fischer stated in that respect: “Both are inspired by a vision of simultaneous progress in
social justice and spiritual consciousness. Both see the role of philosophical mysticism to integrate social norms
[…] with higher philosophical values, and thereby to give society a direction toward developing greater justice,
equity, and fulfillment. Both maintain a creative tension between transcendent and ordinary perceptions. […]
Both deride literalist clerics, and defend the language of mysticism.” See Fischer, Iran from Religious Dispute to
Revolution (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 184. See also Said Amr Arjomand, The
transform the masses, even if he had achieved perfect knowledge. In contrast, Khomeini turned Mullā Ṣadrā's metaphysics of being into a political doctrine, namely velāyat-e faqih (rule of the jurisconsult). He saw the mujtahid as responsible, and one may add divinely guided, for leading the masses toward the realization of true Islam. Maybe Soroush never accepted the theory of velayat al-faqih, a question that cannot be answered in this thesis. However, early on in his intellectual career, he endorsed his own theory of spiritual infallibility of sorts. Referring to Q 28:50, “If they do not accept your words, then you know that they obey their caprices,” he was convinced that a truly pious person could never give in to “satanic temptations.”\footnote{Ghamari-Tabrizi, \textit{Islam and Dissent}, 90-94, 104-105}

In the course of the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath, Soroush's perspective on epistemology and politics changed. In particular, he came to hold a rather negative view of humans, which led him to oppose any political ideology that rested on a form of innate goodness of people, such as Leninism and any form of “Roussaeuesque idealism” common to anarchists, radical Marxists, and Islamic fundamentalists.\footnote{Ahmad Sadri, Mahmoud Sadri, “Introduction” in \textit{Reason, Freedom and Democracy: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush}, ed. and trans. ibid. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xiii-xix.} According to Soroush, any political theory that rested on the perfection of the human could easily be turned into an absolutist or authoritarian rule, by assuming that a pious and religiously educated elite could rule wisely and according to God's true will over a people. Here is not the space to delve into Soroush's intellectual developments since the late 1970s. In what follows I will instead focus on his most recent work, dealing with his understanding of religion and revelation. It is mainly those works that have raised much controversy in Iran and abroad.

Soroush had been intrigued by the plurality of qur'ānic interpretations early on his life. He
wondered how the same text could result in such a variety of readings. This idea led him to conclude that the temporal, spacial, and cultural environment of the interpreter had as much to do with deducing meaning from the Qur‘ānic text as did the Qur‘ān itself. This insight sounds reminiscent of Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics, but according to Soroush, he arrived at this perspective on his own, before he had come in touch with western hermeneutics.\footnote{Soroush, “Interview,” 7, 14.} He was, of course, not the only scholar who noticed the pluralism inherent in Islam, particularly in the fiqh discourse. Khomeini was well aware of the plurality of opinions of the fiqahā’ through the ages. His original vision of the Islamic Republic entailed this pluralism:

We know that there were disagreements between our eminent foqahā, as we know that there are issues that they have not discussed before and that need to be resolved today. Therefore, under the Islamic Republic the doors of ijtihād ought to remain open, the nature of the revolution and the system necessitates that jurisprudent and interpretive ideas on different topics, no matter how diverse, engage with one another freely. Nobody should have the right or the ability to prohibit these engagements.\footnote{Quoted in Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 145.}

Ali Shari’ati and Morteza Motahhari had already indicated that the historical and cultural context of religious knowledge influenced its content significantly. Motahhari, for example, made the point that different fiqahā’ from different times, regions, and circumstances issued diverging fatwās. Motahhari compared the Qur‘ān to nature that becomes increasingly comprehensible with the passage of time. For that reason, contemporary scholars had much better conditions to understand the Qur‘ān and the religious texts correctly and in depth than the early Muslims:

“Future generations will have a deeper appreciation of the Divine text.”\footnote{Motahhari, Khātamiyat (Tehran: Sadra, 1988). Motahhari, Sesh Maqāleh (Tehran: Sadra, 1985), 134. Paraphrased in Ghamari-Tabrizi, Islam and Dissent, 180-200.} But neither Motahhari nor Shari’ati translated these considerations into a form of relativism or a general acceptance of
divergent truth claims. For Sorouch, all truth-claims are contingent. The problem that many religious authorities in Iran had with the polyvalence of the Islamic sources was less an actual rejection of the multiplicity of interpretations and readings.

After all, even Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, a stern defender of Islamic univocality, worked and lectured on the plurality of possible readings of the Qurʾān.\footnote{Ayatollah Mesbah al-Yazidi, \textit{Taʾddud al-qirāʾāt}. See \url{http://www.mesbahyazdi.org/arabic/speeches/lectures/lectures3-1.mp3}} A nation-state based on a coherent legal system, however, can only allow for so much legal flexibility. Those who rejected an infinite range of interpretations feared losing political authority, that is to say, the authority to make binding decisions based on the Qurʾān and Sunna that determined peoples' public and private lives. As Ghamari-Tabrizi confirms,

One can argue that before the appearance of Sorouch's discussion of \textit{qabz va bast} (the contraction and expansion of religious interpretation), there was a long tradition in Iran of competing schools of interpretations of canonical Islamic texts. But the significance of Sorouch's intervention in the post-revolutionary period was that the many attacks on his person and his ideas demonstrate, what was at stake was the \textit{authority to produce religious knowledge}, which Sorouch expanded to civil actors without clerical religious training. The most influential authorities in the clerical establishment viewed Sorouch's ideas as a political intervention, which, if realized, would lead inevitably to the secularization of the Islamic Republic. They were not wrong.\footnote{Ghamari-Tabrizi, \textit{Islam and Discontent}, 219. Emphasis mine.}

In other words, the political question was who was fit to interpret Islam authoritatively and Sorouch represented the side of epistemic egalitarianism, as had Shari'ati before him. One may note that the credo of \textit{kul mujtahid muṣīb} is different from relativism since it relies on the rigorous training of \textit{mujtahids} and works within a specified legal framework that safeguards interpretation from interpretative chaos and inherently avoids epistemic egalitarianism. The relativism Sorouch developed should be understood as countering absolutist claims to truth and,
therewith, political power. Moreover, his relativism was fundamentally linked to his view of human ontology. The diversity of religious interpretations led Soroush to his theory of *qabz va bast*. In his view, the most important task of modern Muslims was to distinguish between what belonged essentially to Islam and what of it could be changed. While religion was eternal, divine, and sacred, the knowledge produced concerning religion changed constantly.

Such a view postulates an innate essence of religion. Humans can never reach this essence comprehensively but merely strive toward an approximate grasp of its truth. As Soroush proclaimed, “that which remains constant is religion (*dīn*); that which undergoes change is religious knowledge and insight (*ma'refat-e dīnī*). [...] It is up to God to reveal a religion, but up to us to understand and realize it.”

Sounding reminiscent of Schleiermacher in his *Speeches to the Cultural Despisers*, Soroush wanted to emancipate religion from all the elements and rules unduly attached to it and neutralize the claims made in its name that do not represent Islam's essence. In his view, the “greatest pathology of religion” was that it had become “plump” and “swollen.” Post-revolution Iran witnessed an excessive emphasis on ritual, the legal aspects of religion, as well as its misuse for political purposes, a situation that Soroush wanted to remedy.

According to him, these “outward manifestations of Islam” came to dominate the attention of modern Muslim reformers, who seemed to believe that the Qurʾān and Islamic tradition, rightly understood, could provide solutions for all problems that troubled post-colonial

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Muslim societies. Against this trend, Soroush aimed to liberate religion from the “many burdens […] put on its shoulders.” While he did not want to see religion diminished, he saw the tendency toward an Islamification of life and society as problematic since it mangled religion's “true sphere and essence,” which could only lead to turning Islam into anything but religion.

Soroush's statements presuppose a clear view of religion. Being a stern proponent of the idea of differentiating the spheres of life, namely science, religion, politics, etc., he has a privatized and internalized form of religion in mind that can be separated from other (secular) spheres of life. Religion purified becomes independent of these other spheres, yet also constricted in its efficacy. Because religion, science, and politics belong to different spheres of human action and cannot be judged on the basis of the same evidence or reasoning. Therefore, Soroush rejected the idea that empiricism could say something meaningful about religious experience.

Nevertheless, all of these fields belong to the human realm and can only be expressed in human terms. In effect, his view leads not only to a differentiation of social spheres but also to the marginalization of revelation. Similar to other Muslim reformers, Soroush wanted to “purify […] religion, making it lighter, […] erasing the superfluous layers off the face of religiosity.”

1340 For Soroush, religion is utterly important for human spiritual well-being and moral conduct: “For the believers, religion quickens the blaze of the sublime quest, delivers from inner attachments, grants ascent above earthly concerns, opens the heart's aperture toward the sun of the truth, and induces a sense of utter wonder in the face of the mystery of existence, so that one may hear the call of Ho-val-Haq (God is the Truth) from every particle of the universe. It brings within grasp the true interpretation of mystical experiences, the lessons of inner journey, and the conduct worthy of divine presence. It defies arrogance, ushers in humility, impermanence, and morality, and accelerates the pace of human emotional and intellectual evolution. For society, religion promises attenuation of avarice and injustice; mobilization for the sake of fairness, justice, benevolence, fulfillment, and enlightenment; and avoidance of the risk of experimentation with that which does not yield to experimentation, that is, the hereafter.” See ibid., 37.
1342 Ibid., “Islamic Revival,” 36.
1343 Ibid., 21.
His vision of the purification process of Islam consists in distinguishing between what actually belongs to religion and what people say and do in the name of religion. Religion and religious knowledge are two different things. While religion is divine and sacred, religious knowledge about religion, commonly understood as religion or religious thought, is

Like other forms of knowledge, subject to all the attributes of knowledge. It is human, fallible, evolving, and most important of all, it is constantly in the process of exchange with other forms of knowledge. As such, its inevitable transformations mirror the transformation of science and other domains of human knowledge.\textsuperscript{1344}

Not only are humans categorically restricted in what they can grasp. Moreover, they can also only articulate so much.\textsuperscript{1345} Thus, Soroush accepts the post-Enlightenment position that human understanding is limited as well as the postulate of the limitedness of human language, as particularly developed by modern critical philosophy. As will become subsequently clear, in the theological debate over the tension between the transcendent and the immanent Soroush concurs with Immanuel Kant's notion of the Ding-an-sich (thing in itself), which is a noumenal unknown, not with Hegel's phenomenological Spirit in history that can somewhat be discerned.\textsuperscript{1346}

Historically, Muslim thinkers held that God is both phenomenal and noumenal, balancing their views on God between tashbīh (the likeness of God) and tanzih (God's utter alterity). Muslims can know God phenomenally through the Qur'an, while they attempt to also maintain God's utter difference from humans. God remains noumenally outside the grasp of human knowledge. Soroush fully accepts the noumenal-phenomenal distinction. Human beings are always situated in a particular context and understand the world through a particular lens;

\textsuperscript{1346} See, for example, Immanuel Kant, Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
humans have no context-independent way by which to perceive things or make statements.

Central to Soroukh's conceptualization of religion is that subject and object are separate. The object and the knowledge of the object are always different. Given this ontological situation, it is impossible to make epistemological claims about the Ding-an-sich without using concepts and language acquired in the phenomenal realm. While claims about the noumenal may be offered, these claims to noumenal reality cannot be independently assessed. Thus, the noumenal remains inaccessible to human perception and knowledge. The transcendent in itself is inaccessible to human experience and thought.

How far behind he has left his Şadrian roots becomes obvious when he describes humans in a poetical way thus: “We human beings are now expelled from heaven and deprived of revelation. We are profane and listless. Our life is blighted by Satan, and our understanding is fallible.” Therefore, religious understanding is fallible, too. Moreover, religious knowledge is collective knowledge and hence, “replete with error, conjecture, and conviction.” As in any other science, “Error plays as much a role in religious knowledge as does insight.”1347 One sees here a turn toward objectifying the Qur'ān that cannot but be examined by methods with which one approaches any other object of study. Soroukh gradually moved away from Şadrā's ontological epistemology that posited humans as being able to partake in Being, i.e., in the divine.

Şadrā had formulated an utterly optimistic view about the potential of humans to approximate perfection in this life, which could also guarantee religious knowledge that is exactly not “always time-bound.” In his writings in the 1980s and 1990s, Soroukh still considered scripture as flawless, shielded from human influence and referenced the “eternal nature of the

Qur'ān.” More recently, he has changed this opinion and presented his views extensively in his *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*. Experience, according to a historicist epistemology always subjective, is the central term he uses to describe the process of *wahy*. This prophetic experience is translated by the prophet into the Qur'ān as a cultural product, although Soroush still maintains some of Şadrā's vocabulary that yet becomes detached from its epistemological implications:

[The Prophet] was both the receptacle and the generator, both the subject and the object of his religious revelatory experiences. And as his personality expanded, so too did his experiences (and *vice versa*), such that revelation was under his sway, not he, under the sway of revelation [...] Viewing Divine Discourse as *nothing but* the Prophetic discourse is the best way of resolving the theological problems of how God speaks. [...] In this experience, it seems to the prophet as if someone comes to him and proclaims messages and commands to him and tells him to convey them to the people.\(^{1349}\)

Soroush seems to imply that Muḥammad only interpreted his “illumination” as divine revelation. The question that this quotation raises is whether God speaks at all in Soroush's conception of *wahy*, a question that he leaves unanswered. In his deliberations on *wahy*, Soroush sounds very much like Schleiermacher who defined faith as the sense of absolute dependence, of being placed and receiving one’s being from a “whence.”\(^{1350}\) According to Soroush, prophetic revelation is religious experience translated into human speech:

Religious experience consists of “transcendence” [which] can take different forms. It may occur as a dream, as the sensing of a scent or a bellow, the seeing of a figure or a color, a feeling of connectedness to a boundless vastness, a sense of contraction and gloom, a sense of expansion and luminescence, a love for an unseen beloved, the sensing of a spiritual presence, a oneness with a person or an object, a detachment from the self and suspension in nothingness, the comprehension of a mystery or the discovery of a secret, a tiring of earthly attachments and flight toward the eternal, being drawn to some

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\(^{1348}\) Soroush, “Islamic Revival,” 31-33.


gravitational force, a thirst, a vacuum, a flash, a sense of awe, a sense of ecstasy and so on. Different as they are, they can all go under the name of religious experience.\textsuperscript{1351}

These different religious experiences had to be put into words by those who underwent them, that is to say, they had to interpret them. Hence, in the Islamic tradition there is “no such thing as raw experience.”\textsuperscript{1352} Soroush interprets the Qurʾān as the result of a dialogue between God and humans in which, however, the human (though growing in prophetic ability) remains human, separated from the divine and influenced by other humans.\textsuperscript{1353}

Soroush is not fully coherent as to what that prophetic experience is. On the one hand, he describes it as a “mystical experience,” having unique insights unavailable to others and being in contact with the realm of the transcendent.\textsuperscript{1354} On the other, he underlines that it is a human experience. Given his statements on human nature above, his view of human experience, must taint the prophetic experience, even of the divine, to a certain extent. As Soroush states, what prophets could or could not say was determined by the limitations of language and culture. For example, the Qurʾān is filled with the discourse of commerce and the desert.\textsuperscript{1355} We see here again a modification of the theory of accommodation. \textit{Scriptura humane loquitur}; for Soroush, means that Muḥammad translated his human experience of the divine into human language, not that God adapted His discourse to humans. Moreover, religious experience is not confined to the

\textsuperscript{1351} Soroush, \textit{Prophetic Experience}, 123.

\textsuperscript{1352} Ibid., 125-126.

\textsuperscript{1353} According to Soroush, Muḥammad is not immediately transformed into the “perfect human,” rather prophethood is like a craft to be learned. With each revelation Muḥammad gained more experience and became a more able prophet. Similarly to Izutsu and Abū Zayd, Soroush refers to Ibn Khaldūn’s theory of progressive prophethood. See ibid., 9. Soroush states: “Both the prophet and his experience are human. He is furthermore surrounded by human beings. In the encounter between all these human elements, a human religion is gradually born which is in keeping with human beings and answers to their real circumstances. Pay earnest heed to the meaning of dialogue and interaction. In dialogue, the answer is in keeping with the question. And what is said is essentially of the nature of an answer, not of the nature of a unilateral inculcation.” See ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{1354} Ibid., 4, 37.

\textsuperscript{1355} He quotes Izutsu on the semantic structure of the Qurʾān. See ibid., 74-76.
Prophet. Other people can have it, too, for example, Buddha, who was yet unaware that he experienced a revelation from God. What makes Muḥammad a prophet is not the uniqueness of his revelation but his public mission.\footnote{Soroush, \textit{Prophetic Experience}, 4-9, 26-27, 45. Soroush refers to Buddha on p. 26.}

The difference between “illuminated” believers and Muḥammad is not ontological or generic, but functional. The role of prophets, in Soroush's view, is to form a theory about their revelations and to identify those revelations for what they are. Importantly, human translation of the transcendent experience always remains within the scope of their own existential framework. In other words, the experience of the divine (that becomes scripture) is always human and shaped by history, culture, and language – all of which are susceptible to error and human flaws.\footnote{Ibid., 126.}

One cannot but note that, in Soroush's accounts, it becomes impossible to decide who is correct, Muḥammad interpreting his religious experience as revelation or Buddha interpreting his illumination without a God. The shift Islam undergoes in Soroush's thought becomes most obvious in his theory of the essentials and accidentals of religion. Essentials are the basic universals of a religion, while accidentals are, as the name suggests, accidental, which means they could have been different. For example, the Qur'ān could have been revealed in any other language or, “if the Prophet had lived longer, the Qur'ān might have been much more voluminous, offering much more extensive guidance and settling many ambiguities.”\footnote{Ibid., 63.} Note here that despite Soroush's emphasis on religious pluralism, he conceives of the ambiguity in the religious text as a problem. The Qur'ān itself is partly “impure” because historical change (and therefore human imperfection) is the destiny of everything that “enters the hovel of history and

\footnote{Soroush, \textit{Prophetic Experience}, 4-9, 26-27, 45. Soroush refers to Buddha on p. 26.}
\footnote{Ibid., 126.}
\footnote{Ibid., 63.}

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nature and dons the garments of humanity and materiality.”1359 Early Islamic history as well as the role of core personalities and religious founders are all part of historical accidentals. In effect, Soroush dispenses with any acting of God in history. His interpretation of early Islamic history is completely secularized. History is a product of human agency void of God's providence. Because everything could have been different, one can modify religious specifics that are culturally conditioned. One can also give up one's identification with one particular strand of Islam. The implications are obvious. Soroush frees Muslims from acting based on cultural memories, which may consequently lead to the political goal of decreasing sectarian tensions.

Soroush clarifies that religion's essentials are not an Aristotelian “essence” or “nature,” rather the essentials of religion are the Prophet's goals. Yet, Islam is essentially a belief system while historical Islam adds on other dimensions to it.1360 In Soroush's view, there is an unchanging Islamic core while the “garments” (language, cultural code, concepts, value, codes) are shaped by time, geography, people, and culture. The accidental outer layers are changeable and temporal. Because one cannot know essences without accidents, one only arrives at the essentials through the accidentals. The essential in Islam is anything without which Islam would cease to be Islam and turn into another religion. However, this is arguably what happens in Soroush's account with considerable implications.

1359 Soroush, Prophetic Experience, 144-145. Soroush states: “All this is to highlight the extent to which religion becomes human and historical when it enters history, how it is subjected to people's theoretical and practical intrusions; how it is dulled and dimmed by the passage of time and the veils that impede understanding; and how much is gradually taken away from it and added on to it.” Ibid., 145.

1360 Among the accidentals, Soroush lists: “The selection of Abu Bakr and Uthman as caliphs; the fact that Imam Ali did govern; the fact that the other Shi'i Imams did not govern; the fact that the Qur'an was collected after the Prophet; the fact that the ummah divided into Sunnis and Shi'is and so on and so forth are all accidentals. They must, therefore, be viewed as no more than possible historical events. They were all equally necessary or accidental and, consequently, are all components of historical Islam, not components of Islam as a belief system. And faith pertains to Islam as a belief system, not to historical Islam.” Ibid., 90.
For Soroush to be a righteous Muslim (or any adherent of any other religion) one must uphold the essentials, not the accidentals,\textsuperscript{1361} such as science, the political and social sciences, and economics. Even ethics is only the realm of religion when it concerns what Soroush calls master values – those “that life is for,” which could be termed virtues. However, all values that serve life, the “servant values” (which are the majority), are entirely shaped by human conditions. Even most theological concerns are only answered directly by religion in a minimalist way and cannot be comprehensively grasped.\textsuperscript{1362} Soroush thus achieves a “minimalistic form” of Islam that is mainly limited to its spiritual aspects. To be faithful to Islam means abiding by its (minimalist) belief system, not by referring to historical Islam. It should be obvious that such a view of religion is predicated on its concept within a liberal polity in which social and political authority is ultimately mediated by the secular state. One problem with Soroush's view is that he does not elaborate on how to separate essence from accidents.

According to him, Islam is “the history of a series of interpretations” by thinkers who rationalized the message of the Qurān. If Islam was not already human, theologians definitely “made religion human.” Soroush over and again emphasizes that Islam in itself must be separated from the disciplines of fiqh, exegesis, ethics, etc. because “Any human discipline, insofar as it is human, is incomplete and impure.”\textsuperscript{1363} While Soroush still refers to Islamic philosophers and mystics, for example Mullā Ṣadrā, he leaves their systematic frame of reference and often seems to only reference them as rhetorical embellishment. He does hold on to an idea of perfection of sorts when he thinks it possible that the Islamic disciplines are striving toward completion.\textsuperscript{1364}

\textsuperscript{1361} See Soroush, \textit{Prophetic Experience}, 63-68.
\textsuperscript{1362} Ibid., 101-105.
\textsuperscript{1363} Ibid., 43, 52. Emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{1364} Ibid., 52. He refers to Mullā Ṣadrā in ibid., 27.
Since such completion remains a theoretical idea in Sorush's thought, he stresses that there is no unique, official interpretation of religion, and therefore there cannot be an official interpreter or authority.1365 His hermeneutical considerations of the Qurʾān lead him to a political statement. No particular understanding of religion should become linked to government and power, because human understanding of religion and religious content is never final and always remains open to further development. As he states, “servitude bears a message: That none of us is God. The finality too bears a message: that none of us is a prophet.”1366

Jarādī's View of Sorush

As we have seen, in his later work, Sorosh came to view religion as human. The Qurʾān entails eternal truths just as it entails so-called “accidentals” – elements that could have been different under alternative historical circumstances.1367 Jarādī contends that such an eclectic perspective of the Qurʾān and Islam stems from (and leads to?) a secular worldview. Since Jarādī does not object to the “humanness” of qurʾānic language, he has no qualms with Abū Zayd. What Jarādī critiques in Sorosh's theory is the arbitrariness of selecting some verses of the Qurʾān as binding and eternally valid and others as outdated. On which logical or systematic basis, he asks, can such a selective method be justified? Such a view leads necessarily to a subjective reading of the Qurʾān and to the emphasis of epistemic self-reliance, since people might disagree over just

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1365 Sorosh, *Prophetic Experience*, 123.
1366 Ibid., 62. Sorosh states: Those “who care about religion and who want to ensure that God's enchanting message is preserved and respected, must, therefore, try first and foremost to signpost religion's terrain and jurisdiction, so that no one can disseminate superstition in the name of religion, or make exaggerated claims in the name of religion, or indulge in hypocrisy in the name of religion, or bring about ruin and devastation in the name of religion. It is to do religion no service if we say that we will meet your every need with religion and we will extract everything necessary for governance, politics and economics from it [...]. Indulging in petty tyrannies in the name of religion; imposing constraints on people on the basis of conjectural precepts; [...] Foremost among the burdens that must not be placed on religion is the burden of completely religious governance.” Ibid., 116.
what the essentials and what the accidentals are. Such hermeneutical understanding jettisons any form of unified identity and judges the Qur'ān not merely by method or history but by an external sense of ethics. Jarādī in particular objects to Soroush's understanding of “humanness:”

There is no need for an “original sin” or for an existential deficiency in the human self, which would lead to the necessity of wahy. [...] The urgent task at hand here is that the general guidance in the creation of the fitra (the “fait-a-compli” of fitra) needs a more particular guidance and one that strengthens it (al-taqwā), which allows for the light of wahy [to shine upon] the spirit, the self, and the heart. From this point about the self, we find a continuing structural line between the deep-rootedness (aşāla) of the creational fitra and the deep-rootedness of wahy in the light of guidance for the formation of the human self.\footnote{Jarādī, “Wahy,” 37.}

At first sight, one might misunderstand this passage as being merely directed against Christian post-Augustinian theology. But Jarādī hits two birds with one stone in this passage. He purposefully uses a Christian term that anyone would recognize as Christian to describe a feature he sees as central to secular worldviews as well, namely the pessimistic view of humans. This might be surprising, given that Enlightenment thinkers in particular were convinced of the “goodness” of people and their innate ability to freedom and creativeness.\footnote{See Howard, Religion, 11.} However, first, one can establish a trajectory of the secularization of the concept of original sin in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers.\footnote{The thoughts of a radical evil and sin can, for example, be found in Immanuel Kant. Stephen R. Palmquist states in this respect: “Kant’s main argument is that evil corrupts our moral nature in such a way that morality must be raised to the status of religion in order for us to have any reasonable hope of fulfilling the moral demand.” Kant, Religion, xx. See also Howard, Religion, 11.} Second, the historicity or historical situatedness of humans presupposes a considerable limitation of human faculties, especially concerning their ability to transcend their humanness that is trapped in “ontological singularity.”\footnote{Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 16.} When Jarādī refers to the Christian doctrine of original sin, one can assume that he really has in mind Soroush's

\footnote{Jarādī, “Wahy,” 37.}

\footnote{See Howard, Religion, 11.}

\footnote{The thoughts of a radical evil and sin can, for example, be found in Immanuel Kant. Stephen R. Palmquist states in this respect: “Kant’s main argument is that evil corrupts our moral nature in such a way that morality must be raised to the status of religion in order for us to have any reasonable hope of fulfilling the moral demand.” Kant, Religion, xx. See also Howard, Religion, 11.}

\footnote{Chakrabarty, Provincializing, 16.}
conception of the human. Jarādī faults Soroush (and others who have adopted a secularized worldview) for failing to consider the divine element in humans, the groundedness of humans in existence that is always divine. The transcendent in effect ceases to have any real meaning in Soroush. On the contrary, Jarādī contends, humans' ḥaythīya (their whereas) is the divine:

We understand that the Prophet – any prophet – is human. And we understand that humanity is linked to the natural world. As we agree and again agree with the reality (aṣāla) of the divine presence in the world of nature; however, the new theory here, which states that the link to the natural world is imprinted upon the Prophet and that he cannot escape from this frame, is in need of theoretical and philosophical proofs [...]. We affirm that [...] nature and all that goes beyond nature is related and embraced in God Who is present in everything, overcoming in His boundaries any limitations, in regard to the fact that the relation of nature and beyond (al-ghayb) returns to Him necessarily, and this relation (nisba) stems from the discourse about the reality of wahdat al-wujūd (the unity of being).\textsuperscript{1372}

Jarādī argues here for a concept of the human that is open toward both the transcendent and nature and is, moreover, essentially linked to them. As a result, his theory rejects any concept that is based on the idea of the autonomous, self-possessed individual that is alienated (and yet determined by) a disenchanted world. As in Mullā Ṣadrā, Jarādī’s ontology determines his epistemology. Soroush, on the other hand, oscillates between the mystical view that humans can find the divine in themselves and a more negative view of humans that emphasizes their fallibility. This becomes particularly obvious when he states that God's word becomes “impure”

\textsuperscript{1372} Jarādī, “Wahy.” 39. Jarādī explains wahdat al-wujūd thus: ‘‘Unity of existence and the existent,’ or ‘personal unity’ [is] when one – a gnostic perhaps – examines multiplicity in terms of and in reference to unity – unity of the existent and existence; there is none therein but God; ‘existence has nothing in it but God. Individuated reality is witnessed in manyness, true, yet it exists in oneness [...]’ Ibn ‘Arabī is said to have declared that ‘all existence is in reality one, nothing complements it [...] Follow the trails of the Book and the sunnah! You will find but One, nothing but oneness, and He is only He [...]’ Ibn ‘Arabī deploys ‘He’ while denoting oneness in order to make clear the reign of the Invisible Supreme Essence (ghayb al-huwīya) over the appearances of all existents; for there is nothing existent but Him. Ibn ‘Arabī saw that scripture, every detail in it, spoke of this ‘personal unity,’ for God, by our very nature, is never absent to us; the entire world is in a state of prayer before his presence; the entire world is paying the tribute of onicity (tawḥīd) before him.” See Jarādī, “Death as Awakening,” 5.
when it becomes human.\textsuperscript{1373} Jarādī also rejects Sorouh's ambivalence concerning the origin and movement of \textit{wahy}. In Jarādī's view, Sorouh leaves his original intellectual affiliation with Mullā Șadrā when the latter suggests that it does not matter with regard to \textit{wahy} whether the prophet received it from outside or from inside, and when Sorouh seems to collapse the difference between God and the world:

\begin{quote}
[Soroush's] theory then is that God Who is manifest in the world aside from (\textit{mā ba'd}) nature is the same who is manifest in nature and that the creatures are equal to this divine manifestation and that the variance of the manifest in them depends on their capacities and the extent of their experiences. From this point his thesis arrives at the statement that God speaks from within the nature not from without and that this is \textit{wahy}.\textsuperscript{1374}
\end{quote}

What Jarādī consequently criticizes are the logical and conceptual inconsistencies in Sorouh's theory of revelation that seems, on the one hand, to suggest the Cartesian insurmountable gap between humans and the divine, while on the other, to conflate nature and God. According to Jarādī, Sorouh neglects the textual evidence and imposes a reading on the Qur'ān that brings a “new discourse on \textit{wahy} about.” This discourse, Jarādī is right to state, has social, ethical, and political implications,\textsuperscript{1375} which would surely entail the disempowerment of the Shi'ite clergy and limit the range of the authority of the Qur'ān.

Jarādī is well aware of the reductionist elements in Sorouh's approach to the Qur'ān that have concrete political implications. From Jarādī's perspective, Sorouh reduces Islam to a spiritual message without recognizing that the Qur'ān entails also this-worldly affairs that have, under secular influences, come to be characterized as “profane.” Sorouh's program effectively embraces a pluralist, albeit individualistic, secular-liberal ideology on the basis of which he

\textsuperscript{1373} Sorouh, \textit{Prophetic Experience,} 52.
\textsuperscript{1374} Jarādī, “Wahy,” 39.
\textsuperscript{1375} Ibid., 27.
judges the Qurʾān. Jarādī disagrees vehemently. Politics, ethics, and society cannot be separated from the Qurʾān. Islam is not Islam without its social dimensions, and it does not merely address the individual.\textsuperscript{1376} The individual in itself is ontologically not detached from God or from creation since humans participate in Being.

Jarādī indicates only sporadically what the ethical and social implications of a reading such as Sorouch's would be. Instead, he aims to demonstrate the incoherence of the adherents of the "modernizing" strands on hermeneutical grounds and emphasizes the interpretative authority of tradition and Qurʾān. In other words, he rejects epistemic self-reliance and emphasizes the need for epistemic authority. In his view, to declare the Prophet and the Qurʾān fully human natural phenomena is a theoretical necessity for methodologies that are based on empirical data.\textsuperscript{1377} They leave the question completely open as to how one can distinguish the eternally valid verses from the contingent ones. In Jarādī's view, the disenchantment of the Qurʾān serves to control it, to be able to dispense with passages one disapproves. Such an approach, however, only circumvents the hard work to root this method in solid Islamic grounds and neglects to develop a coherent systematic theory for one's approach.\textsuperscript{1378} To merely take the idea of the privatization of religion as one's heuristic criterion to decide which contents of the Qurʾān are contingent and which are eternal does amount to a thin argument.

What would that mean for historical criticism? Jarādī concludes that because Muslims believe in the \textit{qayyumīya} of the Qurʾān, it is inconceivable to apply what biblical scholars call Higher Criticism (source criticism, redaction criticism, form criticism) to the Qurʾān. Higher

\textsuperscript{1376} Jarādī, “Wahy,” 32.
\textsuperscript{1377} See in this respect also Ibd., 3-7.
\textsuperscript{1378} Ibd., 40.
criticism always presupposes the production of the text by humans and jettisons the Qurʾān's qayyumīya. While the text's composition and textual coherence cannot be touched, linguistic, philological, and historical approaches have to be investigated on their own terms. According to Jarāḍī, most Islamic scholars differentiate between the Qurʾān (as mutawāṭir) and the qiraʾāt (differing versions of readings) of the Qurʾān (as aḥād). However, for Jarāḍī, in normal circumstances, a Muslim ʿālim would never question the trusted soundness of the Qurʾān, while Higher criticism can doubtlessly be applied to the Sunna.

Qurʾānic tafsīr, at times almost considered untouchable or “holy” (muqaddas), is clearly a product of human engagement with the qurʾānic text and can therefore also be critically revised. Critique, for Jarāḍī, does not imply a hermeneutics of suspicion that aims at debunking. History proper can indeed be of help in interpreting the Qurʾān. Applying a critical approach to the turāth is indispensable for the vitality of Islam and forms an important strand of religious thought.1379

Criticism does not entail for Jarāḍī debunking and deconstructing anything established but logical and reasonable engagement with the Qurʾān, on the basis of historical, linguistic, and philological deliberations. To state this differently, critique is not necessarily secular and does not rest on empty, homogeneous time (i.e., secular history). A revision of tradition may consequently also change the Islamic framework in which the Qurʾān is read. In a way, nothing else had been done by Nöldeke, who still followed Islamic accounts closely. Thus, besides Nöldeke's presuppositions about prophecy as a subjective experience, Jarāḍī does not take issue with the latter's work and finds his work on the chronology of the Qurʾān helpful.1380

1380 Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Jarāḍī, December 12, 2012.
While Jarādī rejects much of the hermeneutical approaches to the Qurʾān, he voices his appreciation for the questions they raise, such as “How do we read the Qurʾān so that it is inclusive of the course of events, situational language, received by a people bound by time and space? What do we do with wahy in [our] contemporary time?”\(^{1381}\) Jarādī affirms in that context that new methods can be fruitful but must remain rooted in the Qurʾān. To declare the Prophet and the Qurʾān fully human natural phenomena is a theoretical necessity for methodologies that are based on empirical data. Like Jörn Rüsen, Jarādī identifies a conflict between meaning (\textit{Sinn}) and method, which he regards as a paradigmatic problem of modernity. Methodological-critical historicization imbue the holy texts with historical contingency and empirical facticity at the expense of a loss of meaning.\(^{1382}\) In Jarādī's view, a full-fledged historicization of the Qurʾān serves to control it, to be able to dispense with passages one disapproves of, without developing a coherent systematic theory of one's approach that still allows for meaningful interpretation.\(^{1383}\)

He is fast to point to a crucial problem in the theory of history and historicism, namely that even belief in history may be sacrificed to history. The conception of history that emerged from post-Enlightenment, European thought has no “privileged observer status.” As Howard reasons, “the inevitability of cultural relativism is logically – if not epistemologically – self-destroying: if all truth is culture-specific, so is the truth of cultural-relative analysis. Hence, it cannot be said to be unqualifiedly true.”\(^{1384}\) Its relativist notions lead to the erosion of any kind of authority. While this is true for the meaning of formerly authoritative texts, history as

\(^{1382}\) Rüsen, “Historische Methode,” 357.
\(^{1383}\) Jarādī, “Wahy,” 40.
\(^{1384}\) Howard, \textit{Religion}, 16.
means to enforce authority in societies. The following considerations will clarify in more depth the political implications of rejecting reductionist hermeneutics to the Qur’ān.

**Political Implications**

History, despite its focus on detail, tends to be thought of in the abstract, in which something particular comes to be translated into the general of secular time. Utilitarian politics rest on this concept of history in which individuals shape their own lives and societies in their own best interest and are not being distracted from the (progressive) course of history by things (e.g., scripture or ritual) that belong to a different time to begin with and are now barred from having an inherent meaning. The idea of anachronism, that is, that certain contemporary things yet do not really belong in the here and now, i.e., that they are not co-eval with us, turns them into “effects of the past.” This past can be unlocked by the historian on history's terms.

Inherent to history is an authoritative claim to a particular temporality that necessarily excludes others. More than that, it entails a strong claim to authority over the present and future as well because history effects a “very particular relation to the past. This is the desire on the part of the subject of political modernity both to create the past as amenable to objectification and to be at the same time free of this object called 'history.'”

In other words, the wish to objectify the past is linked to the desire to be free from the past, which for the modern political subject seems to be necessary to create a new and more just world. Jarādī wants to think a plurality of temporalities of which history is one. This project of “retrievals” has been formulated by Mahmoud Youness, editor of al-*Maḥajja*:

We want to emphasize that retrieval cannot mean (and does not mean for us) to want “the

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1385 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing*, 238-244. Quote on p. 244.
old” for its “oldness,” just as the spirit of the age seems to be to want the new simply because it is new. Rather, we are dealing with a matured and experienced retrieval that predicates the old and the new, and we acknowledge that both deserve our attention because truth is equally attributed to both.  

New and old things are relatively neutral terms when compared to modern and traditional. Youness is here concerned with the equality of these notions, which can only be achieved when one takes the progressive ideology out of history. He sees a reductive mentality operative in western science that reduces things by means of generalization. All things become ontologically equal, but only at the expense of other worldviews that defy the generalizing structure of history. Youness does not deny that Enlightenment thought and what came after can be of value for the intellectual conversation of Islamic sciences as long as it does not claim superiority over other ways of being in the world. However, again, science cannot claim an objective observer status. Its “neutrality is but a justification for a worldview to be superior to (qayyūma ‘ala) other weltanschauungen.” To what Jarādī and Youness consequently aspire is an open conversation that gives way to loosening up certain value-laden (secular) presuppositions that render experiences unintelligible that cannot be explained by science.

As previously shown, for Jarādī, wahy is not something mechanical coming from an outer source that is then infused into a passive receptacle but is a response to a real human existential yearning. At the heart of this yearning is the human search for meaning. Once the meaning of things in themselves is discarded, revelation cannot but be the product of the subject who is the one who creates meaning. In the framework of Cartesian categories of subject and object and the dichotomy between God and humans, the subject has only limited means to know and becomes

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1387 Ibid., 6.
ontologically singular. If knowledge is comprehension (understood as having gained intellectual mastery over a subject matter), it becomes absurd to speak about knowledge of God (Who can neither be grasped in se nor be controlled).

Against this rationale, Jarādī and Youness aim “to reach a knowledge of the divinity of God without disparaging the humanity of humans.”\(^{1388}\) This program is only possible if the world has meaning in itself without needing humans to create it. If meaning is uncovered rather than created by humans, they participate in meaning instead of dominating the otherwise meaningless world. Wahy is God's means of educating (tarbīya) humans, who carry manifold potentials in themselves. The root word of tarbīya is rubūbīya (lordship), which indicates that the formation of selves is linked to participation in rubūbīya. Humans are not divine, but they have the potential to perfect their positive characteristics that resemble the origin of human existence (i.e., God).\(^{1389}\)

Jarādī and Youness call their project one of “retrievals” and want to move away from a terminology of modern and traditional. Those terms can be useful, yet also misleading since they are so value-laden. They occlude that self-acclaimed modern(ist) thinkers also rely on their own tradition, and are, therefore, traditional in their own sense. Retrieval, instead, suggests the coevalness of thoughts and ways of being in the world that can be taken seriously as being contemporaneous “with ourselves,” as Youness formulates it. Importantly, Jarādī and Youness do not erect a strong dichotomy between “the West” and the Muslim world. They engage both terms as being part of their “We.” Their rhetoric suggests that they perceive themselves as sharing in science, philosophy, thought and politics due to the fact that they share in the same time. They do

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\(^{1388}\) Yūnus, “Iftitāḥiyat,” 5-6.

\(^{1389}\) Ibid., 6-10.
not convey any sense of having “to catch up” with Europe. The equality of temporalities they posit affords them to seriously engage with the philosophical questions of their time without apologetic or polemical undertones. The lack of a dichotomy between tradition and modern, seeing both as being effective in the now, avoids treating the *turāth* as an archive in need of being managed. Instead, the *turāth* and non-Muslim thought can all equally be drawn on and examined. Such as view of the equality of temporalities entails the rehabilitation of those pasts and presents that have come to be marginalized under the dominant scientific-historical paradigm.

Just as Jarādī contends that any method is embedded in an epistemological framework, so are politics. Therefore, any debate about sovereignty, legitimacy, and interpretation must be conceptualized against the background of their respective epistemological and philosophical foundations. Through his philosophical and hermeneutical discussions Jarādī positions himself within the field of Shi'ite authority. At the same time, he addresses outside voices that he sees as threatening this authority. To affirm the interpretative monopoly of the ‘ulamā‘ is meant to keep Qur'ānic interpretation under control. Epistemic egalitarianism dispenses with the need for thorough training. As soon as one removes the authoritative interpretative framework from understanding the Qur'ān, one opens the door for all kinds of different readings, extremist ones included. According to Jarādī, reducing the Qur'ān to a text that can be individually interpreted and that addresses each person on a merely individual level ignores the social dimension of forming a new ethical society through reforming Muslim selves, which is one of the ultimate goals of Islam, in Jarādī's view. As he states,

“Changing what is in the souls” (Q 13: 11) is the basis for change at the civilizational level, for there is correspondence between the psychological basis for such a change in the members of peoples and the civilization at large. Ultimately, such a psychological
change would pave the way for the civilization of righteousness and knowledge. [This can be achieved] through uprooting the sources of obliviousness, instilling the capacity to face trouble (by strengthening the heart through observance of the dictates of God), mercy through fixing temper, justice through the shattering of the objects of passion, good deeds through god-wariness, and demeaning of this-worldly life, while promoting its shaping according to the other-worldly life, the life of immortality and dignity.1390

The program of reforming Muslim selves can never be a merely individual task for Jarāḍī. His vision of a society of the “qur'ānic human” necessarily imagines Islam as a public religion. Meanwhile, he is sensitive to the fact that the world is not all-Islamic but religiously and ideologically diverse. The debate over the political constitution of Muslim majority countries in the past decades has elicited various responses and has focused in particular on the secularism-religion divide. Jarāḍī has dealt with the relationship of secularism and religion in various ways and has presented his ideas at different forums.

He identifies a fundamental discord between Islamists and secularists that results from a mutual deficit of comprehension. Both sides lack openness for the other side. The situation is even more complicated by reason of historical figurations and a charged, entangled history. Thus, oftentimes, Muslims view secularism as “foreign” and as an imposition by colonialism and imperialism. They charge the West with the abolition of the caliphate that they equate with an “Islamic state.” Turkey as prototype of a state that followed western models in its legislation, state building, and education exemplifies for them that secularism goes hand in hand with hostility toward Islam and the Arabic language.

In return, Muslims feel unjustifiably accused of “barbarism, ignorance, violence, and terrorism.” Jarāḍī also importantly notes that Muslims experienced secularism mainly in the form

of totalitarian regimes. Against these obstacles, Jarāḍī emphasizes that both Islam and secularism can be inherently open for new approaches and different perspectives. To lose this openness would turn either of them into an ideology. Jarāḍī is careful not to essentialize Islam or secularism. Interestingly, he views the influence of Aristotle on both the Islamic and the western tradition as being liable to the common epi-concern with universal definitions, without paying adequate attention to particularities. For Jarāḍī, secularism does not equal democracy, although that can be the case. Rather, in his view, secularism "is a movement and a practical course that creates motives and generates ideas." To say anything meaningful about secularism one has to look at its concrete historical formations.

In Jarāḍī's view, secularism developed in opposition to other movements, which means that it is first and foremost a negative movement. In its epistemological worldview, its ethical layout, and political references it is non-religious. It is ideally neutral toward all religions. However, secularism can also turn into an ideology, and it can have considerable influence on religion. What he criticizes then, in particular, is a normative secularity more so than secularism as an ordering principle of society. With regard to Christianity, Jarāḍī finds that secular politics and ideas led to the disenchantment of religion and the Bible. He faults some people in the Islamic tradition with attempting to do the same with regard to Islam and the Qur'ān, such as Arkoun and Soroush. Jarāḍī is not wrong regarding these two authors. He groups them under

1391 Jarāḍī, “Al-Sulṭa.”
1393 He is in accord here with Qānsū who equally emphasizes the historical variations of secularism. Qānsū's main article on secularism was published in Jarāḍī's al-Mahājja, which allows for the assumption that the latter has read Qānsū's work. Compare Wajīh Qānsū, “al-Taṣāḥūh al-mujtama‘ī bayna al-dīn wa ’almanīyat al-dawla” al-Mahājja 11 (2010): 41-66.
1394 Jarāḍī, “Al-Sulṭa.”
the label *islāh*, a political version of Islamic reform that he himself rejects. It is noteworthy that Arkoun objected to the label *islāh* for his own project. In that respect it is interesting that both Jarādī and Arkoun agree in rejecting *islāh* as being mainly ideologically motivated, albeit the two authors would give different reasons for their rejection of *islāh*. One may assume that Jarādī views *islāh* as an attempt to blindly imitate the West. As Wael Hallaq has observed, reform projects have often been tied to colonial-era narratives that wanted to align the Muslim world to the norms and practices of the West. Reformers often saw anything that deviated from the western meta-narrative of progress as in need of reform. Obviously, Arkoun and Jarādī differ in how Muslim, and one may add non-Muslim thinkers, should proceed in their treatment of the Islamic tradition.

It is remarkable that Jarādī does not mention by name any secularists who aim at introducing religion-free politics in society. Instead he mentions two Muslim thinkers of major importance who focus in their work on the secular reform of Islamic thought and epistemology. That he mentions these thinkers, namely Arkoun and Soroush, instead of other non-religious thinkers indicates that he perceives them as a greater threat to his version of Islam as social and ethical force. Stern secularists function somewhat outside of his own area of expertise and authority. Since Jarādī assumes their opposition to his vision of religion in society to begin with, there is no need for him to declare a clear demarcation between him and them. Thinkers like Soroush and Arkoun, on the other hand, claim to write within the same discursive tradition and for the same audience as Jarādī. They become worthy of mention, because the lines between his

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1395 He lamented that many eminent thinkers have misunderstood his very project. See Arkoun, *To Subvert*, 10-11.
1396 Hallaq, *Shari’a*, 3-5, 443-446.
and their authority are more blurred than between him and straightforward secularists.

Both aim at reforming Islamic thought, its studies archive, the language we use to speak about core Islamic concepts and notions, and the epistemological framework of approaching Islam. While they court the same audience, they do so by means of very different methods, assumptions, scholarly ethics, and politics. Their activity concerns Jarādī's own domain of thought and authority more directly than the activities of secularists hostile to religion in general. Moreover, that Jarādī mentions them in this context indicates that he expects his audience to be familiar with them, which demonstrates their popularity among educated Muslims. Both authors have entered the discursive space in which Jarādī moves, thinks, and acts.

For Jarādī, secularism in its fiercest form threatens to reduce humans to a “mathematical equation” that strips humans of their true humanity. As we have seen, humanity's end is closely linked to Qur'ānic revelation. Leaving religion out of ethical, legal, and political organization of society would mean to reduce man (ontologically) to a particular human dimension, namely the temporal, historical, and contingent and to ignore the dimension that brings her to human fulfillment. It is revelation that completes humans, and therefore revelation must be considered in any just and appropriate government. Jarādī is intent to demonstrate that the Qur'ān pays heed to the preservation of individual peculiarities “despite the penchant to unity (waḥda) and unicity (tawḥīd).”

He sees both as interconnected: the renunciation of the connection of the human with God

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as the very essence of the western spirit and western (normatively secular) modernity which is
dominated by individuality and the centrality of the autonomous, self-contained, and self-
possessed individual. The death of God made the ascendency of individualism possible inasmuch
as it was God who bestowed unity upon man and the world. With the declaration of the death of
God, the ground of existence and unity vanished as a logical consequence, ushering into an age
of alienated and disconnected egos. This turn toward anthropocentrism is not merely a change in
social attitude or a shift from community thinking to one of humans as disconnected subjects but
is linked to configurations of power:

The center becomes man the individual, who seeks to live his experience alone to form
his personality away from the community, even if, at times, they intersect as much as this
intersection serves his individual peculiarities. Such an attitude reflects a western view of
the self, or the “ego,” and of the world around, when this world was transformed into a
world capable of living as long as it is allowed to do so by the West.¹³⁹⁹

Jarādī criticizes not merely a disconnect of humans from God. This disconnect entails a more
general alienation of individuals from other humans and creation. The western hegemony he
mentions is to be understood as both materialistic and epistemological. Imperialism is not simply
the domination of the market and world politics but is also enacted by dictating a certain way of
being in the world to the exclusion of others. Western liberalism has yet worked in an ironic way
by emphasizing the agency and creativity of individuals while withholding these self-acclaimed
liberal goals from non-western people if they did not ascribe to that conceptualization of humans.
The normativity of liberal individualism is thus granted only in the case that the West agrees with
the particular formulation of such individuality, i.e., of a certain way of being in the world.¹⁴⁰⁰

¹⁴⁰⁰ Mehta, Liberalism.
In Jarādī's view, the Qurān, or any wahu for that matter, is central to the well-being and formation of individuals and society alike. Changing scriptural hermeneutics is thus not simply an intellectual preference but entails affirming or rejecting a certain concept of humans that forms the basis for how society is to be imagined and situated in an international context that is dominated by western concepts of knowing, politics, and sociality. The West is for Jarādī a hyperreal term that refers to a specific figure of imagination which exerts, however, a very real normative effect. Jarādī's concern is not authenticity or the rejection of something “foreign.” Instead, he wants to assert a viable alternative to that hegemonic discourse with its “new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real.”

Concerning the location of religion in relation to the state, Jarādī's view can be termed a middle position in which he affirms that religion, and the religious sense of people, must be taken seriously by any state whose majority of members has a religious affiliation. At the same time, he stresses that it is illusionary to think that in today's context anyone could ignore secularism, especially in a pluralistic society. He explicitly calls out Islamists for holding this view. His reading of the Qurān through a Ṣadrian lens makes Jarādī open to a pluralistic society because he believes in the fundamental goodness of all people and what they produce intellectually. While this does not render right and wrong relative, there is no absolute evil and no earthly almost Manichean dichotomy between true Islam and jāhiliya, either, as one finds it in post-Quṭb Islamist thinking. Jarādī's reading of existence as being grounded in being leads him to

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1401 Mitchell, Colonising, ix.
intellectual curiosity that can appreciate non-Muslim and Muslim authors alike.\textsuperscript{1402}

Let us recall one of Taylor's definitions of secularism, namely some sort of awareness that there are always alternatives to our own lifestyle, which we could pursue, too, if we so chose. Given the examination of Jarādī's thought, he would most certainly agree with Taylor on this point. Seen in light of Taylor's broad definition, Jarādī thinks within a secular framework, even if he rejects what he terms secularist epistemologies. One could, of course, conclude that secularism is too broad a category to convey anything meaningful. One could, however, also contend that secularism, as broad category, is indeed useful to negotiate inner-societal concerns since Jarādī himself uses it to point to possible points of connection and dialogue. In that context the terms secular and religious become rhetorical and factually organizational devices by which to sort out the best structure of society and its social differentiation. They can possibly remain open to each other.

According to Jarādī, power is crucial in any thinking about the state. By power, Jarādī means the power to “divide and rule,” the capability to enforce a particular authority, social norms, and “the authority to lead.” Power is a political matter that does not necessarily refer to any epistemological reasoning. However, Jarādī challenges the idea that a value-free politics or political practice without epistemological assumptions is possible, which he sees affirmed by debates over the origin of political power. In his view, the point of contention and potential agreement at the same time is the focus of politics on the human. Islamists and secularists generally disagree over the source of political power. Thus Islamists “believe that the authority

\textsuperscript{1402} For example, he takes great joy in Meister Eckhard, Immanuel Kant, and even some existentialist thinkers. In the Christian mystical tradition as well as the Hindu one Jarādī finds many commonalities to his own Qur'ān-based philosophy. He definitely has greater sympathy for Christian thinkers than for post-Christian secular ones.
for the management of people's affairs must be based on the Divine […] and that God lays down
the necessary legislations to manage people's affairs and enforces these legislations upon them in
a superjacent binding manner.”¹⁴⁰³ Both strands of thought seem yet to succumb to a strong
dichotomy between the human and the divine.

Jarādī responds to this well-known claim that it is erroneous to assume that God legislates
irrespective of human wishes and reasoning or that He imposes laws on humans without their
participation in legislation. Jarādī emphasizes the capability of humans to take care of their own
affairs since all humans are imbued with an innate ethics (al-akhlaqīyāt al-fiṭrīya). Divine
revelation perfects and completes this innate ethics rather than overruling it. There is no sharī’a
or religion without people because “The origin of Islam is the origin-ness (ašāla) of man who
carries this sharī’a in his innermost (fī qalbihi), which brings him to completion.”¹⁴⁰⁴

Any state in Islam must be based on the people, a form of governance that Jarādī calls
“Popular Religious Sovereignty” (siyāda sha’biya dīnīya). Importantly, humans have multiple
dimensions which also means that people are by nature diverse. This diversity has to be
accounted for in politics. He agrees with the secularists that the human must be the focus and
center of any just rule. However, he faults them for having a reductive vision of man, while his
concept of humans is based on an Islamic (Mullā Ṣadrā’s) ontology. He does not envision an
Islamic state that would follow the Iranian model. Instead, he favors

A state and a society built on the principle of citizenship, in which religion is present as
much as secularism. Let no one in the Islamic world believe that it is possible to create a
lasting state without Islam. Let no Muslim either, from these many societies, believe that
they can create an Islamic state without managing public affairs in the spirit of secularism

¹⁴⁰³ Jarādī, “Al-Sulṭa.”
¹⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

Here, again, he affirms the positive form of secularism, namely, understanding it as freedom for religion, not freedom from religion. Yet, his vision, though including a form of religious pluralism and a neutral state, is not entirely clear, either. To link interpretative authority to the divination of man is, on the one side, a positive outlook on life. On the other, the mystical conviction of the perfection of the self can, when translated into the politics of the modern state, lead to an autocratic and totalitarian demand to power. It is, of course, the totalitarian form of rule of the “perfect man” that Sorouch critiqued. In that respect, one must note that Jarādī rejects autocracy, even if executed by a religious leader. As a philosopher and theologian, Jarādī is concerned with “truths.” At the same time, he cautions against “totalitarian claims to Truth” and calls for humility before epistemological findings.\footnote{At least this is how I understand his statement when he writes about the uprisings in the Islamic/Arabic world: “Will the Islamic umma fall into the trap of repetition again? Will its ideal remain the production of a ruler, the substitution of a despotic ruler with another – but a bearded one this time?” See Jarādī, “al-Dīn,” 5.}

His commitment to the openness of being, one can only conclude, does not entail a hegemonic claim to a particular form of politics. Rather, Jarādī questions any form of political framework that reduces the multi-dimensionality of humans to certain aspects. First and foremost, Jarādī is interested in philosophy and the formation of Muslim selves, not in government affairs; although we have seen that his hermeneutics do convey ethical, social, and, therefore, political norms. Jarādī’s argument that people approach the Qur’ānic text with presuppositions is, of course, an argument raised against his own approach, and some Muslim scholars deem it necessary to deconstruct the Islamic view of the Qur’ān entirely to come to a
better understanding of Islam.\textsuperscript{1407}

Jarādī's discussion of revelation demonstrates that the concept of human nature is an important key for discerning the dissonance between proponents and adversaries of applying historical critique to the Qurʾān. These dissonances reveal that debates over the Qurʾān have political implications; not only because they refer to a text that is authoritative for a religious community but also because they convey visions as to how to imagine the polis and what makes humans truly human.

Jarādī's position clarifies that for a certain strand in contemporary Islamic scholarship the core question is what constitutes humanness and whether there is room in western Qurʾān scholarship for the transcendent as an epistemological category. To view the Qurʾān as text and social product means for Muslim scholars opposed to such an approach to disempower the Qurʾān. However, for authors such as Jarādī, history can add clarity to the literal meaning of Qurʾānic language as long as it does not confine the Qurʾān to this historical context, or deconstruct the body of the Qurʾān entirely.

Being situated in the western academic context, it is hard not to fall into a teleological view that sees the application of the historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān as inevitably happening in the future of Muslim hermeneutics. One may hastily draw the conclusion that Jarādī is to be categorized as a “traditionalist.”\textsuperscript{1408} But not so fast. Obviously, he grounds his approach in tradition and denies that the contemporary scholar has a privileged context-independent avenue to the Qurʾān when compared with what Jarādī calls “old” approaches. As I understand his project

\textsuperscript{1407} An approach in Lebanon that undertakes a deconstruction of the Qurʾān is Qānṣū’s \textit{Al-Naṣṣ al-dīnī}. It points to the openness of the Shiʿite scholarly discourse that Qānṣū published some of his views in \textit{al-Mahājja}.

\textsuperscript{1408} After giving a presentation on Jarādī's ontological epistemology at Yale, Frank Griffel, a prominent scholar of al-Ghazālī, drew this conclusion in the question and answer session after a talk at Yale in March 2016.
of retrievals, it equalizes old and new approaches without presupposing an evolutionist historicism that always judges the new to supersede the old. In Jarādi’s conception, the old and the new both share in the now and are co-eval.

This may be a fruitful starting-point to enter into methodological debates over the Qurʾān, as Neuwirth imagines such a dialogue. It is very rare that an ideal conversation takes place between two interlocutors on an equal footing. Habermas stresses the necessity of the dialectical nature of understanding and a fair power balance between the interlocutors.¹⁴⁰⁹ This point is particularly relevant in a discussion of historical-critical methods and ‘ʿulūm al-qurʾān since the discourse is characterized by a principal political, social and economical disproportion that also translates into epistemological inequality.

Irene Oh urges to understand the motivations of “the other” for holding certain views, which is crucial for paying attention to power relations underlying a dialogue. In that way, all involved partners in a dialogue can be taken seriously as agents in their own right, “agents of self-definition” and “beings who act, have purposes, [and] desires.”¹⁴¹⁰ In regard to Jarādi, Oh's insight would mean to accept that he does not reject historical criticism because it is foreign, western, or modern but because its full-fledged application opposes the purpose of qurʾānic studies.

In the broadest sense, the Qurʾān is concerned with ethics, understood as seeking to answering the question of why we live the way we live. For Jarādi, this quest is ongoing and endless. While it can never be decided conclusively, the question of our existence (its purpose

that entails its whatness and whyness) is most fundamental. Historicist thought conflicts with both the whyness and whatness of humans as Jarādī understands them. Jarādī's ultimate concern is thus not to safeguard the Qurān's sanctity but to affirm a particular view of humans. One should understand Jarādī's demand to retrieve the transcendent as an epistemological category in thinking about humanity in this context.

It may be remarked that his position also conflicts with those Islamic views of humans that equally overemphasize the distance and difference between God and humans or understand the Qurān as a one-way avenue for God to dictate his rules to humanity. Jarādī's engagement with historical critique is, therefore, also a constant conversation with other conflicting views within Islamic tradition, a form of internal critique. Jarādī's exposition demonstrates that discussions over the historicity of the Qurān far exceed the question of whether the Qurān was pre-existent with God or not and whether it is created or uncreated, because these considerations do not play any role in his thought. Ethical and ontological implications are crucial elements in the Lebanese debates over Qurān hermeneutics.

Jarādī's project may well be compatible with the historical school of subaltern studies in which Chakrabarty posits the aim to think with gods and spirits again, or at least not to deny them, as does “History 1.” In his opinion, it is imperative for the task of conceptualizing practices of social and political modernity to include the “question of being with gods and spirits,” because the question of humans also entails the “possibility of calling upon God [or gods] without being under the obligation to first establish his [or their] reality.”

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1411}}\text{ Taking this demand seriously could} \]

also be made fruitful for qur’ānic studies that have always depended on theoretical discussions in the discipline of history.

One does not have to accept Jarādī’s Šadrian epistemology to recognize that his thought leaves room for historical considerations. The question is whether secular qur’ānic studies, and by that I mean those who have evacuated the transcendent entirely from the Qur’ān, have this openness, too. That the transcendent can be introduced into academic qur’ānic studies, as Jarādī wishes, is unlikely. The transcendent remains to be the “unthought” in western qur’ānic studies, besides those concessions that posit it as a kind of mythical bigbang-theory that ignited the production of a text that is merely human after all. However, one should be aware that by accepting the Qur’ān as a merely human text, one might also implicitly make assumptions about human nature, as will be further substantiated in the next chapter. An approach like Jarādī’s that overcomes the dichotomy between object and subject certainly has intellectual appeal.
X. Political Implications of “Reading the Qur'ān as Text”

Western Qur'ānic studies do not need to establish their legitimacy that is taken for granted. The situation is quite different in contexts in which the historicization of the Qur'ān is not part of an established tradition (as it is in western Qur'ānic studies). The political implications and reasons for the dissonance between proponents and contesters of historicizing hermeneutics become most obvious in those Muslim approaches to the Qur'ān that address the latter context since they still have to provide legitimacy for their approach.

The following section focuses on one such thinker, Wajīḥ Qānṣū, professor of philosophy and Islamic Studies at the Lebanese University in Beirut, and explores how hermeneutics and a secular vision for society are mutually interconnected. In his recent work, Qānṣū developed a new approach to the Qur'ān that actively incorporates western methods and undertakes to read the Qur'ān as text. The seriousness with which Qānṣū pursues these tasks gives us the opportunity to reflect more generally on what is entailed in viewing the Qur'ān as “text” and adopting a historicist framework for its interpretation. For Qānṣū, to view the Qur'ān in a new light and take it seriously as “text” is crucial to address social, religious, and political exigencies of society.

Qānṣū links historicizing hermeneutics to the success of progress in the Muslim world. As we will see, his project rests on the ideal of the autonomous self as part and parcel of the liberal polis. Qānṣū's approach effectively entails the privatization of religion a certain form of society. Therefore, his hermeneutics must be understood as inherently political. Qānṣū embodies the now long-standing project of realizing the modern secular nation state, in which authority is transferred from religion to the state. The reorganization of society Qānṣū envisions renders the Qur'ān not completely inessential to the task of ordering Muslim social and political lives, but at
least marginal. Further, based on Qānṣū's work, I fortify my thesis that reading the Qurʾān as literature or historical document does not mainly hinge on method or the ontological status of the Qurʾān but equally on conceptions of human nature.

Qānṣū holds two doctorates, one in robotics and one in philosophy. He also received training in Faḍlallāh's hawza where he focused on ʿusūl al-fiqh. He worked as director of Faḍlallāh's research center and published several works for the Ayatollah. In 1998, Qānṣū wanted to be independent from the institutional Shiʿite framework, without being detached and became professor and proponent of secularism. He is still on good terms with figures in the Lebanese Shiʿite milieu and sometimes publishes in Shiʿite theological journals. He received his Phd from Kaslik University where he worked closely with ‘Aūn, who has been an important voice in the scene of interreligious dialogue in Lebanon promoting religious pluralism.

Qānṣū has written on the politics of Islamic movements, John Hick and Arkoun's philosophical and theological thought, and translated works by David Jaspers, Karen Armstrong, Schleiermacher, and Inglehart into Arabic.1412 He frequently writes for various newspapers, such as al-Safir, al-Hayāt, and al-Nahār and can be seen as a public voice in the Lebanese and Middle East scene. His intellectual journey has culminated in a major work on Qurʾān hermeneutics that posits the quest for new conceptions of truth as crucial for the future engagement with religion.

While numerous works dealing with historicizing approaches to the Qur’ān have been censored in Lebanon, Qānṣū’s magnus opus *al-Naṣṣ al-Dīnī fi’l-Islām* (The Religious Text in Islam) is still being sold, and its second edition is currently being edited, indicating the demand for scholarship like his. This is surprising if one considers the scope of his work that is not only substantial but also highly academic, especially the part on hermeneutics. Two hundred copies of Qānṣū’s work were sold in Saudi-Arabia alone.\footnote{Informal information by the publishing house al-Fārābī. The number does not seem very high, but given the Arabic book market and censorship in Saudi-Arabia, two hundred copies is not insignificant.}

Qānṣū’s hermeneutics are tied to a modernization project. For him, to reconsider the religious text is crucial to this modernizing process and to the progress of society.\footnote{Wajīh Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūḥ al-mujtama’ī bayna al-dīn wa ’almanfiyat al-dawla,” *al-Mahājja* 11 (2010): 41-66.} In his view, Muslims have accepted certain aspects of modernity; but they have failed to sincerely grapple with a modern worldview that starts from Descartes' cogito, taking the “I” as starting point for critical thinking about anything in the world. In Qānṣū’s view, Muslim exegesis remains rooted in a medieval worldview that rests on a form of jābriya – determinism or even fatalism, which either rejects or ignores human individual agency and creativity.\footnote{Ibid., “al-Naṣṣ al-dīnī wa rihānāt al-ma’na al-sīyāsī” (Conference paper for a recent conference organized by the Mu’minūn bi-lā ḥudūd in Jordan), 22-25. Quoted in the following as Qānṣū, “Rihānāt.”} Therefore, in good Enlightenment spirit, Qānṣū deems an epistemological break with tradition necessary.

For social progress to happen, Qānṣū calls on Muslims, “to re-structure the religious and epistemological memory of their present consciousness and thoughts and renew the current interpretative space.”\footnote{Ibid., *Naṣṣ*, 9.} To truly become modern, the collective memory of the Muslim community has to be re-formed by acquiring historical consciousness and historicizing the sources on which they have built their identity. Thus, he ascribes to the modernist view that
modernity needs a critical agent, capable to reflect on the past and able to create the future. Qānṣū leaves no doubt that the avenue to such a new epistemological and religious consciousness is accepting the historicity of both Qurʾān and reader. Society can only develop if the human, i.e., historical, aspect of the Qurʾān is acknowledged as such.

Most contemporary Muslim thinkers who deal with methodological questions concerning the Qurʾān agree that traditional *tafsīr* is insufficient to provide answers to questions a modern recipient will bring to the text.¹⁴¹⁷ The ways to achieve such a “new reading” have differed significantly, as we have seen. A critique of the traditional *tafassīr* was also the original idea of Qānṣū. His project, however, turned into a comprehensive work on how to rethink the reader's – believer or non-believer – relationship with the Qurʾān and thus to achieve a paradigm shift in thinking about Islam, its foundational texts, and role in society.¹⁴¹⁸

For Qānṣū, the time of dismissing western methods simply because they are western has passed. He is unapologetic about his approach that draws on both the Islamic intellectual tradition and western scholarship, especially hermeneutics, while he remains critical toward both. The author engages an impressive scope of literature to make his case,¹⁴¹⁹ examining side by side European seminal authorities on hermeneutics, Christian biblical scholarship, philosophers of religion, *mufassirūn*, as well as other Islamic thinkers.

I suggest that Qānṣū's trajectory from a pious scholar working in the Shi'ite institutional

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¹⁴¹⁸ Thus, a crucial goal of his research was “to question the methods and the understanding of the text that have been and are being followed.” See Qānṣū, *Naṣṣ*, 7.

framework toward a proponent of secularism and historicism can be interpreted as paradigmatic of at least some Muslims in the twenty-first century who have accepted a historicist epistemology to make sense of Islam. It would go too far to state that his decision to become an independent thinker is an illustration of a more pervasive ebbing of religious sensibilities. Rather, Qânsû's thought represents a form of religious subjectivity that coheres with liberal politics. This subjectivity is the result of striving for a meaningful interpretation of Islam in the modern context by incorporating an epistemological framework that has, under certain political configurations, come to be perceived as superior and politically dominant. With the acceptance of this framework comes the acceptance of religion as one tightly defined human sphere among others.

Qânsû's approach should yet not be reduced to an imitation of western thought. His work bespeaks deep-seated qur'ânic and Islamic theological patterns of ordering and interpreting human experience. His is a translation of tradition into a historicist framework of religion rather than a break with Islamic tradition. Yet, these Islamic patterns become “domesticated” in his approach to a degree that threatens Islam's coherence because it relies on the fulfillment of the Enlightenment subject that is always critical of tradition and religious public authority. In fact, at the heart of Qânsû's approach is the rejection of any epistemic authority, which leads to the subjectification and privatization of Islam.

He consequently renders traditional religious authority unnecessary at best, and objectionable at worst. His work entails some critical demands of qur'ânic studies that conflict sharply with more conservative convictions. His trajectory can be seen as one of many examples of Muslim scholars who demand a radical rethinking of the Islamic tradition, such as Arkoun, Soroush, Ju’ait, Abû Zayd, and others. Qânsû approaches the Qur'ân from the angle of
philosophy of religion and is a proponent of religious pluralism. In that respect, it is no coincidence that one of his most important mentors was ‘Aūn.1420 At the heart of Qānsū work, one senses the question of how one can be a Muslim and make sense of the Qurʾān in the global context of religious (and non-religious) diversity.

Rather than just providing some new interpretations of the Qurʾān, he aimed to achieve a paradigm shift in regard to how we view the qurʾānic text, how the reader relates to it, and, finally, how the act of reading and understanding can best be grasped and enacted.1421 According to Qānsū, such an innovative reading of the Qurʾān and its “liberation” from its interpretive system are necessary for a new conception of Islam as religion. Islam should no longer primarily be seen as a social and cultural identity giver but as a personal and private choice.

To achieve such a reading of Islam, Qānsū exposes the politics of previous qurʾānic interpretations and poses the Qurʾān as a social product. His hermeneutic move is a turn toward the qurʾānic text. While this might seem to be the claim of any qurʾānic interpretation, Qānsū means something quite different from those who accept the Qurʾān as a fait accompli. He accepts divine revelation as the source of the Qurʾān and does not dismiss the Islamic interpretative tradition per se. Yet, his paradigm shift entails the reconsideration of the fundamental assumptions about the Qurʾān, which becomes plain in his questions of departure:

About which text are we talking? What is this text that comes from a far-away time? How

1420 One can assume that ‘Aūn at least partially influenced Qānsū. In ‘Aūn's view, while Christianity and Islam are important sources for ethical and political inspiration, he suggests that Muslims and Christians, together with secularists should produce a Lebanese version of secular democracy. He argues that Christianity appeals to all spheres of life, including politics, yet for him politics and religion are separate spheres. See, for example, ‘Aūn, Maqālat. For an overview of ‘Aūn's theology of religious pluralism in English see Hirvonen, Four Thinkers, 298.
1421 Qānsū, Naṣṣ, 7. He states further: “Instead of getting clear and direct answers for clearly defined questions, it is up to us to end the re-posing of previous questions and add new questions to them, but this time on new grounds and within a different relationship with the text.”
did it take form and how did it come upon us? How do we receive it and how do we achieve an activity of reading and understanding in the contemporary time? The question turns from discerning what is said in the text to the direct confrontation of the text and asking about its reality and the relationship that binds you to it and which binds itself to you.  

These questions elucidate that Qānṣū does not take the place of the Qurʾān in Muslim memory as a given, but sees the need to reposition its place in that memory; indeed, he aims to reformulate the memory itself, as we will see. His examination of the Qurʾān takes full account of the modern idea of history and historicity, taking seriously both the historical location of the text and the situatedness of the reader. According to him, what obstructs a free approach and access to the Qurʾān is the interpretative system that the Islamic tradition has erected around the Qurʾān, such as the interpretative strategies of *tafsīr* and its sanctioned view of the nature of the Qurʾān.  

This system makes thinking beyond certain norms, dogmas, and regulations close to impossible. As we have seen, Abū Zayd opted for a literary approach that took the human, and therefore historic, dimension of the Qurʾān as text seriously. Qānṣū's Qurʾān project far exceeds Abū Zayd's in its quality, scope, and radicalness. Qānṣū does not merely aim at a recuperation of the silenced voices in the Islamic tradition, which he acknowledges to be a laudable task. He further calls for a complete reconsideration of how we think about the religious texts in Islam and how we open new avenues to let them converse with us. To merely recover repressed views from the past may help diversify the view of Islam. However, it remains a descriptive affair without critiquing the understanding of the religious texts and religion itself. In short, in Qānṣū's view, Abū Zayd's project is neither constructive nor creative or critical enough.

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1423 Ibid., 8.
Qānṣū notes that many thinkers in the Muslim world who engage in new readings of the Qur’ān have to be cautious as to how they frame their words, given the hostile environment to such an endeavor that often goes hand in hand with debates over secularism, democracy, and pluralism.\textsuperscript{1424} In Qānṣū's opinion, this caution is indicative of a “mentality of limitation,” where “the interpreter only exercises [the tradition's] repetition, its explanation and commenting on its margins.” For him, the problem with these approaches to the Qur’ān is that they place us

Before a religious text that does not come to us in itself, and we are not free in its reception however we want. The text is not free to pour forth its meanings over us; rather, it comes to us from within a space of consciousness (wa'y), existential worldviews, and a network of scholarly a-priori truths that condition our thinking about the text and [its] meaning. [The Qur’ān comes to us with] an etiquette and rules of conduct that condition its deliberation, a specific view of the foundational history of Islam (specifically the times of the prophet, and the “rightly-guided caliphs”), and a system (nizām) of a specific relation between the text and the network of the interpreters who received it and embarked upon its understanding.\textsuperscript{1425}

Such interpretations move within the restricted structural apparatus of tafsīr that Qānṣū attempts to dismantle. Islamic dogma and a body of traditions as to how to read, understand, and approach the Qur'ānic text have created a “reader with a specific vision (ru'yya),” whose capacity to consider the “unthinkable” is restricted. Qānṣū enthusiastically embraces Arkoun's demand to rethink the areas of Islamic thought that have been censored and silenced by external pressure and censorship, creating tight constraints for considering what is epistemologically possible.\textsuperscript{1426}

Already in the 1990s, Arkoun lamented that a “system of reading” was in place in most

\textsuperscript{1424} Abū Zayd's trial occurs when the debate on Islam, sharī'ā, and secularism in Egypt was most intense (the late 1980s/early 1990s), which culminated in the murder of secularist proponent Farag Foda. See Alexander Flores, “Secularism, Integralism and Political Islam: The Egyptian Debate,” \textit{Middle East Report} 183 (1993): 32-38.

\textsuperscript{1425} Qānṣū, \textit{Nāyīs}, 8-9.

\textsuperscript{1426} For this demand in detail, see ibid., 19-20. That Qānṣū takes Arkoun's demand and way of thinking very seriously becomes clear in the numerous quotations of the former's works and the mentions of him in a positive light. For the term of the unthought and unthinkable, see Arkoun, \textit{Islam}, 19.
mainstream Islamic circles:

As such, the term orthodoxy is always being used theologically, but is never thought historically; nevertheless, it is daring to demonstrate that it is the outcome of a long historical process of selection, of elimination and spreading of names, works, schools and ideas depending on the aims of the ruling group, community or those who exert power. Thus a tradition emerges that functions like a system of security and national community. A sociology of readings (la lecture) in the contemporary Muslim societies would demonstrate clearly that it is either the official potentates or a teaching determined by the dominant discourse which adamantly carries out selection.\footnote{Arkoun, \textit{Penser}, 290, footnote 1.}

One cannot but note the spirit of resistance with which Arkoun imbues his demand against a dominant Islamic establishment – a spirit Qānṣū shares. He, in particular, revises the history of the Qur'ānic text and ḥadīth, the historical and cultural conditions for the development of the sharā'a, the phenomenon of revelation, and the formation as well as functioning of what he calls the “Islamic textual system.”\footnote{Arkoun indicates these issues as some of the core-“unthinkables.” In Arkoun, \textit{Rethinking Islam Today} (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary and Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1987), 25-27.} The product of his research turned out to be an exyensive history of the Qur'ān, its reception through history, and a suggestion for “preparing a new experience of relationship and discussion with the religious text.” Finally, he equips the reader with an encompassing theory of reading and understanding.

For Qānṣū, the guiding question is how we can “take into account the logical and objective exigencies for the reception of the religious text.” The radicalness of his project consists in his desire to “re-structure the epistemological and religious memory of [Muslim] present consciousness and thoughts [in order to] renew the current interpretative space.”\footnote{Qānṣū, \textit{Nass}, 9.} This ambitious project leads Qānṣū to redraw the lines of authority within the Islamic discursive tradition and its textual corpus and develop a coherent epistemological framework that takes
seriously the historicity of Qur'ān and reader. It will become evident that his Qur'ān hermeneutics effectively entail a replacement of traditional techniques of the self with the autonomous historically situated critical subject – a shift in hermeneutics with considerable political import.

*History and Drama in the Qur'ān: The Deconstructive Aspect of Qānṣū's Approach*

Qānṣū opposes interpreting the Qur'ān on the basis of an Islamic vision, determined by the parameters set by the Islamic exegetical tradition. His approach is oversubscribed by a deep suspicion of tradition that cannot any longer provide a guiding framework for reading the Qur'ān and instead becomes an obstacle to such an endeavor. History aids Qānṣū to create a sort of interpretive “tabula rasa” by dismantling the tradition of *tafsīr*, demonstrating the situatedness and inaptness of tradition, and disentangling the Qur'ān from its history of effect. History is used by Qānṣū to become free of that same history. He emphasizes the personal and subjective relationship the believer (or any reader for that matter) has with the qur'ānic text. The refusal to align himself with any specific school or abstract essentialized “Islam” accords with his understanding of religion. Religion is a private matter that should be chosen freely and that can mean very different things to various people.  

The plurality of religious understanding is closely tied to Qānṣū's view of humans represented in his quote of Kierkegaard, who stated: “I am only a weak human being. I am not qualified to contemplate the eternal internally or theoretically, but I am forced to the restriction of myself within existence.”  

Such an understanding of the limitedness of human nature *vis-à-vis* the transcendent relativizes totalizing claims to truth and emphasizes the subjectivity of all

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1430 Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Wajih Qānṣū December 12, 2013. For the term “tabula rasa” and the function of history to free contemporaries from the past, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing*, 244.

1431 Qānṣū, *Nāṣ*, 18. He paraphrases Kierkegaard in this quote. However, he uses him out of context. Qānṣū refers to Kierkegaard's “Concluding Unscientific Postscript.”
humans, which, in effect, leads to epistemic egalitarianism. It also contrasts sharply with Jarādī's understanding of humans and religion. The limitedness of humans, for Qānishū, does not entail a rejection of their ability to be active in creating their own world on the basis of assessing reality and subjecting it to critique. While he rejects the idea of human “perfection,” he is also wary of seeing human nature as fundamentally flawed and therefore unfree. These understandings of religion and human nature guide Qānishū's Qur'ān hermeneutics.

In his view, traditional Islam does not see the Qur'ān as an autonomous text or the highest source of religious authority. Instead, the Qur'ān is entangled in a web of other “authority givers,” such as Sunna and *ijmāʿ* (consensus of Muslims) that form a “textual system” (*manzūma nasṣīʿa*). The Qur'ān is always read through the lens of these two authorities. At times, the Sunna even competed with the Qur'ān over authority. Sunna and *ijmāʿ* legitimize the Qur'ān, but every so often they also deny the scripture its literal meaning. They form a negotiated authoritative space. Even approaches that focus solely on the Qur'ān function within the limits of the Islamic textual system that keeps the Qur'ān in check.

In Qānishū's view, the exegete's task was conventionally to bring the differences produced by the competing sources into a systematic framework that could guarantee some form of harmony. In contrast to such a consensual way, Qānishū follows what Robin Horton termed a “competitive style of theorizing.” The rejection of tradition in Qānishū's account poses from the

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1433 Ibid., Naṣṣ, 10.

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outset a theoretical problem. As he rightly states, without the Sunna and especially *ijmāʾ*, one cannot speak of an Islamic scripture.\(^{1436}\) What is left is the Qurʾān as text, which raises the questions of why and how one should read the Qurʾān, if one rejects the technical devises and authorizing discourses that posit it as meaningful for a specific community.

To free the view on the Qurʾān, Qānṣū suggests to disentangle the web of authority and significance (dictated by Sunna and *ijmāʾ*) and to examine the cultural, social, and political formation of these various documents. To achieve this “disentanglement,” he scrutinizes the historical formation and function of the various texts in the textual system and explores what kind of religious meaning they produced.\(^{1437}\) For him, to historicize the Qurʾān does not simply mean to take the Qurʾān's original context into consideration or to explain certain verses with their *sabab al-nuzūl* – practices well establishes in Islamic *tafsīr*.\(^ {1438}\) For Qānṣū, the context of the Qurʾān is not something accidental but is fundamentally present in the Qurʾān.\(^ {1439}\) He starts by arguing against conflating the transcendent source of revelation with the Qurʾān in its completed form after it went through several social and historical processes:

The reception of the transcendent by means of the religious text, and the Qurʾānic one in particular, in the time following its recording and the elevation of its form, its arrangement (*tartīb*), and its words […] closed any room for scientific research regarding the circumstances and environment of the formation of the text. It isolated the text intellectually and legally […] from the historical concomitants of its recording and from the political measures and social pressures that brought it into its uncharacteristic form and shape. Although the religious texts, Qurʾān and Sunna, came to us through human

\(^{1436}\) See particularly Qānṣū, *Naṣṣ*, 144-146, 168-224 227-229. Qānṣū extensively deals with the question what exactly constitutes *ijmāʾ* and whether there is a method for us to determine *ijmāʾ* empirically.

\(^{1437}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{1438}\) Ibid., 367. On the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, see ibid., 80. The context of the formation of the Qurʾānic text, of course, does matter as well. See ibid., 24.

\(^{1439}\) Ibid., 11. Qānṣū quotes al-Ṭabaṭaba’ī here as someone who also holds this view. However, al-Ṭabaṭaba’ī has a different conception of history in mind with his point. See al-‘Ālāma al-Ṭabaṭaba’ī, *al-Mīzan fī tafsīr al-qurʾān* vol. 18 (Qum: Manshūrat jamāʿat al-mudarrisīn), 188.
media, by means of artistic and political regulations and pressures, Muslims set out to
confuse the texts circulating among them entirely with the first form in which they had
emerged. They obliterated the historical stamp of the formation of these texts, [which
underwent] redaction, recording, collection, and arrangement into chapters. The Muslims
filled the religious texts with sacredness (qudāsa) by means of a number of rituals; they
concealed them with thick covers of intellectual support and a deductive chain of
authority (isnād), so that the neglect of its circumstantial historical side became possible:
the social, cultural, and political circumstances through which these “divine” and
“infallible” texts were firmly established.1440

These judgments follow directly from the logic of the precepts of modern history that discharge
the transcendent from human (social and political) processes. According to Qānṣū, the process of
“selection and omission” created the impression that those texts were identical with God's speech,
an idea Qānṣū challenges. He accepts the occurrence of divine revelation (wahy) descending
upon the Prophet. This original revelation, however, is not easily accessible anymore. It has gone
through several stages, influenced by language, politics, society, and culture.

Qānṣū's view entails an evacuation of the transcendent from religion insofar as he sees the
contingent and accidental of history overrule any divine providence. Note here that his critique of
the current understanding of the Qur'ān goes far beyond that of Abū Zayd. The latter had
similarly emphasized the historicity of the Qur'ān and held that “The text was transmuted from
the first moment on – i.e., when the Prophet recited it when it was revealed to him – from being a
divine text (naṣṣ ilāhī) to something cognizable, a human text (naṣṣ insānī) because it mutated
from descent to interpretation.”1441 Qānṣū certainly agrees with this statement, but he thinks
through its implications more systematically and takes the Qur'ān's materiality more seriously.

According to Qānṣū, there exists a substantial difference between “God's word,” as an

1440 Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 11.
1441 Abū Zayd, Naqḍ, 93; Abū Zayd, Maḥfūm, 120, 122.

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eternal attribute of God, the revelation of “God's word,” the process of revelation, its
documentation, and the consolidation of the Qur'an as mushaf. When Qânsû refers to the
“religious text” he means those material texts (whether oral or written) that we have in our hands,
that is, the “tangible products of revelation.” Yet, those texts are not equivalent to “God's word;”
if God's word is one of His attributes, it cannot be confined to a particular human language or
pressed into a finite text. Classical Islamic scholars would not have objected to this view. The
difference is that Qânsû's conception of the human entails its ontological singularity, whose
historical existence is conditioned by the contingent. Exceptions are possible, as in the case of
Muhammad, as we will see. Qânsû first affirms Abû Zayd's view that the Qur'an is not God's
Word since it is “encoded [and] rooted in a specific (human) language system.” As he states:

The only way through which God could convey to us his will and intention was to speak
and to think like a human, like us. Furthermore, the source of authority for us to
understand His purpose (murâd) is our convention, grammar, and rules regarding the
composition of speech, and nothing else.  

There exists an ontological difference between God's word, on the one hand, and human speech,
on the other. In Qânsû's view, this explains why the Muslim majority position maintains that God
does not directly speak to humans but always posits an intermediary, most famously Gabriel.  

As we will see, against this view, Qânsû contends that God did actually address Muhammad
directly. This event, however, is to be distinguished from the Qur'an as text.

1442 Qânsû, Naṣṣ, 24. In this context, Qânsû analyzes what “divine speech” or “kalâm Allâh” signify. Ibid., 255. The
definition of “kalâm/qawl Allâh,” when, how, and in which form it was transmitted to the Prophet were
controversially discussed among Islamic thinkers and led to a branch in Islamic sciences called “Kayfiyât al-
anzâl wa ma'nâhu (science of the kinds of descending and its meaning).” For a concise and extensive summary
of the different views see Abû Zayd, Mafhum, 47.
1443 Qânsû, Naṣṣ, 13-15.
1444 Ibid., 15-16. Even when Gabriel is not in the picture, for example when the prophet received revelations in the
form of “the ringing of bells,” this was no verbal inspiration, no direct address from God to Muhammad in a form
we would characterize as “conversation.” See Van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration?,” 177-195.
Qānṣū reiterates some well-known questions in this context: What constituted the “event of revelation (wāqiʿat al-wahy)?” How did wahy become speech (mushāfa)? How did Muḥammad receive the wahy, and how did it become words? What did God reveal, the meaning or the words of revelation? How can we imagine the revelation process? Divine revelation to the prophet took place. The discourse God used adapted to the social, cultural, and linguistic context, in which it was being revealed, so that any rational person could understand it.

This theory coheres with Shiʿite usūl al-fiqh. Accordingly, God directed his speech in a way to humans that their most rationally minded people (ʿuqalāʾ) could grasp. God thus used a discourse of rational common sense, a form of “divine accommodation,” — *scriptura humana loquitur.* Interestingly, Qānṣū places great emphasis on the direct communication between Muḥammad and God, a minority opinion in Islamic scholarship, classically held by Hanbalite scholars. Following al-Ṭabaṭabāʾī, Qānṣū bases his interpretation on Q 53: 2-18:

Your companion has not strayed, nor has he erred, nor does he speak from inclination. It is but a revelation revealed (wahy yūḥāʾ), taught him by one immense in power — One of soundness. He took His stand, being on the higher horizon. Then He approached and hung suspended and was at a distance of two bow lengths (qāba qawsayn) or nearer. And He revealed to His Servant what He revealed. The heart (fuʿād) did not lie [about] what it saw. Do you dispute with him what he saw? And he saw him in another descent by the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary near which is the Garden of Refuge — when there covered the Lote Tree that which covered [it]. The sight neither veered nor did it transgress [its limit]. He saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.

This passage has mostly been interpreted as describing an encounter between Muḥammad and Gabriel. However, as Qānṣū rightly states, there is no direct indication in the text that the passage

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1447 For the mainstream view see Izutsu, *God and Man*, 174-178. Joseph Van Ess states that outside of the Hanbalite school no one seems to have held that idea. Usually, it is assumed that God spoke directly only to Moses who is called kalīm Allāh, based on Q 2: 253. Compare Van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration,” 186-188.

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actually refers to Gabriel. Qānṣū is aware that the direct communication between God and the Prophet is a minority opinion. The *mutakallimūn* and *fuqahā’* were cautious not to analyze God's self or essence. It was therefore theologically problematic to say that Muḥammad had seen God. Consequently, most theologians held that God had only conversed with the Prophet through the intermediary Gabriel as a means to bridge the ontological gap between the divine and the human. The general theological mood tended to reject anything resembling anthropomorphism and strove to uphold the concept of *tanzīḥ* against those verses that suggested *tashbīh*.

In Qānṣū's view, it was the fear of frustrating the fundamental gap between God and humans that led these interpreters to reject a direct conversation between Muḥammad and God. On the contrary, Qānṣū argues, if it was possible for Gabriel to have direct contact with God, it should have been possible for Muḥammad, too. Both are created beings, while God is the creator. Moreover, there exist Islamic narratives that suggest that Muḥammad's power transcended that of Gabriel in his capacity to be able to view God and to directly receive *wahy*.

The experience of *wahy* differs from other religious experiences. It is not a silent encounter between two but consists of a dialogue. By emphasizing the dialogical nature of *wahy*, Qānṣū differentiates between *wahy* as the reception of information, on the one hand, and *wahy* as a personal event, on the other. *Wahy*, as a personal event, entails the creation (*iḥād*) of the human self – face to face with God – in which the presence of God is directly experienced, transforming

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the receiving person who has a personal relationship with God.\textsuperscript{1449} Against much of Islamic tradition,\textsuperscript{1450} Qānṣū contends that God revealed \textit{His self} in revelation. \textit{Wahy} is not merely guidance or information. Rather, “Through [...] the activity of God in the event of \textit{wahy}, the history of \textit{wahy} becomes a continuous revelation of the absolute.”\textsuperscript{1451}

In Qānṣū's view, direct revelation, “seeing God with his own eyes,” is particular to Muḥammad in the anthropology of prophets. The initial word that opened all revelations to Muḥammad, namely \textit{iqra’}, transformed him into a prophet and messenger of God and opened the stage for a historically unique relationship between a messenger and God.\textsuperscript{1452} This does not mean then that God was simply the source or the dispatcher of \textit{wahy}, as al-Ṭabāṭaba’ī suggests, but that God was present in the process of \textit{wahy}. Therefore, only Muḥammad could fully comprehend and sense this \textit{wahy} because “this is one of those occurrences that is transmitted through [...] direct experience (\textit{ikhtibāt}), not through intellectual teaching, philosophy, or transmission (\textit{naqūl}).”\textsuperscript{1453} No one but the Prophet could understand the exact way or the whatness (\textit{māḥīya}) of \textit{wahy}. It is for this reason, and in opposition to Soroush, that Qānṣū argues that the original experience of the Prophet cannot be reproduced but was only to be experienced as such by him; it is therefore a

\textsuperscript{1449} Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 34-36.

\textsuperscript{1450} In most accounts, it is held that God did not descend or reveal his self in the process of \textit{wahy}. As Stefan Wild states, “God Himself is never subject of the \textit{mazūl}. [...] God rules over heaven and earth, but he rules from above.” See Wild, “We Have Sent Down,” 191.

\textsuperscript{1451} Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 37. In another article Qānṣū even states that “God descended through his speech to us to raise us through our acceptance of Him to His speech.” See Qānṣū, “Rihānāt,” 8.

\textsuperscript{1452} This expression is used by Ibn Mardawayh (d. 1019), a scholar from Isfahan. Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 32. See Q 81: 19-27 that states, “Indeed, the Qur’ān is a word [conveyed by] a noble messenger [Who is] possessed of power and with the Owner of the Throne, secure [in position], Obeyed there [in the heavens] and trustworthy, And your companion is not [at all] mad. And he has already seen Gabriel on the clear horizon. And Muḥammad is not a withholder of [knowledge of] the unseen. And the Qur’ān is not the word of a devil, expelled [from the heavens]. So where are you going? It is not except a reminder to the worlds.” Q 80: 194; Q 2: 97. Ibid., 38-39. Qānṣū’s view goes against mainstream opinion that holds that the Qur’ān (4:164) states that Moses spoke directly to God, which even gave Moses the name “the one to whom God spoke directly” – \textit{kālim Allāh}. See Van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration,” 186-187.

\textsuperscript{1453} Qānṣū in all these passages relies on Ju’ayt, \textit{Fīl-sīra I}, 61, 62. See Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 46-49.
completely subjective and singular historical event.\footnote{Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 32-33. According to Qānṣū, \textit{wahy} went through stages in human history and differed from people to people and was leveled according to their spiritual and intellectual capacities.} One could, of course, argue that if Muḥammad was able to converse with God why should God's providence not also continue after the Prophet's passing? Qānṣū leaves this possibility unexplored. Establishing Muḥammad's direct dialogue with God, one can surmise, serves Qānṣū to declare this event to be unique and foreign to the contemporary reader rendering it to a certain extent incommensurable.

When Gabriel is in the picture, the Qur'ān does not call him an angel or depict him as a mere instrument of God but indicates that he is God's spirit. That the Qur'ān mentions Gabriel separately from the other angels leads Qānṣū to the conclusion that Gabriel is more than an angel: “The Holy Spirit is from God's self and is congruent with Him though separated (\textit{huwa min dhātihi al-munfaṣila 'anhā}).”\footnote{Qānṣū refers here to Old Hebrew in which Gabriel is identified with the spirit or breath of God that sustains the earth, pointing to the Holy Spirit as proceeding from God (\textit{munbahṭiq}). Q 2:98, Q 66:4 “If you two [wives] repent to God, [it is best], for your hearts have deviated. But if you cooperate against him - then indeed God is his protector, and Gabriel and the righteous of the believers and the angels, moreover, are [his] assistants.”} According to the Qur'ān, Gabriel differs from the other angels in regard to his nature and reality. Gabriel is God's spirit, the “in-between,” linking the divine and the created. In him, both come together, permitting the \textit{itiṣāl} (conjunction) between both.

Like the other authors we have encountered so far, Qānṣū ascribes peculiar significance to the first revelation and how it was being narrated. Following Hishām Ju‘aṭ, the revelation to the Prophet was something new and unexpected that frightened him and raised the need to contextualize it. The first to provide such a frame of reference was Waraqa ibn Nawfāl.\footnote{Hishām Ju‘aṭ, \textit{al-Wahy}, 47. In Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 45.} As in Jarāḍī and Tamer's view, the initiation story signifies an existential moment in Muḥammad's life as a human and Prophet.\footnote{Ibid., 83. Qānṣū states that the self of the prophet was fundamentally changed when he received the Qur'ān, through which he was able to perceive unity in multiplicity.} Rather than hinting to Muḥammad's “illiteracy,” \textit{ma aqrā’} or \textit{mā ana}
bi-qārī' indicate his confusion as to what was demanded from him and what he was to recite.

Qānṣū examines why the idea of Muḥammad's illiteracy, advanced by scholars such as al-Baqīllānī, al-Rāzī, al-Zajājī, and al-Qurtubī, has come to be the predominant opinion in the contemporary discussion about Muḥammad's prophethood. People like Jaʿfar Subḥānī and al-Ṭabaṭabāʿī emphasized with it the Qurʾān's elevatedness and its transcendence of natural laws. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ḥakīm takes it to prove the Qurʾān's iʿjāz. The rationale of this argument is that if Muḥammad did not know how to read or write, he could have never come up with the Qurʾān on his own. Overall, this theory is used in order to argue against Muḥammad's role in the emergence of the Qurʾān.1458

In Qānṣū's view, this line of argument is flawed because it ignores the character of Arab society during Muḥammad's time that was strongly based on orality and memory. That Muḥammad could not read or write does not mean that he was not conversant with other cultures and their religious content. Quoting several narratives that affirm the Prophet's literacy (albeit limited), Qānṣū interprets ʿummī as "someone or a group of people who did not possess a heavenly book, and thus the Qurʾān came to be a special book for them."1459 That Muḥammad was summoned by the angel to recite does not refer to correct spelling or actual reading. Rather, as al-Ṭabaṭabāʿī also asserts, it refers to "pronouncing what he will be hearing."1460

In Qānṣū's view, whether the prophet was ʿummī, in the sense of being illiterate, or in the sense that he belonged to a people that did not have a scripture, is unimportant. Instead, the

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1458 Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 45-48; see also Juʿaṭ, al-Wahy, 7-23.
1459 Al-Bukhārī and al-Qurtubī, for example, report that the prophet could read and write. Ummī is not originally an Arabic word but comes from Hebrew. See Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 49-50. See also Muḥammad ʿAbid al-Jābirī, Madkhal ilā al-qurʾān al-kārim (Beirut: Markaz dirāśāt al-wahda al-ʿarabīya, N.D.), 81. Hishām Juʿaṭ is convinced that the prophet could read and write, and that ummī refers to not having a heavenly book. See Juʿaṭ, al-Wahy, 101.
1460 Al-Ṭabāṭabāʿī, Tafsīr al-mizān 20, 108.
crucial point is his presence in the process of wāḥy, being awake and conscious, which defies the idea of Muḥammad as a mere vessel in the process of wāḥy and emphasizes the human involvement in it from the beginning. Qānṣū differentiates between two modalities. The first is “wāḥy in its capacity as speech revealed to the prophet.” In that case, the prophet is restricted to receiving wāḥy, to memorize, and promulgate it. In the second case, the prophet is active in the process of wāḥy, which Qānṣū calls the “activity of wāḥy.” The descent of the Qurʾān is entailed in the process of wāḥy. The Prophet's promulgation to the people constituted the end product of the process of wāḥy. The speech (kalām) of wāḥy cannot be separated from the process of wāḥy,

Because it borrowed from it its reality and existential dimension and came with and through it to the world. If the words that were revealed to the Prophet, coming from outside of him, descending upon him, and issuing from him, were independent from him in the last formation of their shape, then a collected and written text would be impossible that can be read out loud and that can be presented slowly and in a chanting manner, that can be read, interpreted, and analyzed in a way separated from the Prophet. The activity of wāḥy [...] is not independent of the Prophet because it is more than hidden arrangements and visions (kushufāt). [...] The [process of wāḥy] consists of personal interactions (mutual reactions) of the Prophet in the moment of inkishāf (uncovering) of the hidden to him which was the event of the reception of wāḥy, accompanied [...] by worry, burning anxiety, and eventually peacefullness of the self.\textsuperscript{1461}

Wāḥy becomes substantiasted in an interaction between Muḥammad and the angel or between Muḥammad and God. The process of wāḥy is the occurrence of the ittiṣāl (conjunction) between the transcendent and the contingent. This process generated the practical experience within the Prophet, bringing forth visions of the heart and other forms of revelation. At the end of this experience, Muḥammad developed into a “person in whose innermost [self] the experience of

\textsuperscript{1461} Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 51-53. Muḥammad's own sentiments, anxiety, and reaction to receiving wāḥy are well documented in Islamic tradition. Tamer similarly takes these reactions as indication of the active participation of Muḥammad in the revelation process. Verses that suggest that the Prophet received the exact words entail: “Follow what has been revealed to you from your Lord” (Q 6:106); Also Q 18:27, Q 17:86, 73. “Move not your tongue with it to hasten with recitation of the Qurʾān. Indeed, upon Us is its jamʿ and its recitation (qurʾān). So when We have recited it (qara'nahū), then follow its qurʾān” (Q 75:16-18). See Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 52.
wahy intensified and poured forth in his words and deeds.” A realistic differentiation between Qur'ān and Prophet, therefore, becomes impossible. Rather, Muḥammad becomes the speaking Qur'ān. He can respond to questions, counter challenges, and clarify the Qur'ān's meaning. For Qānṣū, the fact that Islamic literature provides evidence of the strenuousness that accompanied many revelations demonstrates the inseparability of wahy from the process of wahy. Therefore, “Wahy entails both the descended speech and the experience of prophethood.”

Based on the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition, Qānṣū, in agreement with Ibn Khaldūn and Abū Zayd, concludes that Muḥammad grew increasingly experienced in the course of the revelations. The Prophet was changed from a confused recipient of wahy into someone who was capacitated to summon wahy and organize the affairs of his people. In Qānṣū's words, “He was a unique creator of human history. The event of wahy was itself a historical event (from the side of its occurrence), it shaped history (from the side of the influence on it), and acted for the sake of history (from the side of how it influenced history and changed it).” The Qur'ān's significance, one can assume, rests consequently in its historical effectiveness.

The Prophet was metaphorically the “word that walked among us,” embodying the message of the Qur'ān in his words and deeds.146 The result of wahy was not simply the Qur'ān but also entailed the person of the Prophet. The separation of Qur'ān and Sunna only occurred

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146 According to Qānṣū, humans do not adapt easily to the experience of wahy that is highly exceptional and evokes different feelings and reactions in the human. Numerous reports describe the unusualness of the event, in which the Prophet would become cold, shaking, eloquent, disturbed, etc. All of this testifies to the fact that the words of wahy were not separated from the process of wahy. The Prophet did not merely receive verbal words, expressions, and phrases, it was moreover a “qawl thaqīl” – a heavy speech. See Qānṣū, Nas̱ṣ, 53-54 esp. 53.

146 Ibid., 68.

146 Qānṣū in particular refers to wahy ta'limā here. The Prophet became an appearance of the appearances of wahy and one of its objective and historical manifestations next to the Qur'ān. See ibid., 53-54. In another article, Qānṣū even states: “The Qur'ān spoke through the Prophet.” What we see as religious text was “of blood and flesh and walked among the people and called to God.” See Qānṣū, “Rihānāt,” 8.
once the Qur’ān was fixated in writing, issuing in two separate texts. Importantly for Qānșū, the uniqueness of the “event of wahy” makes it incommensurable, a fact that has theological and hermeneutical implications. Revelation can henceforth only be taken as an object of study. Participation in its mystery (for example, by means of spiritual practices or by reliving the originating moment by placing oneself in the line of Qur’ān reciters) becomes impossible. While Qānșū thus allows for “cracks in the structure of the homogeneity” of historical time and keeps historical (read secular, finite) categories open with view to the revelation event itself that constitutes a breach of divine intervention in the system of representation of secular time, history in the end creates a corridor between today's reader and the Qur’ān. In other words, when it comes to understanding the Qur’ān in the contemporary context, history’s secular temporality assimilates other forms of memory to itself, despite the fact that Qānșū grants a breach in homogeneous empty time in the past.

In whatever way Muḥammad received revelations and in whichever form he formulated them in his own words, there are still some intermediary steps until we arrive at the final material version of the religious text, according to Qānșū. He takes the dialogical structure of the Qur’ān seriously that mirrors a dialectic between God, Muḥammad, and his community:

This means that the historical situation of the event of revelation is not only a condition for its objective actualization and occurrence but lies at the origin of the formation of the qur’ānic discourse. [It is the historical situation] that grants the Qur’ān an inner dynamic,

Qānșū analyzes in detail the theological discussions between Ash’arites and Hanbalites concerning the question whether the Qur’ān was revealed according to its meaning or in its exact words. It should be clear by now that this is not a relevant question for Qānșū: “If one follows al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī and Ibn ʿArabi, wahy does not have to occur in words, rather wahy can be attained or received in any possible way. We see this in the Qur’ān when the bee receives wahy.” There is no serious Muslim scholar who holds that qur’ānic wahy only occurred in verbal form. In Qānșū’s view, there is no indication that the exact words of the Qur’ān, let alone their particular shape and form, existed eternally as the Hanbalites held. See Qānșū, Nāṣṣ, 68-69, 71-75.


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which is not based on the act of conveying informations into one direction but represents an ascending dialectic movement that starts with the qur’ānic speech and brings forth external excitement and reactions that serve as a means to furthering ulterior a-posteriori qur’ānic speech that forms a new outcome out of previous speech and the provocations that it created.\footnote{Qānṣū, Nāṣṣ, 74-76, 80. Quote on p. 80.}

Here, Qānṣū leaves explicitly the framework of accommodation theory according to which revelation is adapted to the capacity of humans. Instead, history, conceptualized as being shaped in its details by humans and yet represented as an almost abstract independent agent, is active in creating the Qurʾān.

In Qānṣū’s view, the self-referentiality of the Qurʾān does not merely imply qurʾānic discourse about itself as Qurʾān but entails an inclusive discourse about the earlier scriptures (Torah and Gospel) that are different versions of the same eternal \textit{kitāb}.\footnote{The parallels to Madigan’s explanation of the qurʾānic use of the term \textit{kitāb} are striking. Concerning the term in the Qurʾān, Madigan observes: “The use of the plural \textit{kutub} reflects a belief not in the existence of a celestial library but in the plurality of the manifestations of the one \textit{kitāb}, that is, the successive interventions made by God in history in order to guide humanity by making clear what God alone knows and what is God’s alone to will and command. The Qurʾān’s very claim to authority rests on there being a single, univocal, and integral \textit{kitāb}, manifested in the past and now manifest once more through the mission of the Prophet. Since, as we have seen in the Qurʾān’s case, the \textit{kitāb} is always responsive to the situation it is addressing, what is remembered and recited by each community will vary. Thus, though the \textit{kutub} are not identical in their wording, they exhibit a unanimity that comes of having the same authoritative source. This understanding is expressed in the Qurʾān’s repeated claim that it is \textit{musaddiq} ‘confirming’ of the earlier revelations.” See Madigan, \textit{Self-Image}, 177.} According to him, the dialectic and the historicity of the community around Muḥammad are the reasons for the Qurʾān’s inter-textuality (\textit{tanāṣṣ}) with other scriptures and Arabic pre-Islamic poetry.\footnote{Qānṣū, Nāṣṣ, 80-81, 393-395.} It is obvious for Qānṣū that the Qurʾān establishes its own genealogy with the Gospel and the Torah, for example in Q 3:3: “He has sent down upon you the \textit{kitāb} with the truth, confirming what was before it, and He revealed the Torah and the Gospel.” Many of the qurʾānic narratives and phrases would not make sense without the inter-texts of Christian and Jewish scriptures and apocrypha. This does not
entail that the Qurʾān draws on “sources” (maṣādīr), a vocabulary Qānṣū avoids since it is inconsistent with his theory of the Qurʾān as God's discourse directed to humans.

In the process of Qurʾānic revelation, the message of the biblical scriptures came to be semantically and theologically transformed and simultaneously granted the Qurʾān authority. For Qānṣū, the Qurʾān represents a historical manifestation of the word of God, as there were earlier historical manifestations. The Qurʾān does not fit clumsily into an alien historical context but was “formed in the heart of the historical experience.”¹⁴⁷⁰ The enchanted is not banned in Qānṣū’s account of the Qurʾān, although the divine, as soon as it enters human history, already adapts to the contingent. The transcendent as well as the supernatural have a place in revelation. However, as will be seen subsequently, Qānṣū’s exposition of the Qurʾān as text is thoroughly historicized.

For Qānṣū, the Qurʾān is a historical document about the prophetic experience of Muḥammad and the “event of the Qurʾān.” The document of the materialized Qurʾān can lead one to the prophetic revelatory experience but cannot itself be considered revelation. Rather, the Qurʾān is the means of taking one to that experience that, strictly speaking, only Muḥammad underwent. But more than that, according to Qānṣū, the Qurʾān reflects the speech and interaction of various participants in a “drama of revelation.” Against that context, Qānṣū takes the dialogical structure of the “yas’alūna – qul” (they say – say) paradigm at face value. The questions in the Qurʾān are not mere rhetorical devices but reflect an actual dialogical situation between the various interlocutors of Muḥammad. The dialogical structure of the Qurʾān can be traced in its

¹⁴⁷⁰ There are several Qurʾānic passages that affirm Qānṣū’s interpretation. See for example sūra 10:37: “But [it is] a confirmation of what was before it and a detailed explanation of the [former] Scripture, about which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the worlds.” Or in sūra 12: 111: “This is not a fabricated discourse, rather it is a confirmation of what was before it, and an elaboration of all things, and a guidance and mercy for a people who have faith.” More of such or similar statements can easily be found in the Qurʾān. See Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 81.
self-referential style and content, where it addresses the reactions and sentiments these passages evoked in the recipients. These various dialogical elements have come to be incorporated in the material Qur'ānic text as “response upon response upon response.”

The question at hand is hence not whether one should read the Qur'ān against its historical background (which one should), rather the core-task is to acknowledge that “history is in the Qur'ān” and to work out the implications of this statement. If one merely read the Qur'ān against a historical context, one would imply that history was somehow oddly outside the text. In Qānṣū's view, the Qur'ān is not merely clothed in historical language; history is what brings it forth and the Qur'ān itself suggests a dynamic historical progression for itself. Consequently, we are dealing with a historical document that describes the already “linguistically edited message” of the Prophet, as much as it documents human speech, angel's speech, and even the devil's. All these participate in the Qur'ānic discourse, and God is only one of them.

Qānṣū's theory of the Qur'ānic text comes close to Neuwirth's view of the Qur'ān as reflecting a communication process between God, Muḥammad, and the community of believers. Qānṣū is much more detailed in how he envisions the revelation process and includes the transcendent more clearly in his account. Regarding the structure and chronology of the Qur'ān, he faces the same theoretical problems as Neuwirth. Qānṣū's deconstructive approach to the Qur'ān could be described in Neuwirth's terminology as striving at the “pre-canonical text.”

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1471 Qānṣū, Nāṣṣ, 52, 80-81, 218.
1472 Qānṣū's line of reasoning seems similar to the main claims made by Neuwirth, “Qur'ān and History,” 1-18. Interview Rahel Fischbach with Wajih Qānṣū, December 12, 2012. For Satan having a voice in the Qur'ān, see Q 7:14: “[Satan] said, 'Reprieve me until the Day they are resurrected.'” It may be noted that Faḍlallāh similarly sees the reproduction of a dialogue between these “actors” in the Qur'ān. See Faḍlallāh, Āfāq, 7-8. Of course, his view of the ontological status of the Qur'ān is quite different than Qānṣū's.
1473 See Part I, Ch. 3 of this thesis. Qānṣū is not familiar with Neuwirth's work. For further detail, see Qānṣū, Nāṣṣ, 566-568. Compare Neuwirth, “Two Faces,” 141-156; Neuwirth, Der Koran. It seems astonishing that both are unaware of each other's work.
He places even more emphasis on the material difference between Qur'ān as mushaf and Qur'ān as qur'ān. The phases that led to the final redaction of the historical “religious text” were revelation, tablīgh (preaching about the revelation), and documenting these processes, writing them down (tadwīn). What Qānṣū describes here is a text that, as Jerome McGann would say, is “not determined sui generis but is, rather, the result of a process involving the actions and interactions of a specific and socially integrated group of people.”1474 In the case of the Qur'ān, this group is the early Muslim community. How and for which purpose the qur'ān (oral scattered recitations) became materialized is crucial for Qānṣū to understand the meaning of the text. In the following section, we will look more closely at Qānṣū's understanding of this “documentation process” that is crucial for him to derive the meaning of the text.

The Qur'ānic Text as Social Product

Qānṣū pays close attention to the process of how the qur'ān, oral scattered recitations, became materialized (on paper, pamphlet, and in a book) and for which purpose. As mentioned before, according to Qānṣū, the Qur'ān is not identical with wahy from God. First, there is a difference between God's word (as attribute) and God's word conveyed to Muḥammad. How Muḥammad received the wahy under changing historical and social circumstances forms the process of wahy.1475 During Muḥammad's lifetime, the qur'ān, an event representing this process of wahy, was still in oral form and not yet arranged into what we know as Qur'ān (mushaf). The pre-mushaf Qur'ān is an event more so than a text. Wahy was directed first at the Prophet and second at its first recipients, the people around Muḥammad whose concerns, questions, and needs

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1474 McGann, “The Text,” 274.
1475 Qānṣū, Nass, 22-83.
it reflects; it does not, indeed cannot, address the questions of the contemporary recipient directly, who is always only a second-order recipient. With Muḥammad's death, the process of wahy ended, while the formation of the Qurʾān as text only began that rested on the consensus of the Muslim community.\textsuperscript{1476}

The transition from the era of prophethood to the caliphate was a transition from oral transmission of the “word of God” to its reception mediated through a specific documented text. Prophethood had been transient and temporary in nature. With the passing of Muḥammad, sustaining the emerging religious community required that the deeds and words of the prophet became fixed. Now, Muslims had to decide on the form of the Qurʾān and religion. Qānṣū sees this process as corresponding to Max Weber's description of the transition from charismatic leadership to institutionalization in which the Qurʾān was transformed “from being a lived experience by the prophet to an oral recitation of the believers, to \textit{texts} that were written down and brought into a fixed structure.”\textsuperscript{1477} For Qānṣū, the community was actively involved in the shaping of Islam:

The religion that emerged in its historical context was not simply what the Prophet actualized and decreed but was also what the community decided after he had passed away. The decisions made in the course of this process became authoritative over time. From being practical solutions in a specific moment of history at the time, they became established as a holy and organic part within the religious system itself. Doubt in this system, especially in what was fixated by the first four “rightly guided caliphs,” came to equal doubt in Islam.\textsuperscript{1478}

One cannot but notice in this statement that the form Islam took seems rather accidental and could have been different. While Qānṣū emphasizes wahy as an encounter with God, he does not

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 87-89.
\item Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 90-91.
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leave any room for divine providence in subsequent history. Islam was from its inception contingent on the social circumstances, and so was the Qurʾan. One of the decisions made by the community was that the Qurʾan should be written down as a coherent whole.

To substantiate his claim that the process of the fixation of the Qurʾan in writing influenced its form and arrangement, Qānṣū examines various conflicting early Muslim narratives that dealt with the redaction of the Qurʾan. Following Subḥi Sāliḥ, Qānṣū affirms that parts of the Qurʾan had been written down on bones, parchments, and palm leaves during the time of the prophet. According to some scholars, the whole Qurʾan had been written down during Muḥammad's lifetime, a view held, for example, by Sāliḥ, al-Khūṭī and by many classical thinkers, such as al-Zarkashī, al-Sayyid Zarandī, and implicitly by al-Suyūṭī. They mainly base this view on a report that quotes Zayd ibn Thābit: “We composed the Qurʾan from pieces of paper.” Al-Zarkashī is a good example of this view: “The verses and the placing of the basmallāh in front of each sūra as well as their structure has been instituted [in Muḥammad's time] without a doubt, and there is no disagreement concerning this matter.” In effect, ‘Uthmān did not rearrange the verses and sūras as he or his companions pleased.

Qānṣū challenges this view by drawing on equally numerous, sound traditions that narrate the process of the compilation of the Qurʾan after the prophet's death under ‘Uthmān. The verb used in most of the original Islamic sources jamaʿ (to collect) does not necessarily imply the act

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1479 Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 93. This tradition has become a prevalent trope in western accounts. A scholar such as Ibn al-Jazarī would not even mention these reports, because he stressed the Qurʾan's orality. See Bauer, Kultur: 63-67. While these reports are definitely part of the Islamic tradition, they have in particular come to be emphasized in modern times, above all by Salafis who highlight the early written fixation of the Qurʾan. Ibid., 68-75.

1480 Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, al-Burḥān Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah līl-ṭibāʿa, 1977), 256. Al-Bukhārī reports that the prophet stated, “Gabriel came to me and ordered me to place this verse in such and such place in this sūra.” Sahīh al-Bukhārī, vol. 6, 29. Qānṣū lists several other reports and traditions that hold that the prophet had already arranged the Qurʾan in its final form, following commands of Gabriel. See Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 94-96.
of writing. Even if the reports intended this meaning, they did not refer to a systematized corpus yet but indicated spontaneous and individual initiatives. There is no evidence that the Muslims ever gathered around a closed copy of the Qurʾān before the death of Muḥammad. For example, al-Zarkashī, who held that the Qurʾān was arranged in a complete and exact manner initially following Gabriel's command, simultaneously argued that different maṣāḥif circulated after the Prophet's death and that the final Qur'ānic version was only compiled under ʿUthmān. He further asserts that the final mushaf was a result of the effort (ijtihād) and judgment of the umma and the companions. Hence, Qānṣū concludes that the arrangement of the verses and sūras “was not made obligatory by God” since the Qurʾān was still changing. The compilation of the Qurʾān in writing came only later, undertaken first by Abū Bakr and finalized by ʿUthmān.1481 Qānṣū highlights the orality for Arabic culture, in which memorization was preferred over the written word and seen as an advantage of Muslims vis-à-vis Jews and Christians.

The modern move toward privileging the written over the spoken word is a development not only criticized by Qānṣū. The Azhar scholar Labīb al-Saʿīd similarly criticized the modern obsession with the written word.1482 In Qānṣū's view, the assumption that the Qurʾān existed in writing during the time of the prophet is strategical and apologetic. Examining why the belief of the Qurʾān compilation during the life of the Prophet seems so important to modern people, he reasons that such a belief displays the need to ascertain that we hold the same manuscript of the

1481 See Al-Zarkashī, al-Burḥān, vol. 1, 262. See Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 94, 96-97. Al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) similarly adopts the opinion that the Qurʾān as mushaf was the result of judgment and reasoning of the sahāba, the companions of the Prophet, a theory also accepted by al-Ṭabātabāʾī.

Qurʾān in our hands that descended as *wahy* upon the prophet Muḥammad. The effect of this view is to “eliminate any human role or effort in the activity of collecting and writing down the Qurʾān. Just as *wahy* is from God, so must the writing down of the *wahy* and its structure equally derive from God through the mediation of Gabriel and implemented by Muḥammad.”

To discern why this prevalent view is defended so rigorously, Qānṣū surveys the reasons al-Khūṭī offers. Qānṣū finds that al-Khūṭī's arguments are not founded on historical facticity. Instead, al-Khūṭī wants to defend the Muslim belief system and refute the challenges against its veracity raised by non-Muslims. His main argument is that Muslims have to hold on to the absolute certainty of the textual documentation of the Qurʾān because they have to shield themselves against those “who attack the faith of Muslims.” These reasons, Qānṣū rightly states, are apologetic and do not derive from historical critique. For him, this means that they do not possess epistemological correctness.

Once the *qurʾān* entered history it became a contested space. The historical reality, in which the Qurʾān partook in Qānṣū's account, is that defined by a realist and empirical sociology, in Hirschkind's words, “a space of ideological contestation wherein autonomous subjects of interest (individuals, groups, classes) compete with each other for […] political goals.” Qānṣū traces the human influences in the formation of early Islam to substantiate his claim that not only interpretations of the Qurʾān but also its text (in its written form) was a social product. It would not be fair to conclude that Qānṣū evacuates the transcendent, or more specifically God, from the Qurʾān, and with it from history entirely. Yet, the non-historical elements present in the revelation

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1483 Qānṣū, *Naṣṣ*, 103.
process are rendered subordinate to Qānṣū's conceptualization of the Qur'ān as text. More than anything, the involvement of the community in redacting the Qur'ān means for him that it is a social product. As such its materiality must be taken seriously. This analytical step results in distancing the Qur'ān as revelation from the contemporary recipient who has no history-independent avenue to the Qur'ān.

The materiality of the Qur'ān as a social product is the reason why the Qur'ān we have today is not the revelation of Muḥammad or the “text” of the early Muslim community. The material constitution of the text is simply different. Therefore, the reception of these different Qur'ānic texts must vary, too. We have before us a well-structured Qur'ān that we can read where and how we want; we know its form and structure, its approximate history, and we view it as a book between two covers. This situation of the reception of the Qur'ān differs fundamentally from that of the first receivers, not simply because of cultural and historical differences. More than that, we are unable to relive the first reception of the Qur'ān because we know “how the story went,” what its outcome was, and we have the Qur'ān as a whole closed corpus in front of us, fully redacted and nicely arranged. We are not part of the revelation experience that the early Muslim community witnessed. As “text” the Qur'ān functioned in an essentially different way for its first receivers than it does for contemporary Muslims.

The Qur'ān during Muḥammad's lifetime was a speaking one, embodied in the Prophet. It responded to and interacted with the questions of its contemporaries. With the absence of the Prophet, the text lost its potential to speak for itself. It became a different, a fixed text and lost its ability to defend itself against misreadings. The fixation of the content and form of the Qur'ān had two consequences. First, it became an open text allowing for all kinds of various readings. At
some point, the Muslim community reacted to this openness by establishing rules and systems as to how to interpret the Qur'ān, which always allowed for a plurality of readings, albeit within certain confines. Second, the Qur'ān became ahistorical in the sense that it came to be detached from its original circumstances and from its own textual history. Because the material constitution of the Qur'ān in the contemporary context differs significantly from that of its first recipients, who witnessed the “speaking Qur'ān,” Qānṣū argues, it is similarly impossible to understand the Qur'ān with the help of the same methods that the first Muslims used.  

The effect the Qur'ān had on the first Muslims (above all, on Muḥammad) cannot be reproduced, in Qānṣū's view. History comes to dictate a fundamentally contingent understanding of the Qur'ān whose immediacy it interrupts. That the Qur'ān does not address the contemporary reader directly is contrary to almost all so-called modern or traditional approaches to the text and has serious implications for how one understands the Qur'ān. Compare Qānṣū's view, for example, with Sufi ways of approaching the Qur'ān that rest on a mindful consciousness and immediacy, as explained by Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 899):

There are three ways to listen [...] . The first is to listen to the Qur'ān as if you were hearing the Messenger of God recite it to you. Then you should rise from this and hear it as if Gabriel was reciting it to the Prophet, [...] . Then you should rise from this so that it is as if you were hearing it from God [...] . In your listening [as if you were hearing it] from God, understanding (fāḥm) is brought out by the presence of your heart (ḥudūr al-qalb) and your being devoid of any preoccupation with the world and your self by the power of witnessing (mushāhada), the purity of remembrance (dhikr), focused attention (jamʿ al-hamm), good manners (ḥusn al-adab), purity of the innermost secret (ṣīr) and sincerity of realization (ṣidq al-taḥqīq).  

Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 20; ibid., “Rihānāt,” 9-12.
This quotation from Abū Naṣr al-Sarrā, Kitāb al-lumāʾ is quoted in Sands, Sufi Commentaries, 31. This view is formulated similarly by Abū Ṭalāb al-Makkī: “I used to read the Qur'ān but found no sweetness in it until I recited it as if I was hearing the Messenger of God reciting it to his Companions. Then I rose to a station above it and I recited it as if I was hearing Gabriel presenting it to the Messenger of God. Then God brought me to another way station and now I hear it from the Speaker. Here I found from it a blessing and delight I could not resist!”
Al-Kharrāz's hermeneutics represent a form of reading the Qurʾān that transcends the individual, whose understanding is created in a field that entails the text and the reader but also the physical, spiritual, and intellectual disciplines of an established reading tradition in which reader and text are embedded. Quṭb similarly, yet with a different emphasis, holds that modern Muslims have to “relish” the experience early Muslims had with the Qurʾān. According to him, “We have to reconstruct and relive the abundance of the feelings (mashāʾir), comprehensions (mudrakāt), and experiences (tajārib) that accompanied the revelation and the first generation of Muslims.”

Such reliving of early Muslim feelings and experience is precisely what Qānṣū rejects as impossible because of his historical conceptualization of the Qurʾān.

Most Qurʾān reciters and exeges accepted that in order to receive the Qurʾān, one had to discipline one’s self with spiritual, ethical, and mental practices. Qānṣū replaces these techniques of the self with historical consciousness that cannot but declare the Qurʾān to a certain extent removed from the present. On the contrary, for al-Kharrāz, the reader shares in the same temporal now as the Qurʾān in which previous Muslims equally participated. Neither approach is entirely subjective, though they all leave room for subjectivity. In the first case, reading is guided by a technique of pious discipline that entails spiritual and physical practices inherited from tradition; Qānṣū’s approach is, though explicitly subjective, also guided by rules dictated by a dedication to accept the complete contingency of our human experience. It is through meticulously applied historical thinking that one may arrive at Muḥammad’s original revelation; but in order to do so...

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Quotation from Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s Qūṭ al-gulūb. Quoted and translated in Sands, Sufi Commentators, 31. One can easily find other authors with similar statements. For example, Ibn ʿArabī who states, “Each qurʾānic recitation is like the renewal of revelation (mujaddid al-inzāl) upon the hearts of those who recite it. Whenever one recites it, the sending down is being renewed by God, the Wise and Praised. The hearts of the reciters are the thrones on which He descends.” See Ibn ʿArabī, Futūḥāt, III, 127-128. Quoted in Kermani, Gott ist schön, 225. Quṭb, Khaṣāʾīs, 6.
one has to fight one's way through a jungle of historical contingencies. While Qânsû takes the Qur'ân seriously as an important document for Islam, he questions its transcendent nature and in effect, its real participation in the present. In his final step of introducing an historicized understanding of hermeneutics, Qânsû disrupts any form of *regula fidei* and breaks with tradition. The result, as will be demonstrated, is an entirely subjective understanding of the Qur'ân that has serious political and ethical implications.

*Reading the Qur'ân as Text*

Because the qur'ânic text is rooted in a specific historical condition, the contemporary recipient has to acknowledge the distance, even the foreignness, of the text. The historical situation of the Prophet's contemporary community is entirely different from today, and therefore, our understanding of the Qur'ân is radically different, too. A fresh understanding of the text is difficult due to the layers of interpretations, the textual system in which the Qur'ân is situated, and the traditional dogmas and devices as to how to read and understand it. A new reading is not simply achieved through an “opening of the text,” as Abû Zayd would have it. The reader as well must open her mind toward the text and liberate herself from the “tradition” of reading.

Qânsû's attitude is in line with an Enlightenment suspicion of tradition in general that always has to be subjected not only to critique but to doubt. The first step to achieve this openness is the deconstruction of the textual system intellectually, which Qânsû equates with the “liberation of the text.” For him, such a deconstructionist approach can only be the starting-point and is the presupposition for the actual act of reading and alternative ways to have one's own individual experience with the qur'ânic text. It is up to us to make the text speak in a responsible way, acknowledging that we approach the Qur'ân from a very different angle than its first
recipients. Qānṣū adopts fully Gadamer's hermeneutics and also utilizes other seminal authors, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Ricoeur, and Umberto Eco. Gadamer's reflections on how one comes to understand a subject matter are closely linked to historical consciousness. According to Gadamer, meaning is not simply in the text and interpretation does not mean to enter the mind of another. One cannot leave one's own mind and horizon. One always brings to a text one's own questions, mindset, and preconceived notions – a certain pre-understanding – and enters into a “history of effect.” In short, one's history impacts the act of reading just as the text is influenced by history.

In Qānṣū's view, prevalent tafsīr “disregarded that [the interpreting self] belonged to a specific historical context and a cultural horizon loaded with personal questions and ideas.” The reader was schooled in performing a generic role of reading, following prescribed practices, and interpretations. The limitation placed on the reader led to her neutralization. The text is similarly neutralized and determined by outside elements, namely, by the interpretations of the salaf (ancient forebears) or of an infallible (maʾṣūm) imām. The belief in an infallible tafsīr renders any reading of the Qurʾān an “act toward conformity.” The text itself is rendered mute, too. Its meaning is not decided through its own aesthetic, structure, and vocabulary, but from the outside regimented elements of the tafsīr of the salaf and infallibles.

By limiting the horizon of the reader to the horizon of the first recipients, “Reading is being transformed into an act of transmission (naql),” and religious meaning ceases to be the product of an interaction between text and reader. The development of an apparatus of rules for

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1489 Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 524-617. See in particular Gadamer. Wahrheit; ibid., Truth.
1491 Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 17, 525.
1492 Ibid., 525-527.
reading the Qurʾān produced the *illusion* that an objective and eternally true meaning could be derived from the text, even if tradition allowed for polyvalence. Qānṣū concesses that the Islamic tradition accepted a plurality of readings. However, this plurality was seen as the natural outcome of a fallible human being's search for an objective meaning in the text. In his opinion, the problem with traditional *tafsīr* is that

The role of the interpreter is reduced to [following] a pre-determined grammar, without any room for the personal or the subjective, the temporal and the relative, [in which the exegete] fulfills a generic role, which brings forth non-personal generic understanding and meaning of the text that is being repeated each time she executes her role as exegete and applies the rules with which she is entrusted. [In this kind of exegesis,] the exegete takes on the general understanding of the group to which she belongs.\(^{1493}\)

Such a generic *tafsīr* does not judge interpretation as to whether it is correct or wrong but whether it conforms to a mainstream consensus and blocks the way for any new understanding and *personal experience* with the text. In Qānṣū's view, the absence of the reading self (*al-dhāt al-mufassira*) caused a circle of repetition and monotony, and foreclosed any possibility for new discoveries of the unforeseen, the contemporary, and the surprising in the text. While the *mufassirūn* recognized the need to “free” the self of opinions and to avoid emotions and personal inclinations in their interpretation, they did not translate this insight into a theory of subjectivity.

The volatility of the reading act, Qānṣū claims, was the reason for why they urged to comply to the *ʿaqīda* and well-established transmitted methods for approaching the Qurʾān. Maybe the most explicit discussion of this fact can be found in debates over the meaning of Q 3:7, namely, “those in whose hearts is waywardness follow the part of [the Qurʾān] that is *mutashābih*, seeking discord, and seeking [to unravel] its interpretation.” This verse seems to

\(^{1493}\) Qānṣū, *Nass*, 17. See also ibid., 525.
suggest that people can come to wrong conclusions about the Qur'ān and instrumentalize it for their own purposes. In the same line, Imām ʿAlī is quoted as having stated, “The Qur'ān does not speak; humans make it speak.” Qānṣū interprets these traditions as acknowledging the idea that meaning is formed in the consciousness of the reader. However, what is missing in tafsīr, according to Qānṣū, is an authentic experience of the religious text that can overcome generic monotony. Reading denotes a specific activity that proceeds from a conscious self through friction with the text. In it both sides exert influence, direction, control, and diction in reciprocity with each other. This activity can be described as a struggle because of the distinction (even opposition) between the two entities: the text and the self.

Reading is thus an essentially dynamic (yet unstable) process. Moreover, reading is the act of a subject on an object (a confrontation), not the participation of the subject in the object, as it is for al-Kharrāz. The Qur'ān does not have meaning in itself without a reading subject while the text simultaneously produces the agent of comprehension. Yet, it is still the interpreter (mu'awwal) who makes the semantic connections, decides their significance, concocts the way in which the various textual elements fit together, and decides on her textual strategies.

In order to achieve such a reading Qānṣū draws on western hermeneutics. According to Gadamer, even before one reads the first words of a text, the text has already influenced one’s pre-understanding. Since one's pre-understanding might be transformed in the history of effect, it forms a part of it. Themes, objects, and texts, while having an existence of their own potentially, need a conscious self to become tangible, as Sartre states:

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1494 Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 523-527, 532-534. See also ibid., 18
1495 Ibid., 527.
1496 Ibid., 533-534.
To make [the text] come into view, a concrete act called reading is necessary, and it lasts only as long as this act can last. Beyond that, there are only black marks on paper. Now, the writer cannot read what he writes, whereas the shoemaker can put on the shoes he has just made if they are his size, and the architect can live in the house he has built. In reading, one foresees; one waits. One foresees the end of the sentence, the following sentence, the next page. One waits for them to confirm or disappoint one's foilsights. The reading is composed of a host of hypotheses, of dreams followed by awakenings, of hopes and deceptions. Readers are always ahead of the sentence they are reading in a merely probable future which partly collapses and partly comes together in proportion as they progress, which withdraws from one page to the next and forms the moving horizon of the literary object. 1497

And here, we have come full circle. At this point, Qānṣū leaves reading the Qurʾān as scripture and enters the terrain of reading the Qurʾān as “any other text.” The reader is not entirely free to read as she likes, but the link between the text and its author is capped (maybe the author has even died). The reader is the intermediary of the text who elucidates its meaning. Once the Qurʾān materialized as text, it partly lost its self-determination; reader and text depend on each other. For there to be a reader there has to be a text. The text equally needs a reader.

As Sartre states, “True reading is impossible with respect to the author (or the narrator) himself, because his reading will be free from any anticipation and prediction, from any awaiting, assessment, and any failed anticipation.” 1498 In short, the Qurʾān lacks the elements, feelings, presuppositions, and pre-understanding the reader brings to it. According to Sartre, neither the text nor the reader can bring forth meaning in themselves without the other. This view of reading entails an anthropocentric turn for two reasons. First, the human is the one who creates meaning. Without an understanding mind meaning is not there. 1499 Second, the text comes to be detached

1498 Ibid., 50. See Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 526-527.
1499 Sartre writes: “Each of our perceptions is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a ‘reveler’, that is, it is through human reality that ‘there is’ being, or, to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations. It is we who set up a relationship between this tree and that bit of sky. Thanks to us, that star which has been dead for millennia, that quarter moon,
from its divine intention. In this process, it is not God who reveals and creates meaning but the human. Gadamer does not mean that one can use the text as one pleases to arrive at the interpretation one desires. In Qânsû's view, this happens in ideological instrumentalizations of the Qurʾān, which he strongly opposes.\footnote{Qânsû, Naṣṣ, 19.} The Qurʾān is a vulnerable text:

As we receive the religious text in our time as a written text, it cannot speak for itself or elucidate its intention unless we read and interpret it. This places the text in a situation of silence that cannot correct the mistakes of the interpreter or the extent of her deceits. It posits the contemporary recipient who interprets the text in an active role. [The reader] possesses the power to instrumentalize the text, employ, and falsify it. We see this clearly when we look at the contemporary chaotic utilizations of the Qurʾānic text that seem to be capable of legitimizing any political standpoint to mobilize the masses or move the general sensitivities.\footnote{In this passage, Qânsû paraphrases ʿAbd al-Majīd Sharfī, Min falsafāt al-tawīl ilā nazariyyāt al-qirāʿa (Beirut: al-Dār al-ʿarabiyya liʾl-ʿulūm al-nāshirūn, 2007), 93-100. Qânsû, Naṣṣ, 529.}

This call for caution concerning the act of reading and guaranteeing the intactness and voice of the text sounds reminiscent of Jarāḍī's warning against interpretative anarchy. However, the two authors reach dramatically divergent conclusions in the face of the sheer multiplicity of possible interpretations. According to Qânsû, reading is a volatile act.

The vulnerability or silence of the text does not suspend the possibility of interpretation. There exists a difference between utilizing, using, and misusing a text, on the one hand, and reading it, on the other. Under “utilization,” Qânsû understands an interpretation whose outcome is predetermined by the intentions and expectations of the reader. Jarāḍī is similarly aware of the vulnerability of the Qurʾān. His solution is to affirm an Islamic regula fidei, which Qânsû forcefully rejects. To avoid a mere utilization of the text, he urges to consider the nature of the text. For this reason, a historical consideration of the text's constitution gains relevance.
In Qānṣū's view, to read a text properly means being conscious of one’s own conditions and preconceptions within the process of interpretation. Coming to an understanding always implies being ready to change one’s own presuppositions. Understanding a particular subject matter is the result of a fusion of horizons and a process of dialogue and conversation. Horizons are places or locales where people’s visions overlap. Each person articulating her own position on certain issues aims to adopt “the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.” Every tradition or perspective, according to Gadamer, is an ongoing process of fusion of different horizons. According to Qānṣū, neither the horizon of the text nor that of the reader can be abolished, while both can never fully agree or cohere either.

He claims that tafsīr neglects both the horizon of the text and that of the reader. A sincere interpretation must be based on the realization that humans are bound by history and that they are incapable of visions outside of history. Qānṣū does not want to return to “an original intention” of the text or uproot the text from its original milieu. The historicity of the text must be taken seriously without “imprisoning [the text] or reducing it to its pastness. One has to enter with it in an act of discovery [and] conversation.” He urges that reading the religious text ought to be a new struggle each time one approaches the text; even if the text does not change, the reader does.

If one takes seriously the Islamic credo that “the Qurʾān is valid for all times and places,” one has to acknowledge that this text has something new to say instead of defending a sanctioned meaning, which completely ignores the difference of time, place, and historical context. Thus,

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1502 Gadamer, Truth, 299-307; See Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 529-530, 536-538, 555-556.
1504 Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 20.
similarly to Jarādī, Qānṣū wants to prevent the Qurʿān from historical objectification that denies the text its “contemporaneity by assigning [it] to a specific period in a calendrical past.”¹⁵⁰⁵ In contrast to Jarādī, he does so by means of history and by establishing the distance of the text from the reader first. In the process, he denies the Islamic interpretative tradition its coevalness with his own time. This tradition becomes truly anachronistic, a remnant of the past that somewhat oddly is still present in the contemporary context.

Qānṣū demands that a sincere reading of the Qurʿān should aim at setting aside one's own feelings, theories, and inclinations. The text has its own autonomy in the process of reading, conveyed through its structure and semantics from within which one should approach the text. Reading is an infinite experience with the text. The Qurʿān is no easy text and has its own internal structure that the reader has to take seriously. It presents itself

Between the lines of presence and hiddenness, clarity (al-muḥkam) and ambiguity (al-mutashābih), in a way to excite the powers of the reader and her possibility to discover its specific organization and its deepest intent, without it being possible to arrive at the final meaning of it. Each fruit of the experience of discovering calls [the reader] to review and rethink: *Then turn your gaze back twice more, and your sight will return to you, humbled and flagging* (Q 67:4).¹⁵⁰⁶

The text thus presents its own semi-autonomous reality that can only be grasped if one truly ponders the text and listens to it carefully. The reader does both, she discovers the elements of the text and creates or invents her aesthetic object in the process of reading. As long as there is no self that brings these objects to the fore, they remain in potentiality.

Qānṣū adopts Sartre's conviction that reading is based on the principle of freedom, which contains both the personal independence of the self and the sovereignty of the text. Freedom

¹⁵⁰⁵ See previous chapter. For quote, see Chakrabarty, “Death of History,” 63.
¹⁵⁰⁶ Qānṣū, Nāṣṣ, 530-531.
renders reading a powerful tool for creativity. Whenever the reader participates in the realization and clarification of the literariness of the text and its beauty, the text's meaning will gain richness and depth; whenever the participation of the reader is “fastened with chains,” the text will appear sober and pale.\(^{1507}\)

Qānṣū finds the principle of cooperation of text and reader that creates the freedom of both affirmed in the Qurʾān when it states, “In this is a reminder for one possessed of mind, or one who hears attentively and bears witness (shāhid)” (50:37). For Qānṣū, this verse indicates that the reader must engage fully all emotional and intellectual faculties and be wholly present and conscious vis-à-vis the text's aesthetic and semantic import in order to relate them to her own reality.\(^{1508}\) Absent from Qānṣū's analysis of the act of reading is God, who takes a crucial role in exegesis as facilitating and enabling the comprehension and internalization of the Qurʾān through illumination or unveiling. This disenchanted act of reading that yet offers insights and meanings transcending the actual text and reader is consistent with Qānṣū's understanding of epistemology and the production of meaning, positing the critical self as most qualified reader.

In Qānṣū's view, \textit{tafsīr} generally remained within the belief that its task was to “uncover meaning,” whether in the genre of \textit{tafsīr} or \textit{fiq̱h} that should ideally lead to understanding the text's intention. This attitude failed to release the full potentiality of the reader, reducing her task to a movement in narrow confines. \textit{Tafsīr} as such has consequently been a collective activity

\(^{1507}\) Qānṣū follows Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger closely here. Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 532. Sartre states in this respect: “Reading transforms into an activity of cooperation between the free and the creative between the reader and the text, where each of them can exert his complete freedom and at the same time allow the freedom of the other.” See Sartre, \textit{What is literature?}, 50. See Qānṣū, \textit{Naṣṣ}, 353.

\(^{1508}\) It is unclear to me how exactly Q 50: 37 relates to the act of reading in the Qurʾānic context. The \textit{sūra} in which it is placed brings together reflection on the Qurʾān and an apocalyptic vision of the last days and the Day of Judgment. Ibid., 536. It may be remarked that the reception of God's message, His remembrance, is not only linked to an open mind and the observation of nature and the Qurʾān, but to repentance (50: 8) and an act of divine unveiling, which permits humans to gain clear insight (50:22).
based on general agreement, which led to a “generic meaning reached by a generic kind of interpreter not by (true) persons.” One may speculate that the person Qānṣū has in mind is a sort of ideal autonomous self, embedded and confined by her historical and social contexts, no doubt, yet also inherently creative. Each person is unique exactly due to her circumstances, and therefore, interpretation is a highly subjective and personal affair. Social embedding does form a limitation to the autonomous act of reading, but the reader should, nevertheless, constantly strive to overcome these confines in order to reach freedom in the act of reading by being aware of her historical conditioning. Reading is an ultimately conscious, yet unstable, activity.

Qānṣū conceives of the sacredness of the Qur'ān and the Islamic textual system as obstacles for opening the Qur'ān for contemporary Muslims. In his view, desacralizing the Qur'ān as text does not lead to the loss of revelation; quite the contrary, it is the only way to attain a closer understanding of what that original revelatory experience might have been. However, because it was a subjective experience unique to the Prophet, it cannot be reproduced, a view that sharply conflicts with Jarādī's claim to the objectivity of revelation. For Jarādī, all Muslims have at least potentially the option to relive the initial revelatory experience of Muḥammad through the Qur'ān. This option is frustrated in Qānṣū's account because wahy is the purely subjective experience of the Prophet. Muslims can try to discern this experience on the basis of the Qur'ān. However, ultimately, every experience with the Qur'ān, which is in its entirety not revelation anymore, at least nor verbatim, is singular, relative, and therefore privatized.

By detaching the Qur'ān from the interpretive system in which it is situated, Qānṣū in effect designates a greater importance to the Qur'ān because he views it as the main (and almost

1509 Qānṣū, Nāṣṣ, 536.
sole) determinant for Islam – a fairly Protestant move. The tool for liberating the Qur'ān is history. Simultaneously, he frustrates the authority of the Qur'ān. Since there is no meaning without an interpreting subject, and each subject is situated in historical contingencies that affect her approach, any interpretation is necessarily relative. Another effect of Qānṣū’s Qur'ān hermeneutics is to deny both the religious Islamic establishment and traditional pious reading practices their monopoly over Qur'ānic interpretation. Religious scholars are subjected to the hegemonic textual system to such an extent that Qānṣū's approach would surely dismantle their authority, which rests on this textual system. Qānṣū's Qur'ān hermeneutics have direct political implications, particularly for redefining religion in society.

An immediate effect of Qānṣū's approach is that it destabilizes the authority of the Qur'ān that ceases to be God's speech. Qānṣū understands religion as a “human phenomenon,” and so is the Qur'ān in its materialized form. Once this is established, religion becomes questionable as autonomous and divinely sanctioned authority. His emphasis on the subjective relationship of the reader with the Qur'ānic text challenges the monopoly of a religious class as sole interpreters of the Qur'ān. Plurality of religious understanding is then a natural outcome of interpretation since humans are diverse and limited in their comprehension, which relativizes totalizing claims to truth. Truth claims in general seem odd to the modern and postmodern scholar, and Qānṣū fully embraces that view. In his opinion, the Qur'ān does not address us today directly, which importantly renders the shari‘a void and, with it, Islamic practices. For Qānṣū, the question of the Qur'ān's authority is in the end irrelevant because the query of the modern skeptical

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1510 Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūḥ,” 51.
1511 Qānṣū’s view of humans is represented in his quote of Kierkegard. Compare Qānṣū, Naṣṣ, 18.
1512 Howard, Religion, 9.
individual is “What can I get out of the Qurʾān?” not “How should the Qurʾān comprehensively structure my life?” – a view that suggests a consumer market mentality. Finally, Qānṣū's approach seems to make the creation of meaningful readings of the Qurʾān for Muslims communally impossible.

Besides these apparent effects of Qānṣū's approach, his view of the Qurʾān and its readers is closely tied to an understanding of human nature as severely limited and tied to its circumstances.\textsuperscript{1513} By stressing the limitedness of human nature, Qānṣū confirms the subjectivity of all humans, which refers to the reader of the Qurʾān just as it applies to the Prophet. There is, in his view, no indication in the Qurʾān for the possibility of the perfection of humans, as Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy has it. On the contrary, the Qurʾān emphasizes human weakness.\textsuperscript{1514} As we have seen, Faḍlallāḥ similarly placed emphasis on human weakness. Qānṣū takes this view a step further. He decisively emphasizes the individuality and singularity of humans and posits a sharp divide between the divine and the human who is trapped in her “existence,” if not becoming outright what Chakrabarty calls “ontologically singular.”\textsuperscript{1515} While the horizons of reader and text fuse, they remain in a relationship of subject and object, separated from each other.

Qānṣū links a specific scriptural hermeneutics, namely the historical and literary approach, to modernity and in fact to a healthy society that is ultimately secular. Although Qānṣū

\textsuperscript{1513} Qānṣū, \textit{Nāṣṣ}, 18.
\textsuperscript{1514} In Qānṣū's view, the Qurʾān adopts an almost existentialist view of humans and it would be revolutionary to actually adopt that view. He sees this issue broached in the Qurʾān in Q 2:30: “Remember when God said to the angels, 'I shall appoint a deputy on earth,' and they said, 'Will You place therein one who causes corruption and sheds blood while we chant Your praises and proclaim your holiness?' God said, 'I know what you do not know.'”
\textsuperscript{1515} Chakrabarty, \textit{Provincializing}, 16. The exception to this rule would be the prophets, above all Muḥammad, in Qānṣū's account since Muḥammad seems to have overcome the ontological divide between the human and the divine. However, Qānṣū emphasizes also the Prophet's humanity. True, he encountered God and was transformed in the process. Yet, given Qānṣū's general view of humans, this transformation cannot be understood as an ontological change in the prophet's nature, much less as a form of perfection in Mullā Ṣadrā's sense of the term.
wants to leave room for a sort of indigenous modernity that does not need to follow the West in every aspect, his project implies a form of temporal epistemology, in which one moves teleologically from a non-modern past toward modernity, whose parameters are set by the West. What Qānṣū envisions is a critical historical consciousness that can produce the agency needed to create present and future, which many authors, for example Ricoeur, consider as a crucial component of the “western mind,”¹⁵¹⁶ and as the trademark of what he calls “our” modernity.

Qānṣū does not see his own approach as the final solution, inasmuch as he aims at bringing new thoughts into the debate. He is well aware that (western) hermeneutics developed out of Christian interpretative methods. For many Muslim authors situated in the tafsīr tradition, their acceptance is problematic because it easily leads to the acceptance of an epistemological system that conflicts with an Islamic worldview and in turn changes the understanding of Islam. For people, such as Jarāḥī, hermeneutical approaches to the Qurʾān are an expression of the adoption of a secular (mostly positivist and materialist) worldview.¹⁵¹⁷ Indeed, hermeneutics and the political vision of the interpreter are linked – an issue that has to be considered carefully. One can at this point not be surprised that to read the Qurʾān in a new light is more than an intellectual exercise for Qānṣū. Rather, as will be seen in the following section, it is a social and political necessity for redefining religion in society.

Qānṣū’s Political Vision and Its Relation to Qurʾān Hermeneutics

According to Qānṣū, society will not change as long as Qurʾānic scholars do not open the Qurʾān for new interpretations and take historical considerations seriously. The Arab world, in his

view, is still at the beginning of rethinking their *turāth* and questioning some “sacred” facts. Qānṣū's ideal vision of religion is a privatized one in which people have their faiths, with religion entering the public life only in a restricted way. Qānṣū claims that the historicization of the Qur'an is a necessary step in the intellectual advancement of Arab society that leads to secularism.\textsuperscript{1518} His critique echoes certain voices in the West who see in the historicization of the Qur'an the cure for the malaise of Muslim societies.

However, in Qānṣū's view, it is not enough to apply western methods to the Qur'an. Rather, the whole tradition has to be rethought and its strictures dissected. It is no coincidence that Qānṣū lets modernity start with the German reformation and the posting of the 95 theses in Wittenberg,\textsuperscript{1519} which he interprets as a revolution against a rigid clerical establishment that upheld an even more rigid textual system. While the Reformation was overall a religious movement that formulated its critique from within the framework of the Church, it gradually led to the destruction of the unity, sanctity, and catholicity of the Roman Catholic Church, which opened possibilities for something new, above all, a novel understanding of scripture.

As mentioned before, Qānṣū is in favor of accepting a new form of religion, one that leaves space for individual growth and reasoning and remains mainly a private matter. This does not mean that religion cannot enter the public and has to be confined to the private sphere, but the relationship of social forces within society has to be negotiated anew.\textsuperscript{1520} To achieve such a reconfiguration, both religion, in particular Islam, and secularism must be reconsidered, a theme

\textsuperscript{1518} Rahel Fischbach, Interview with Wajīh Qānṣū, December 12, 2012.
\textsuperscript{1519} Qānṣū, “al-Taṣāḥaluh.” This does not imply that the reformation was itself a modern phenomenon but that it was the symbolic beginning of something new, leading to new political and epistemological configurations.
\textsuperscript{1520} Qānṣū lays out his vision and suggestions for a new approach to the relationship between Islam and secularism in an article published in a Shi'iite philosophical-theological journal. See Qānṣū, “al-Taṣāḥaluh,” 41-66.
that Qānṣū has scrutinized in several articles for various audiences. This reconceptualization of Islam is directly linked to hermeneutical questions. In an article published in al-Maḥajja, Qānṣū examines the genealogy of secularism in the West and how it has been perceived in the Muslim world. Thus, it gives us good insight into his understanding of secularism and Islam and demonstrates that he is in conversation with other scholars, such as Jarādī and Youness.

Qānṣū discusses the historical development of secularism as well as its various forms and consequences, such as the separation of church and state, the diminishing of religion as faith and belief system, and the transfer of political and legislative power.\footnote{Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūḥ,” 45-51. Since then he has elaborated on this last point concerning the creative faculty in humans in several consecutive articles.} He also highlights the creative faculty in humans that is linked to his concept of individual freedom and comes close to the liberal notion of the autonomous, self-possessed subject. While this subject is not entirely self-contained, since Qānṣū is very conscious of its social embeddedness, the telos of the individual is nevertheless freedom, understood as the actualization of autonomous thinking and exploration.\footnote{See his article on the jabrīya. Qānṣū, “Rihānāt,” 23-27.} The freedom of individuals is based on both their self-understanding and political configurations that make the realization of human creativity possible and thinkable in the first place. To have a sincere conversation about political exigencies, human freedom (as against divine determinism) has to be acknowledged.

His emphasis on the liberty of the reading subject gains new relevance in this context. The mode of thinking Qānṣū has in mind that hinders this realization of freedom (and therefore the advancement of society) is what he calls political jabrīya. The term jabrīya refers to a view that any human action is and should be determined by God, which entails the complete submission of
human to God's will, approximating fatalism. Any thought that cannot be based on God's law or “book” is to be discarded in that frame of mind, which Qānṣū sees exemplified in both Quṭb and Bāqir al-Ṣadr. In his view, their conception of an Islamic state lacks the capacity of humans to political action, although this notion is more explicitly formulated in Quṭb when he equates any purely human, i.e., not divinely sanctioned, thought or action with the jāhiliya.\textsuperscript{1523}

For Qānṣū, the problem is not simply one of interpretation but of how we think about the act of understanding itself. The regime of reading that the \textit{tafsīr} tradition erected functions on the basis of certain premises. If these premises, such as the \textit{jabrīya} and the view of “human nature,” do not change, independent political thought is not possible either. At stake is not the authority of the Qur'ān but the fact that this authority is in actuality the dominance of religious thinkers who move within a framework of thinking that has not yet accepted hermeneutics in Gadamer's sense of the term.\textsuperscript{1524} For Qānṣū, secularism does not necessarily promote atheism, but it establishes an epistemological field that is free to determine the parameters of its own field of knowledge, independent of religion and religious authorities.

Qānṣū concedes that the secular logic indirectly led to a diminishing of religious authority. Yet secularists held varying positions, both sympathetic and hostile to religion. In this context, he explains, religion took on new communal forms and functions in society. Thus, despite the secular politics in the West, Qānṣū highlights that religion did not disappear from the public and social spheres entirely. The form of religion, however, Qānṣū rightly states, changed in that process. For once, religion ceased to be the most powerful discourse in society, while

\footnote{Qānṣū, “Rīhānāt,” 26-29.}
\footnote{Ibid., “al-Taṣālūḥ,” 29.}
religious scholars aimed to reconcile religion with new findings in science, history, and other disciplines. Secular thought led to a new secular study archive with which the religious discourse had to grapple. Religious texts, religious consciousness, and religious positions became secularized and faith an option. At the same time, religion did not vanish and religious trends emerged that aimed at countering secular modernity. The religion that crystallized was different from its pre-modern forms; less bound to church institutions and, above all, considered a human phenomenon. 1525 In these deliberations, it becomes obvious that Qānṣū is well aware of the radical break his hermeneutics entail for Islam, a break he welcomes.

His account of the rise of secularism in the West brings him to the question of the relationship between Islam and secularism. He observes that both Islamists and secularists in the Arab world often see both as incommensurable. Many Islamists, such as ‘Amāra, contend that secularism is simply not a Muslim problem since it arose in the West to tackle problems specific to the Christian context. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods successfully and rightfully shrugged off those problems that are, however, not Islam's. ‘Amāra's aim is to prove that secularism is alien to Islam and inappropriate for Muslim societies as a whole.

For him, both Islam and secularism are ideologies. The West, due to its supremacy, could dictate to Muslims their modes of thought and thus strip them of their Islamic identity. The contemporary Muslim world is confronted with an “intellectual and cultural invasion (ghazw).” 1526 Secularism is even more dangerous than the crusades since it infiltrated Muslim minds. ‘Amāra would thus object to Qānṣū's project that entails the disenchantment of the Qur'ān

and the change of Islam into another form of religion than it used to be. In line with this argument, ‘Amāra criticizes that western civilization has been regarded as universal “human civilization,” whereas everything else was branded as “traditional” and unfit for modernity. Secularism, in his view is, by and large, a western import. More important, ‘Amāra asserts that in light of Islam and its all-embracing nature, secularism does not mean progress for Muslims in the same way it did for Europe. The solution for the flaws in Muslim societies inhere in Islam.

‘Amāra, similarly to Faḍlallāh, argued that Muslims were not in need of secularism in case they succeed in realizing “true Islam,” an argument forcefully propounded by the Muslim “modernists” (muṣliḥūn) as well.

Accepting a well-known argument elaborately developed by ‘Abdū, ‘Amāra holds that Islam has always subscribed to reason and science. Renewal (tajdīd), progress (taqaddum), and innovation (ībdā’) are, in ‘Amāra’s view, core elements of both secularism and Islam, which proves that Muslims do not need secularism. He, in particular, faults secular societies with the rejection of traditional values. Secularists marginalize religious identities by branding them as conservative. Islam, on the contrary, distinguishes between reactionary traditions that hamper progress and values that strengthen society. This feature of lived Islam facilitated rejection of blind traditionalism and acceptance of useful innovations.

It is approaches such as ‘Amāra's that Qānṣū aims to disprove. In his view, the most important aspect of the transition to secularism was the shift in authority over the religious texts –

a shift that he sees to have symbolically started with Luther and his rejection of church authority over church teachings. Moreover, this shift also empowered the individual vis-à-vis the Church to be able to derive individual teachings from the scriptures, even if they went against the Church. What Qānṣū considers most important in the transition to secularism thus came from within the Church when it engaged with scientific and philosophical thought and was confronted by absolute doubt. Similarly, change in Islam would have to come from inside.

According to Qānṣū, the secularization process led to the collapse of authority of interpretation and meaning that the Church had so far safeguarded. The struggle against church authority was soon transposed to an ontological and existential realm, although many pre-modern presuppositions remained present in secularism. Qānṣū concedes, “No one can deny that secularism is the fruit of a long western history, and that all of its constituents are particular to the West, which also means that its transposition into other realms has its own different conditions, whose artificial cultivation [in the Muslim world] will neither carry elements of life nor permanence.” Qānṣū implicitly refutes here those thinkers who view secularism as an exclusively western project unfit for the Muslim world.

One of ‘Amāra’s main arguments is the foreignness of any sort of ecclesiastic institution to Islam. This argument is one of the core elements of those claiming that Islam and secularism are incompatible. Since Islam does not know any clergy, so the argument, theocratic dominance over the state is ruled out. Christianity, according to that argument, is merely spiritual and interested in saving souls, not an unfair judgment if one means by Christianity its modern

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1530 Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūh,” 57.
1531 ‘Amāra, al-‘Almāniyya, 25.
deprivatized version. ‘Amāra traces this notion back to Matthew 22:21, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s” – again a phrase that has gained currency in modern Islamist writings. Islam has, according to ‘Amāra, in its essence, a much more positive relation to intellectual freedom and reason than Christianity. In contrast to Christianity, Islam is in its essence interwoven with politics, society, law, and the individual life. ‘Amāra appreciates secularism as a solution for Europe that suffered under the tyranny of the Church and led Christianity to its true nature as a merely spiritual religion. However, Islam cannot be reduced to spirituality and does not have the aforementioned problems; Secularism is a “solution for a problem Muslims do not have.” Hence, ‘Amāra objects to a privatized form of religion and the religious subjectivity that comes with it.

One may take issue with ‘Amāra's at times polemical language. However, he is perceptive of the fact that religion, as “distinctive space of human practice and belief which cannot be reduced to any other,” is a western invention. By accepting this definition of religion, one also agrees to a broader reconfiguration of society at large. The point is not simply the “hegemony of the clergy,” or “traditional values,” but at stake is the organization of society as a whole, the introduction of a new epistemology and the all-championed liberal subject. ‘Amāra presents a fundamentally different conception of religion that is not “a general order of existence that provides meaning,” but a way of life that materializes in society and politics.

1532 Qānṣū clarifies that this is a myth that has not much to do with the original scene in which Jesus allegedly uttered those words. Jesus certainly was not aiming at a political system that is independent from religion. Rather his statement was strategical to sidestep the danger of being pulled into Roman politics. Instead his disciples should concentrate on spreading the message. Compare Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūḥ,” 43.
1533 ‘Amāra, al-‘Almānīya, 28.
1534 Asad, Genealogies, 27.
1535 This phrase alludes to Clifford Geertz's understanding of religion as a system of symbols. See Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87-125.
Qânsû challenges ‘Amâra's view, which, he states, simplifies the evolution and potential of secularism as well as that of Islam. He clarifies that the difference between Islam and Christianity consists in the differing framework of religious representation, not in the absence of an institutionalized power in Islam. Islam differs from Christianity on a formal level. However, there exists a “functional symmetry” and a “discursive uniformity” between the two considering that both have institutions for exerting control and authority over society. While the form of exercising religious power varies between Islam and Christianity due to differences in political and social environment, there is no reason to assume that in a Muslim environment the crucial questions secularism raises are irrelevant. To affirm an essentialist difference between Islamic and Christian religious representation that includes both form and content equals, for Qânsû, self-denial that ignores the struggles between religious representation and other social forces in the Muslim world. There was in Islam no free space for an autonomous rationality that could have developed independently from political power.\textsuperscript{1536}

For Qânsû, the slogan of Islam as “dîn wa dawla” – religion and state – cannot but be misleading particularly in the contemporary context because it is based more on fiction and less on a realistic construct of either religion or the state. He argues that not every form of secularism is anti-religious, and in some cases, secular states could be turned into entities “freed from the power of religious symbols and commandments, [and turned] into systems based on religious pluralism and respect for various faiths and convictions.”\textsuperscript{1537} This is the form of secularism Qânsû

\textsuperscript{1536} Qânsû, “al-Taṣâlûh,” 59-60. Qânsû juxtaposes the role of the Catholic Church and its connection to the ruler and the complex relationship between the Islamic schools of thought with the respective caliphs, not ignoring or downplaying the differences. In both cases, “the course of religious institutions became linked to the fate of the ruler (or ruling institution) and to the mood of the prince [in which] the reality of religious belonging blended in with the reality of the ruling authority.”

\textsuperscript{1537} Ibid., 57.
advocates and which he sees potentially to be of much value for Islamic societies. While this conceptualization of society seems all too familiar to the western reader, it is only possible once religion is reduced to the private realm, which becomes clear in Qānṣū's wish to remove “symbols and commandments” from public power. However, as we will see, religion is not to be reduced to a mere commodity, either, for Qānṣū.

While Islamists focus on the aims and intentions of secularism, Qānṣū stresses the foundations on which it is built and which are necessary for its flourishing, such as creative means to organize legal and constitutional positions toward religions and regulate social and religious institutions. According to him, Islamists only view the alleged outcome of secularism, namely the separation of religion and politics and the diminishment of the power of the religious establishment. Yet, these outcomes do not necessarily reflect the epistemological foundations of secularism. Only because secularism emerged in the West does not mean that it is “out of the question for our Islamic world.” Rather, one has to strive to learn from the West's experiences, without simply copying or replicating its models of society. Qānṣū is deliberate to argue that in the modern context a form of indigenous secularism is very much needed. The question that should be examined with a view to the Islamic world is, in Qānṣū's view:

What are the principles of a free consciousness and rules of the new allocation [of roles] and organizing the relations between the powers in order to create a political and epistemological realm in which rule (sulta) is advanced to the level of the state, in which the powers of the religious representation are brought into focus in such a manner that the right of general tutelage is seized from it, while it would simultaneously not be cut off from general affairs, in which the society would realize its centrality and consider it a priority subject of its support in forming power and sovereignty, and retrieve in it freedom in its full force to create [...] meaning and room for a rich and fertile life?\footnote{Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūh,” 58.}

\footnote{Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūh,” 58.}
Thus, while religion has a place in Qānṣū’s ideal state and might even influence politics and enrich people's lives, in the end, power is in the hands of the state that can affect religious thought and practice. Religion seems to be able to impact society, too, in Qānṣū's view, but the state retains the final and exclusive authority to define the parameters indicating an asymmetry between the two that, according to Asad, is a measure of sovereign power. For Qānṣū, it is not enough to assume, as Islamists do, that Islam is not in need of secularism because it does not differentiate between the religious and the political realms. This argument misses the reality that even in secular societies the religious and the temporal are not fully separated either. Rather,

Secularism does not call for the separation of the religious from the temporal meaning, but it calls for setting rules for this relationship between temporal and religious power and for creating a new sphere and compass (madā) that confers and executes political control (sulṭa) from within, whether this concerns civil or religious power.

One gains the feeling that Qānṣū is actually concerned with the rejection of authoritarian forms of the execution of power, whether this pertains to the religious or political. In his view, to deny the existence of a religious power elite in Islam is misleading and detracts from the forcefulness of religious discourse and symbolism in the Muslim world. His point is not so much that religion and politics should not mingle. Instead, his premise is that even if one conceded that religious discourse at times concerns the political sphere, one must acknowledge that religion, as a “human phenomenon,” was likewise influenced by politics and other societal forces. Once this is established, religion becomes questionable as autonomous and divinely sanctioned authority since there are clearly human, i.e., contingent (read secular) forces at play in it, which have to be

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1541 Ibid., 51.
negotiated. This view presupposes a view of the religious that is distinctly separate from politics.

Qānṣū’s vision for politics and religion presupposes the modern compartmentalization of different social spheres, of which the religious is but one. Conceding that secularism must be different in the Muslim world than in the West, in the end, Qānṣū comes to the definition of secularism as differentiation. As he states, “What we need are three aspects of secular societies: religion, society, and a form of government.” For Qānṣū, modernity is not a normative configuration that prescribes to non-westerners what to do and how to think. Modernity is first and foremost a fact, to which philosophical and theological concepts have to adapt. For example, our cosmology has changed fundamentally since Copernicus, our political entities are nation states, whose political leadership is preferably decided by means of (free) election, economics are situated in a capitalist framework, etc. Thus, modernity is a reality in which Muslims live, too. What is lacking in the Muslim world, in his opinion, is not an emulation of western thought but concurrence with these fundamental changes in the configuration of real lives. Historical consciousness in that context is crucial because it helps to meet the challenges modernity poses.

One does not have to follow Descartes or Spinoza to engage in modernity, Qānṣū asserts, but one has to realize a philosophical approach to religion that has come to terms with the modern givens – the reality, into which one is thrown intellectually and even existentially. Modernity is not something purely material but a transformation and a modification of social norms and values. In the end, Qānṣū presupposes the acceptance of a western epistemology (and crucial to it historicizing hermeneutics) as necessary to reach societal progress. To clarify how Qānṣū establishes the connection between scriptural hermeneutics and secularism, let us look at

\[1542\] Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūh,” 61.
his reflection on the current phenomenon of Islamically justified violence, an issue he has repeatedly addressed. Like Jarādī, Qānṣū conceives of the rise of violence by Islamist groups as a great challenge for contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims. His concern with hermeneutics can thus partly be understood as a response to militant Islamic ideology.

In his view, Islamic fundamentalism is a new phenomenon that has produced novel forms of religion and has defined its relationship to politics in an unprecedented way. It poses a danger to the traditional balance between the realm of *fiqh* and the ruling power but also raises serious questions for the “normal believer who, until recently, looked at religion as something that could give her life meaning and morality.” The new discourse on politics led by Islamists breaks completely with the logic of the traditional order of *fiqh* that acknowledged the right of the sovereign power to rule. On the contrary, the attempt of Islamists to re-formulate religion only recognizes a ruling power that is based on religion. Qānṣū's own approach is hence not simply a response to “traditional Islam” but also competes with Islamist movements that are equally busy with redefining Islam.

In his view, the answers provided by *fiqh* and the Islamic establishment are insufficient to effectively address the new challenge of the radically violent Islamist discourse. The Islamic counter discourse has so far mainly come up with two responses: Either to emphasize that only the ruling power has the right to apply the *hudūd* or to suggest new readings of the religious text by stressing those passages that call for peace and tolerance and claiming that fundamentalists misunderstand the text. While this might very well be the case, the problem is that such an approach simply leads to two conflicting interpretations of the text.

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1543 Qānṣū, “Rihānāt,” 1.
Readings that remain within the traditional frame of reference are unsatisfying for Qānṣū. They fail to address the actual cause of the problem because they follow a reading practice that lacks historical consciousness and basic hermeneutical understanding. He concedes that people like Quṭb and Bāqir al-Ṣadr adopt modern terminology and concepts. For example, they posit Islam as a state or an ideologically coherent and all-encompassing system, whereas mentally, Qānṣū claims, they still move within an intellectual and cosmological framework that is pre-modern and therefore unfit for the actual modern reality. The problem lies in the religious thought itself, its structure, and epistemology.

Both Islamists who justify violence on the basis of the religious text and people who blame the religious text for the use of violence demonstrate a misunderstanding of how texts and reading function and turn interpretation into an “ideological affair.” Most Qur’ān exegetes view religion not as a field of interaction between the reader and the text but as a system of a non-equal relationship between the religious text that represents the non-limited, transcendent, and perfect and the recipient. Qānṣū does not intend to upset anyone's faith in the sacredness of the religious text, but the functions of the reception of the religious text need to be generally understood if the current crisis of interpretation is to be solved.

Reading is always a social activity, even if the reader sits alone in a room since reading entails the horizon of the text, its pre-history, and the presuppositions the reader brings to the text. Consequently, the interesting question to ask is not whether the text prescribes violence but under which circumstances those interpretations that understand it in that way become possible and even prevalent. Meanings do not emerge in a vacuum, “independent from external

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1544 Qānṣū, “Rihānāt,” 2.
conditions. We have to acknowledge the external circumstances that make Qur’ānic meaning possible.” Similarly, we have to be aware that any reader of the Qurʾān approaches it, albeit subconsciously, from within a certain regime or paradigm of reading. Once one examines the activity of reading in a detached and almost anthropological way, one can discern the causes for specific problems:

Why does the reading of the text take a specific semantic direction under certain circumstances [...] but a different one under others? And why does violence suddenly become one of the exigencies of the text? Why does the text for many people not indicate tolerance, peace, and coexistence although the text strongly indicates these concepts?1545

It is in these questions and Qānṣū’s answer to them that his Qurʾān hermeneutics gain yet another political dimension, namely, to render innocuous those who want to enforce their interpretation of the Qurʾān as ultimate truth. As we have seen, Qānṣū’s hermeneutics create a precarious private system of ultimate meaning and thus render any public meaning relative.

For Qānṣū, an honest conversation about the formation of society can only be reached through a critical engagement with the foundational sources and a sincere paradigm shift with regard to how we understand them. In that line of argument, Qānṣū rejects all approaches that do not question how we understand the religious text and instead draw selectively on it. Thereby, they accept a textual system that developed under certain historical and political circumstances and ignore how heavy this construct bares on any modernizing project. Struggles over power fought on the back of utilizing the religious text plainly prove that religion is a social and mundane force. Qānṣū demonstrates how fast Islamists changed their seemingly firm religious opinions under shifting political circumstances. Their opponents fare not much better in his

1545 Qānṣū, “Rihānāt,” 2-5.
assessment because they equally fail to reconsider the text itself historically, epistemologically, or hermeneutically. Secularists, in his view, either ignore the Qur'ān or they include it willy-nilly into their thought without considering the epistemological assumptions that come with accepting the religious texts as a fait accompli. On that account, one can infer that he would also object to approaches like Ţabbāra's that continues to be dedicated to the regime of tafsīr as remaining on the surface of the crisis of interpretation.

All of these approaches tend to render the religious text a sanctioning instrumentarium that can be utilized at a whim to legitimize opinions and politics that have been determined before-hand. This strategy would be less problematic if the reference to the Qur'ān did not grant those decisions allegedly divine support. To base any reform project on the Qur'ān is good and well, but one also has to acknowledge how qur'ānic interpretation has been affected by political contingents throughout history, and how the text itself has been silenced through an “interpretative regime.” Finally, the liberation of the text is a necessity for society's flourishing:

The renaissance (al-nahda) of our societies is no longer limited to the liberation of the individual from the burden ('ib') of history and the weight of belonging but also demands the liberation of the text itself from the power of positions [taken by religious scholars] and the burden of consensus (ijmā') that does not procure through the gathering of opinions but is reached through top-down decision and generalization; i.e., [what is needed is] the liberation of the text from the generally accepted truths (musallamāt) of interpretation and hermeneutics (ta'wil) that have become to precede the text, so that it came to be changed from a text that is followed into one that complies, and from a text that creates meaning into a text of which nothing much is left except its skeleton and the ritualism of its recitation.1546

This call for a reconsideration of the text and its relevance for the progress of society echoes the critique of Abū Zayd, who similarly attacked the ritualistic function of the Qur'ān and the

1546 Qānṣū, “al-Taṣālūh,” 61-62. For this previous section, see entire article.
congealment of interpretation. Qānṣū’s discrimination against ritual and reading practices indicates that his approach is not simply directed against Islamist militant Islam but embodies a post-Kantian view of religion in which ritual is a sign of “outward religiosity” and a clinging to a religion that is still immature and somewhat childish. Once, humanity progresses and reaches maturity, Kant affirms, the phenomenal forms of religion will disappear.\textsuperscript{1547} By accepting this framework, Qānṣū privileges history over other forms of memory construction.

Historicization is not an innocent method but a verdict that comes to sit in judgment over tradition and ritual that cannot but be viewed as belonging to the past. In Qānṣū's approach, tradition becomes conceptualized as knowledge of tradition and is turned into an archive that may contain some valuable knowledge but is inevitably separated from “our time.” Tradition can be evaluated and examined but not possibly be an actual part of the present. By accepting historicism's modernist framework, Qānṣū delegitimizes other ways of memory construction whose relation to the past is not defined by secular, homogeneous empty time. His work seems to negate the creation of meaningful readings for Muslims communally.

Neither for Abū Zayd nor for Qānṣū is the Qurʾān “a text like any other.”\textsuperscript{1548} On the contrary, they assign great significance to the Qurʾān. Both experience it as a highly complex and challenging text, not only due to its entanglement of 1400 years of interpretation but definitely because of its divine issuance. Yet, they call for reading the Qurʾān as other texts and posit the critical, albeit creative, subject, aware of her historicity as ideal reader. This particular act of reading leaves no space for any kind of regula fidei. The meaning of the Qurʾān for both inheres

\textsuperscript{1547} Kant, \textit{Religion}, xxvi, 135-137.
\textsuperscript{1548} I disagree with Hirschkind's assessment of Abū Zayd in this point. Compare Hirschkind, “Heresy,” 38. Qānṣū states that the Qurʾān is a text like no other. Qānṣū, \textit{Nāṣṣ}, 24.
in its linguistically structured material text, not in experiencing the Qur’ān through non-rational means within a framework that links one's understanding always to a reading community.

One could gain the idea that after Qānṣū'ī's deconstruction, the standing of the Qur’ān is left so unclear that he does not seem to know what to do with it anymore. But such a conclusion would miss the constructive aspect of Qānṣū'ī's hermeneutics and his dedication to an almost existentialist philosophy. In his view, the hypothetical meanings of the text are generated in specific fields in which the text continuously comes to be. Any time the field changes, it brings forth new meanings and suggestions while the text never exhausts the meanings inherent in it. Repetition of the same meanings is a sign of the saturation of the text and its fixation in a certain field. It is also a sign that we should move on to a new field.¹⁵⁴⁹

For him, reading is an almost playful act that results in a multiplicity of meaningful (albeit subjective) interpretations in accordance with the postmodern emphasis on polyvalence. One must understand that Qānṣū'ī's hermeneutical claims aim at ensuring the Qur’ān's vitality as a complex text that continues to be surprising and alive. He would agree with John Caputo, who contends, “Whatever is important, valuable, significant is ambiguous – love and death, God and suffering, right and wrong, the past and the future. Just so, if something is unambiguously clear, transparently simple, is that not because its substance is spent, its future is over?”¹⁵⁵⁰ Qānṣū counters the trends that, in his view, “uncomplicate” the Qur’ān and correspondingly threaten its future. He embodies a postmodern turn in Qur’ān hermeneutics that emphasizes the polyvalence and ambiguity of texts as crucial for the creation of meaning and rejects models of static or

¹⁵⁴⁹ Qānṣū, “Rihānāt,” 12-16.

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objective truths. To effect this openness, however, the non-linguistic dimensions of the Qurʾān (everything that exceeds the Qurʾān as text) have to die to history. Once the Qurʾān has been historicized and the dimensions that defy historicization have been discarded (since they are linked to different forms of temporality, e.g., ritual), the text comes to be resurrected as disenchanted.

One can conclude that Qānṣū's project culminates in rendering Islam an “invisible religion,” as Thomas Luckmann has called certain privatized religious phenomena. Those religious embodiments are not public or political and do not per se challenge either the dominant structures or the dominant paradigms. However, Qānṣū's hermeneutical demands de facto challenge preconceived paradigms. For that reason, they must be understood as inherently political, even if the outcome was the privatization of Islam. His hermeneutics presuppose the ideal liberal subject, who places her trust in a neutral political entity, independent of tradition and, in the end, also of community. The realization of his hermeneutics would usher in a privatized (and possibly commodified) Islam.

By accepting the western concept of religion as but one human sphere among others, Qānṣū adopts the argument that religion in the modern context cannot be the religion from the past. It is simply not timely and will only lead to irresolvable problems. In other words, non-secularized religion constitutes an anachronism in our own time. For Qānṣū, the question of how we approach the world is closely linked to our view of human nature. He adopts the modern paradigm of the creative ability of humans to think freely, while simultaneously being limited in their capacity to transcend themselves. This view also bespeaks the theological concern of

\footnote{Casanova, Public Religion, 5.}
upholding the distinction between God's realm (faith and revelation) and humans, who rise to be agents in power over history and nature. As such they are capable and in fact obligated to create the most viable society. Maybe the societies humans have produced are not perfect, but the argument as brought forth by Qutb that any un-Islamic thought belongs to the jāhilīya is fatalistic, in Qānṣū's view, since it confuses human freedom with sin.1552 He would fall into the category of those scholars Qutb called “defeated scholars,” that is, “scholars who have basically accepted the western understanding of religion as a mere doctrine in man's conscience having no relation to realistic programs of life.”1553 In other words, Qutb would characterize Qānṣū as having fallen victim to epistemic violence.

Qānṣū presents his approach as a realist move. In his perspective, he simply adapts Qur'an hermeneutics to a reality in which Muslims already participate. However, his “realism” is aligned to a normative secularity that comes to define that “real” to the exclusion of other experiences of the real. His religious pluralism simultaneously reduces that pluralism since the specifics of the various religions must first be translated into the higher-order concept of scientific language and secular time. Pluralism, for Qānṣū, does not entail epistemological diversity. That pluralist models of society do not necessitate the historicization of scripture is evidenced in Jarādī and Ṭabbāra's approaches and relativizes Qānṣū's claims in this regard.

The urgency with which Qānṣū presents his claims can be explained with his conviction that a paradigm shift in understanding the religious texts is a requirement for society to properly address reality. As we have seen, this belief also informed much of political philosophy since the

1553 Quoted in Abu Rabi, Islamic Origins, 187.
Enlightenment. Yet, despite, Qānṣū's assertive tone, one can understand his project as a suggestion and contribution to an ongoing conversation rather than as univocal recommendation. Drawing on other modern Muslim thinkers and elaborating their thought is a crucial aspect of Qānṣū's work and demonstrates the richness of the debate. This engagement is no mere lip-service on Qānṣū's part but belies his location in that discourse. His approach offers Muslims who have already accepted a historicist frame of thinking an avenue to meaningfully engage with the Qurʾān anew. His rejection of non-literary approaches is a protest against what he sees as a prevalent current to engage with the Qurʾān rather than their outright damnation.

To put this differently, he offers an alternative way to engaging with the Qurʾān. For scholars situated in the western academic context, his work offers a rich archive of past and present Muslim treatments of the Qurʾān and could be an incentive to move attention to the question of what it means to read the Qurʾān as text. His philosophical considerations could, moreover, be taken as an invitation to also introduce philosophical deliberations more consciously into western qurʾānic studies.
Conclusion

The underlying question in this thesis was whether a rapprochement of western and Islamic Qur'ānic studies, as called for by Angelika Neuwirth, is possible. To lay some of the groundwork for tackling this question, I have considered the political nature of Qur'ān scholarship and examined how historicizing approaches to the Qur'ān are perceived by Muslim and Christian scholars, principally in Lebanon. My results suggest that specific scriptural hermeneutics are indeed linked to politics and convey visions of the human, language, and in extension, society.

Applying a historical-critical approach to the Qur’ān often presupposes that the researcher is neither concerned with the existence of God nor with the question of whether the Qur’ān is revelation. By positing the historicity of the Qur’ān, its language, and formation, the scholar often assumes that she can bracket these questions. This situation leads to a disconnect between academic studies and so-called pious Islamic studies of the Qur’ān. They seem irrelevant to each other. At times, one even gains the impression that they are dealing with different texts.

For scholars such as Kropp and Conrad, this mutual isolation is warranted and necessary for academic Qur'ānic studies to proceed as they have. For them, scholarly integrity is at stake that requires the pursuit of secular, objective, and disinterested historical studies. Neuwirth, on the other hand, regards the mutual isolation of western and Muslim Qur'ānic studies as “scandalous.” For her, there exists a scientific-political responsibility to bridge the polarity between western and Muslim scholarly approaches, a gap that seems difficult to overcome. As she states, “Western scholars accuse Muslims of bias concerning theological dogmas, Muslim scholars perceive their western colleagues as polemical-triumphalists, who lack an elemental
empathy toward Islam.”¹⁵⁵⁴ She notes that between the two World Wars and even up until the 1970s and 80s, western Qur'anic scholars were called to teach at universities in Jordan and Egypt; such (mutual) curiosity is unthinkable today. Neuwirth holds political events responsible for this “climate of distrust” as well as certain western scholarly debates and “textual wars.” One aim of Qur'anic studies should be to bring the western debates into dialogue with those in the Muslim world. Before this can happen, however, western Qur'an scholarship has to be more self-critical.¹⁵⁵⁵ There are in any event serious obstacles to such rapprochement.

Before we address the obstacles, let us consider some of the possible advantages of such an endeavor. To draw on the vast archive of Islamic scholarship can be of methodological benefit particularly in regard to linguistic analysis, structural considerations, and studies of rhetoric. One can significantly enrich western Qur'anic studies by unlocking the wealth of commentary and hermeneutical material that already exists in the Muslim world. Neuwirth has in particular the tafsīr adabī in mind when she calls on western scholars to include contemporary studies of the Qur'an in their own work. Abū Zayd and Qānṣū would both fall into this camp.

Qānṣū's work could especially aid in enhancing hermeneutical and philosophical discussions in western Qur'anic studies. However, if one stops there, one still has not come very far. If a scholarly rapprochement is to be successful, the first step must be to discern the basic points of contention, a step to which my thesis contributes. To work out the politics of Qur'an scholarship is not meant to be yet another postmodern practice of deconstruction. But I believe to understand one's own tradition better will also create new spaces for critical thought.

¹⁵⁵⁴ Neuwirth, Der Koran, 21.
¹⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 20-23.
Behind questions of methodology lie those of epistemology. If one wants to seriously consider a meeting of the two research and knowledge traditions, epistemology is where one has to start. That is to say, before we claim to combine, compare, and improve our methods by means of a kind of cross-fertilization, we have to ask questions such as: What kind of knowledge do we seek? What is it that we want to know about a particular subject and why? The “why” is still an under-explored subject and stands in need of special attention since the legitimacy of any academic discipline in the end depends on this question. Further, with what assurance or what limits do we think? These questions concern not only the meeting between western and Muslim (traditional) Qur'anic studies but refer equally to discussions among various disciplines. Michael Lambek suggests viewing academic disciplines as analogues to religious traditions:

Both academic disciplines and religious traditions are constituted through long internal conversations carried out within and between generations of students and teachers (apprentices and practitioners). Both are located historically, shaped by their respective pasts, from which they continue to draw authority, and by their present circumstances. Both are self-conscious, confront other traditions, and recognize multiple and dissenting voices within the tradition, so long as those voices remain in some kind of stable conversation with their predecessors and with each other. In a strong sense, their particular conversations or arguments are what constitute each tradition, albeit each has means for silencing or weeding out undesirable voices.\footnote{Michael Lambek, “Recognizing Religion: Disciplinary Traditions, Epistemology, and History,” Numen 61 (2014): 146.}

To examine whether a rapprochement of western and Islamic Qur'anic studies is possible, one has to scrutinize both traditions. While western Qur'anic studies may not conceive of itself as a tradition, it makes sense to posit any academic discipline as tradition. An academic discipline would not acknowledge a work as academic or legitimate without quoting certain authorities and following a certain set of technical guidelines that determine how one argues, cites, and
structures one's argument. On a global scale, history and Qur'anic studies are young undertakings embedded in a post-Enlightenment philosophy, even if the academic is not aware of it. It is important to be conscious of working within a particular discipline's philosophy since it shatters the myth of detached objectivity. Moreover, the historical-critical approach served particular configurations of society and power which should alert the practitioner (of western Qur'anic studies) to this political potential of her studies. Such awareness of the limitations and biases of one's tradition need not lead to intellectual quietism or solipsism.

As mentioned before, particularly revisionist theses are easy to attack for their underlying assumptions. They cannot simply be rejected on the basis of some sense of discomfort or, as some claim, “political correctness.” They can, however, be examined critically and from within the scholarly tradition out of which they develop. In that respect, the discipline needs to firmly determine its circuit in which “dissenting voices” have their own role to play. Approaches that exceed what can possibly be affirmed with the help of history for lack of empirical data, and that defy the discipline's own internal “stable conversation” can still yield positive results in conversation (and friction) with other theories.

Yet, they can also upset the field that needs to affirm and assert its own discipline-specific parameters. Under this category fall philological and historical approaches that venture into unwarranted normative (ethical, political, and theological) claims and hence overstep the circuit of the role-specific task of the historian, who can, on the basis of sufficient historical data, offer hypotheses without claims to certainty. To clarify, this does not mean, one has to refrain from any value judgment or social responsibility in one's research. However, such interest should be stated and understood consciously as such, i.e., as a religiously, socially, or politically motivated
position, not as a result of mere historical or philological deduction that, in any case, can only yield limited results.

The advantage of viewing academic disciplines earnestly as traditions (and as analogues to religion) is that one can compare them on equal grounds with other traditions. This could lead to dispensing with endowing one of them (western Qur’anic studies) with the aura of standing beyond any bias and prejudice, being convinced of its own objectivity. Does one want such a dialogue or not, and can this be a dialogue in which the power asymmetry is reduced to a minimum? The crux of the problem is the concept of religion itself and how it is linked to scriptural hermeneutics. Historical criticism is never neutral. When the “critical” of historical-critical is more emphasized than the “historical,” it is typically linked to an Enlightenment ethos of debunking myth and tradition. A full-scale historicization of the reader and the text leads to the relativization of truth claims. In that capacity, the historical-critical approach is closely tied to a worldview that aims to produce a religious subjectivity cohering to a form of politics predicated on the free, autonomous, and ontologically singular individual. Such a move is requisite for a subjectivity that transfers power from a tradition to the state and accepts religion as private, or is at least perceived that way. Certainly, such a hermeneutical move frustrates epistemic authority.

History in itself does not necessarily lead to the condemnation of the past or of tradition. In the past one hundred years, historical science has struggled with its own limitations and sought to solve a hermeneutical impasse that locks the past in the past. For example, historian Johann Gustav Droysen stated that the “nature of the historical method is to understand by inquiring.”

Mark Bloch similarly placed emphasis on “understanding” the past, rather than judging or

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condemning it. One does well to take these words to heart and call for the responsible practice of the discipline of history. History has its purpose and has become established universally as one important way to see the world. Historical-critical scholarship has produced many scholars who aim at understanding early Islamic history and the Qurʾān in a better and new way. Other approaches threatened to deconstruct Islam's coherence entirely. To make historical-critical scholarship a voice in Muslim Qurʾānic studies, Madigan's call for caution recommends itself:

The issue is not only one of literary theory [and historical critique] but of the methodology one chooses for the study of religious phenomena, for in Islam the Qurʾān is more than merely an intriguingly problematic text. It is more even than scripture; it is ritual, a “sacrament” (if one might be permitted to borrow a term from Christianity), and so a literary or an historical-philological approach to it can only be expected to yield limited results.

It should be acknowledged that any historical-critical or literary method can always only reveal certain (probably limited) dimensions of the Qurʾān. It seems advisable to wait for the sifting through the manuscripts currently undertaken by the Corpus Coranicum in Berlin and by the group of François Déroche in Paris. Patience for the assessment of this abundance of source material is not owed to some form of political correctness, as many of its critics are fast to point out, but to a more ideal data situation that makes it possible to dispense with hyper-speculative theses that may seem fanciful and thrilling but do not hold up to historical empirical evidence.

Although Qurʾānic studies is a small field, it produced what Neuwirth called a “hopeless chaos” of hypotheses concerning the emergence of Islam that are entirely incommensurate

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with each other. The drive to produce newness (even sensation) at the expense of depth seems to be an almost inevitable result of academic scholarship, in which each author has to differentiate herself from others. Academia rests on the inherent belief in the advancement (and progress) of thought. Usually, such advancement includes critique and criticism as well as the ongoing creation of new hypotheses. The academy has the privilege of taking time and no political urgency should require jumping to premature conclusions. Simultaneously, one should not assume that the western discipline of Qur'anic studies is less confined in what it holds to be “thinkable” than Muslim Qur'anic studies. To take western Qur'anic studies seriously as a tradition one also has to inquire why the scholars (the practitioners) hold certain beliefs and examine their embeddedness in society and culture. While it is a truism that every scholar works on the basis of specific presuppositions and approaches her object of study from within her own horizon, the belief in the scholar's “bird-perspective” is by no means extinct.

It is difficult to perceive academic disciplines as traditions. Let us assume the following example. When an anthropologist examines some obscure people in some corner of the globe, she is expected to not scrutinize the truth, logic, or consistency of beliefs but their function and connection to rhetoric, culture, and political structure. To apply such an anthropological approach to scholarly disciplines and their practitioners poses problems. As Blaut writes, when such an “ethnographic approach is applied to [so-called] 'Western' ideas in the realms of science, history, and the like, the results are disturbing and the enterprise itself seems somehow improper.”

That this short thought experiment seems almost impossible confirms the asymmetry between western and non-western regimes of knowledge and clarifies the challenge to conceive

\[1561\] Blaut, Colonizer’s Model, 31-32.
of western academic disciplines as traditions. It also shows that academic disciplines, despite postmodern critique, are rather resilient in their belief to write and research from the position of a detached observer. Perhaps, my thesis can be taken as a starting-point to study ideas (even academic ideas) as beliefs. Such an approach entails the assumption that

Questions about belief status are matters of ethnography: of finding out why beliefs are held by given people; how beliefs come to be accepted and rejected by these people; how given beliefs are connected in the minds of these people with other beliefs held by them; how new candidate beliefs are weighed and accepted or rejected; and how beliefs as such are connected to other parts of culture, including values, social organization, class organization, politics and so on.\footnote{Blaut, \textit{Colonizer's Model}, 32.}

Speaking analogically, academia has its own rituals, initiation rites, authority, and “kinship-” relations. This investigation can, shockingly, lead to evidence that a group holds a belief not on the basis of factual evidence but for reasons that are not rational but simply accepted in the given culture. Mainstream western Qur'anic studies has traditionally dispensed with philosophical questions and presented itself as a neutral undertaking. It is time to take seriously the philosophical underlying assumptions by which Qur'anic studies operate.

This thesis has demonstrated that different hermeneutics convey political rationalities and are linked to particular religious subjectivities. The methodological discussions about the Qur'an disclose strong convictions about society, religion, and authority. Contemporary Qur'an hermeneutics have political dimensions; not only because they refer to a text authoritative for a religious community but also because they convey visions of how one imagines the polis and what makes humans truly human. One could argue that Qur'an exegesis has always been political. However, post-Enlightenment epistemologies – empiricism, historicism, and positivism...
that evacuate the transcendent from “sacred texts” add a new political dimension to the
discussion. This makes Qur'ān hermeneutics more complex since approaching the Qur'ān as a
historical or literary text (instead of as scripture or Word of God) presupposes a certain
conceptualization of religion and religious subjectivity.

To discern the resistance historical-critical methods meet in a non-western context and
take these objections seriously may seem to some to ascribe to a pre-modern view of the world –
or simply to dispense with science. Whatever cannot empirically be proven is to be discarded or
bracketed. It does not seem possible to overcome this scientific ideal. The transcendent as
epistemological category has no place in western science or in history. To assume a transcendent
category contradicts the foundations on which this knowledge system is built. In response, it may
be remarked that history is also story-telling and does not happen without imagination and
speculation. History tells the past without spirits, gods, and the presences. Nevertheless, even in
history, there were eminent scholars who detected meaning in it.

One does not have to ascribe to a form of Hegelian world-spirit. Someone like Ranke
simply saw a purpose in history. To see a purpose also entails to attach value. Generally speaking,
history is not concerned with meaning or values but with facts. The ideals of objectivity and
detachment have yet only rarely been realized. As stated before, there is no disinterested
scholarship because there is no disinterested interest, and any scholarly task starts with some
form of interest. Since the discipline has always been closely linked to the formation of nation
states, it was mainly used with that purpose in mind. It is likely that the transcendent will remain
to be the unthinkable in both history and western Qur'ānic studies, although some post-colonial
historians have called for “writing history with the gods” (Chakrabarty). While most historians
would probably oppose such a proposition, one could still accept that history but one of multiple ways to represent and organize temporality, without prioritizing one over the other. In other words, we would have to accept the plurality and equality of temporalities. To accept that history serves a purpose is insofar useful as it can direct one's attention to new responsibilities.

Debates over new Qurʾān hermeneutics must be understood against the background of colonialism and counter-hegemonic discourses. Western Qurʾānic studies have never been a neutral undertaking and reflected the scientific and epistemological presuppositions of their time, as they reflected political configurations of power and were related to other philosophical and social projects. History presupposes an epistemological shift in scriptural interpretation as well as a shift in how we understand the interpreting self. To take conflicting epistemological assumptions seriously can help to re-shape one's own analytical framework and consider one's underlying assumptions. The survey of nineteenth century western Qurʾān scholarship demonstrated that Qurʾānic studies must be understood as inherently political.

While historical-critical scholarship of the Bible developed in conversation with the discipline of theology, Qurʾānic studies did not have this balancing co-discipline. This fact is crucial in understanding how the Qurʾān became an “unprotected object” in Europe that could be bent according to the author's need. For example, Geiger and Weil negotiated their Jewish identity and the development of reform Judaism by means of Qurʾān scholarship, posing the question of how much Judaism was in the Qurʾān.

Their work elucidates that even using the Qurʾān in a positive way is still political. They were committed to the Enlightenment project and applied methods and techniques from historical-critical scholarship. Their work in particular prompted Yerushalmi's critique, who saw
the historicization of the Jewish tradition as a serious rupture in Jewish memory. He asserts that the historical-critical shift in the view of religious traditions is highly political. As much as the “counter-history” of Jews served them in their endeavor to achieve Jewish emancipation in Europe, Yerushalmi points to the epistemic violence that was involved in this assimilation. He highlights that the cause for this shift toward history was not scholarly curiosity but ideology, catering toward the assimilation of the Jews in a greatly hostile environment.

As he states, “Only the Jewish disciplines that adopted a form of historicism influenced other non-Jewish fields, which means Jewish scholarship first had to adapt to mainstream academic culture before being worthy of consideration.” This means that for Jews to be taken seriously by mainstream European society and the academy, they could not stay Jewish “in the old sense.” This led to the invention of Judaism as a religion in the nineteenth century. Yerushalmi's reflections indicate the paradox inherent in history in non-European contexts; that is to say, history can be made useful for resistance against the dominant culture and imperialism, while to adopt historicist thinking simultaneously seems to suggest that one has already given in to an imperialist discourse and accepted the re-invention of one's tradition in the process.

In Yerushalmi's view, the break that the adoption of historical thinking caused for Jewish identity and social cohesion was immense. It was a break with collective memory, and it was saying “no” to a potential national (and political) character of the Jews. Instead, they were declared a religion. But more than that, the historian “constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact.” History aims at being comprehensive in order to recover a total past while collective memory is highly selective. This historical selection process is itself never

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1563 Yerushalmi, Zakhor, 85-86.
natural or neutral but ideological.\textsuperscript{1564}

We encountered an equivalent paradox in the context of the discussion of the Nöldeke translation. Quṭb's resistance to orientalist scholarship can be understood as recognizing this mechanism of history. To simply dismiss this objection as an expression of anti-westernism or identity politics misses the impact epistemological breaks can deal to collective memory and organizational structure. Historical-critical scholarship of scripture becomes problematic in the moment it is posited as a political exigency that aims to silence other readings of tradition and claims supremacy over them. Yet by claiming to be objective and to provide a grammar of generality, history tends to neutralize protest against it that is often conceived as either being politically motivated or simply “not there yet.”

The Qurʾān in the European 	extit{imaginaire} came to be viewed by eminent scholars (such as Renan, de Vaux, Gibb) as static in nature and an impediment for social progress. Though static, the Qurʾān, for many scholars, was also confusing and lacked coherence and structure, in other words, it lacked order. The passion for intellectual separation, demarcation, and order is a central peculiarity of western modern thought (even though it has come to be a prevalent view globally). The sociologist Richard Sennett has explained the modern disdain for ambiguity and dissonance with “the desire to be all-powerful, to control the meanings of experience before encounter so as not to be overwhelmed.”\textsuperscript{1565} The drive toward clarity, by means of universalizing concepts (e.g., history, the individual, subjectivity, etc.) that create sameness in the face of sheer plurality, operated on the level of social analysis of whole peoples as well as in textual hermeneutics. Any

\textsuperscript{1564} Ibid., 94-95.
text could be approached on the basis of the same methods, judged by the same literary standards. The Qurʾān posed an obstacle to a discourse of sameness and had hence to be declared to be like the Bible, yet to have failed to live up to the Bible's orderliness and structure.

Several scholars emphasized the need to reform Islam via Qurʾān hermeneutics. They regarded its historicization, modeled after Protestant historical-critical scholarship, as necessary for Muslim progress. This view is not extinct. Its normativity has been carried over into political debates. For example, Habermas has recently stated that Islam has to follow in the trajectory of western Latin Christendom and repeat the “learning-process” it underwent. He explicitly calls for a “change in epistemic attitudes following the Reformation in the Christian churches of the West,” when religious subjectivity became reflexive.\textsuperscript{1566} He represents an attitude that posits a certain way of how religion should appear in public and, specifically, in politics. One must understand that his opinion is based on a concept of history that moves linearly into one direction. Some people are at the head of this race while others still have to “catch up.”

Habermas's view does not come out of nowhere but is firmly rooted in a general attitude toward religion in Europe that sees people as constantly progressing and maturing toward an ideal future determined by concepts whose genealogies reach back to elite European Enlightenment thought.

The end-point of this “learning-process” is historical consciousness that dispenses with other forms of temporalities attributed to a still childlike mindset.\textsuperscript{1567} Models of thought and life that do not cohere with this ideal type are then branded as an “earlier type” of a European present and fortifies an image of humanity that, being universal and inherently similar, moves into the


\textsuperscript{1567} See, for example, Mehta, \textit{Liberalism}, 14, 31-41.
same direction, just at a slower more leisurely pace. Qur’anic studies had its own (even if minor) part to play in the creation of this image. Importantly, debates over the Qur’an have been revived and qur’anic studies are part of discussing Islam in Europe and beyond which, again, underlines the political responsibility of the field.

J.Z. Smith's deliberations on the challenges of comparison elucidate the problems inherent in the use of comparison as a core technique of historical criticism that easily lapses into a discourse of resemblance and identity. Instead, Smith urges that the cognitive end of comparison should be “judgment with respect to difference” that can overcome the universalizing tendency of the “like them” – a tendency that is intrinsic to history since it always aligns a particular system of thought to itself. Smith's deliberations on comparison are heuristically useful for such qur’anic readings that examine how the Qur’an incorporates, judges, and transforms the biblical literature with which it is in conversation, without privileging the world behind the text over the world created by the text, and without conflating these two worlds. Reynolds' work exemplifies an approach that dismisses post-qur’anic Islamic tradition as unreliable and useless to arrive at what the Qur’an “really meant.” Prioritizing the world behind the text has a tendency to dispossess Muslims of their founding document and to posit the historian as a “specialist” who alone can decode the Qur’an's meaning.

Nevertheless, the world behind the text can be useful in shedding light on the world of the if one refrains from declarations of sameness. Reynolds' approach can be seen as an incentive to intensify our research on those Islamic disciplines that are directly related to Qur’an interpretation. His inquiry into the biblical intertexts of the Qur’an has provided us with a rich

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1568 Smith, To Take Place, 14.
archive for exploring phrases and narratives in relation to their biblical analogues further, a reading technique that could also be made fruitful in tafsîr, which at an early point in Muslim history used biblical material for interpreting the Qur'ân.

While the act of dispossessing is subtle in Reynolds' work, it becomes obvious in Luxenberg's philological method to de-code the Qur'ân by stating that it is really an Aramaic Christian text. The result is that only a specialist trained in Aramaic can unlock the Qur'ân's secrets. Luxenberg thereby strengthens a Syriac-Aramaic identity and inflates the importance of Aramaic studies. I suggest to understand his work against the Lebanese background as promoting a form of Aramaic/Syriac nationalism. His approach could then be appreciated as a form of Christian “counter-history.” Placing approaches such as Luxenberg's in the western academic context not only deepens the rift between western and non-western Qur'ân scholarship and sows distrust vis-à-vis western approaches to the Qur'ân. It also upsets the discipline itself that is based on philology and history. In other words, Luxenberg's view of the Qur'ân silences not only Muslims but also western traditional Qur'ânic studies, whose main methodological tool had heretofore been Arabic philology.

Surveying the media coverage of Qur'ânic studies over the past ten years highlights the political implications of debates over the Qur'ân as scripture and its relevance for “granting” Islam a place in Europe, especially in view of the fact that the field of western Qur'ânic studies has recently seen a revival. In Neuwirth, one finds a scholar who understands the political nature of Qur'ân scholarship in the contemporary context and has taken a stance in this political field. Neuwirth’s political objectives move in a matrix of various political, social, cultural, and scientific positions.
Neuwirth’s approach, though raising serious methodological questions (e.g., concerning the chronology of the Qur’ān) and remaining within a historical-critical framework, is fruitful for future Qur’ānic studies that must recognize its own political implications. Neuwirth refrains from seriously considering the epistemological implications that her own approach takes for granted, however. Only by means of historicizing the Qur’ān, so Neuwirth claims, can the equalization of Bible and Qur’ān be achieved, from a European perspective. To consider the historicization of the Qur’ān as crucial for Islam to become accepted as western religion leans toward Euro-centrism.

It is the more important to bring western approaches into dialogue with non-western ones. Again, to view academic disciplines equally as traditions would be useful to incorporate them in an intercultural dialogue of sorts. To be clear, such a dialogue does not have to lead to dispensing with scientific presuppositions and methods. Accepting Qur’ānic studies (in academia) as a tradition, on the contrary, affirms its inner workings and functioning. However, this step would also entail to give up the illusion of pursuing a merely neutral and disinterested undertaking and correct the still held self-acclaimed impartiality that often seems to imply an ethos of being able to stand in unbiased judgment over the Qur’ān (and at times over Muslims). An ideal dialogue presupposes openness as much as it entails boundaries.

The presupposition that the Qur’ān has to be historicized and hence relativized in order for Muslims to enter modernity has been taken up by several political institutions, among them the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the U.S. Defense Ministry, and the Rand Corporation. The instrumentalization of historical critique to further secularizing policy goals is problematic, as argued by Mahmood and Hirschkind. While I agree with these thinkers that Qur’ān hermeneutics convey political and epistemological visions, one has to also be careful not to lump all “moderate
Muslim thinkers” together and not to link their historicizing hermeneutics to the western imperialist project. Whether certain Qur'ān hermeneutics are being accepted by the “Islamic discursive tradition” depends on the particular situation out of which the authors write.

Asad's understanding of Islam as “discursive tradition,” as useful as it is, accepts configurations of power rather than challenging them. This conception of Islam implicitly strengthens a form of orthodoxy that is determined by relations of power and silences voices perceived as marginal. Examination of a range of modern Muslim thinkers suggests that most contemporary Muslim thinkers have accepted a form of political secular framework (if one accepts a very general definition such as the one provided by Taylor and Casanova) out of which they argue (even if they support an Islamic state) as well as historical thinking.

The case of the Arabic Nōldeke translation in Lebanon shows the intricacies of debates over history in relation to the foundational Islamic sources in the modern Arab-Muslim discussions. “Historical critique” has become symbolically linked to western modernity by proponents of historicizing approaches to the Qur'ān, on the one hand, and to political intentions and imperialist practices by its opponents, on the other. The Nōldeke incident points to the politicization of the Qur'ān. The utilization of orientalist scholarship for colonialism and missionary endeavors makes it difficult for historical critique to be perceived as a merely disinterested scientific method. In the colonial and post-colonial context, the incorporation of history as discipline and concept in Arab discussions about identity and the Qur'ān was paradoxical, as history (a discipline developed in the West) has simultaneously been used for both colonialist control of the colonized and as a tool of resistance by the colonized against imperialism.

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On the basis of Tamer's introduction to Nöldeke, one can see that a translation even of an outdated work is perceived as political. Tamer's insistence that the historicization of the Qurʾān is needed for a renewal of Arab societies makes his translation contested. One must add that without his political claims, the fate of the Nöldeke translation might have been different. In general, translation of western Qurʾānic studies into non-western languages should be encouraged since it can open up space for new discussions, as Tamer intended. His introduction remains rooted in a discourse of modernity. For Tamer, historical knowledge, or in Ricoeur's words “memory exercised, cultivated, trained, sculpted,” in short memory disciplined, is necessary for a properly human conception of humanity. Historical knowledge can produce a “collective” past on the basis of which a collective identity can be forged.

Paying heed to Yerushalmi's caution, one may challenge the assumption that history, understood as the modern historical discipline, is the only and most fitting form for “disciplining collective memory.” One may also keep in mind Ricoeur's words that after the death of God, all the West had left was history, “on which to build an ethics of care and a politics of responsibility.”1569 Since societies have other living forms of disciplining collective memory, could one not allow for a pluralism of these various temporalities? Simultaneously, elements of historicist argumentation have entered Arab modern discourse as well, and can even be found in the writing of thinkers like Quṭb, which highlights the paradoxical nature of discussions over history and its relation to Islam in the modern Muslim discourse.

The sensibilities concerning historicizing approaches to the Qurʾān are owed less to identity politics and anti-imperialist sentiments than to a realistic fear of epistemic violence, that

is, the fear of having the Qurʾān controlled by methods that prima facie evacuate the transcendent from the Qurʾān. The argument of epistemic violence merits attention. Often, the rejection of historicizing approaches to the Qurʾān (by Muslims) is discarded as apologetic, polemical, or politically motivated. However, one has to acknowledge that science in the modern secular sense carries in it the element of control.

Both Baconian empiricism and Cartesian mechanism have been explored in terms of domination, aggression, and the impulse to control.¹⁵⁷⁰ Morris Berman characterizes the pre-Cartesian consciousness as “participating consciousness,” in which knowledge is produced when subject and object merge and the universe is connected “through a network of shared meanings,” in which the subject identified with objects and did not merely abstractly conceptualize them.¹⁵⁷¹ In such a “universe in which the spiritual and the physical merge, where body and mind participate in knowledge, objectivity is impossible,” and, Susan Bardo adds, “In such a world, objectivity is not an ideal.”¹⁵⁷² In contrast, Descartes produced a new epistemological model based on objectivity, with which he hoped to safeguard the certainty of knowledge after the collapse of the medieval epistemological system. Descartes's legacy was “a conceptual universe with clear boundaries and discrete natures, a universe amenable to conceptual sorting.”¹⁵⁷³ To achieve such objective knowledge, the knower must be free of bias, prejudice, and emotional attachment.

Diverse thinkers attested the intellectual striving for purity, clarity, and order a tendency

¹⁵⁷¹ Berman, Disenchantment, 69-75.
¹⁵⁷² Bardo, Flight, 78.
¹⁵⁷³ Ibid., 16.

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to be turned into a desire “for control over the more unruly, 'chthonic' dimensions of experience” – a world that had no inherent meaning anymore. Once the world and the subject were separated, the world's chaotic and threatening elements were brought under control by some higher order conceptualization, predicated on the assumption that the scientifically minded person “is in possession of some neutral 'matrix' [...] with which to perform an ultimate critical or conceptual cleansing.”

In other words, the world had to be objectified in order to gain control over it.

The element of control is also tangible in the discipline of history; not only because history was used by colonial powers to justify their imperialist endeavors but also because the ethos of control is written into the very fabric of science that follows the ideal of technological liberalism. This ethos dispenses with tradition and makes everything questionable, if it can yield benefit to humans, conceptualized as quasi-autonomous individuals. As Descartes' philosophical system suggests, knowledge is useful and enables humans “to make [them] masters and possessors of nature.”

Only by means of free will can humans achieve felicity.

The free knower can choose freely what to do with both nature and scripture. She is not bound by tradition, a regula fidei, or communal ethics and morals. This ethos enables the reading self to be free to do what she wants with the text. The Qur'an can then be read as just “any other text.” The impact of this scientific ethos on religion and scripture was considerable. Even Nietzsche faulted the adherents of historical-criticism with “resolving [Christianity] into pure knowledge about Christianity [that] ceases to live when it is dissected completely and lives

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1574 Ibid., 76-78. According to Bardo, the notion of philosophy and science as “purifying” is a threat one finds throughout all philosophical writings since Descartes.


a painful and moribund life when one begins to practice historical dissection upon it.”

As Jarādī points out, one consequence of the historicization of scripture can be the frustration of meaning. Methodological-critical historicization endow the holy texts with historical contingency and empirical facticity at the expense of meaning. If meaning is contingent and only produced in the mind of the reader (i.e., it is subjective), it is necessarily relative and perhaps meaningless in the end. A total historicization of the Qur'ān that posits the text and its reader as entirely contingent controls it insofar as any uncomfortable aspect of the text can be explained away as anachronistic and out of date – therefore relative.

Jarādī's Şadrian approach to the Qur'ān leads him to accept the historicity of the Qur'ān while affirming its divine status. His view of the Qur'ān is determined by his theory of how God, the world, and humans relate to each other. Jarādī's idea of humans does not subscribe to the ideal of an autonomous self-possessed subject, an ideal which, I argue, is represented in most of western Qur'ān scholarship. Instead, in Jarādī's thought, humans, being fundamentally connected with the Divine, can achieve a mode of being that disrupts human limitedness and calls attention to their in-betweenness and interrelationality with the world and with God. Jarādī's approach also overcomes the dichotomy of subject and object. He rejects the demand to “read the Qur'ān as just any other text” because reading, for him, is not a meeting of two horizons but an existential event of uncovering truths in one's self by means of the Qur'ān. This is possible due to the ontological openness of the reading self. Qur'ān and self are not two separated entities. Rather, the reading self reads itself along with the Qur'ān, a process that could be called “participating

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consciousness” in Berman's sense of the term.\textsuperscript{1578}

Jarādī rejects in particular Soroush's negative view of humans as severely limited and placed in opposition to the divine. Jarādī argues that this tendency is also prevalent in western approaches and constitutes the legacy of the dogma of original sin. His critique points to a paradox in the conception of humans inherited from Enlightenment thought that posits the human as both liberated from the past, tradition, and social constraints, and therefore able to be creative and objective, and yet simultaneously as being confined to her subjectivity that constitutes a “boundary between our perception and the world.”\textsuperscript{1579}

Jarādī clarifies the problem of any situatedness of method. His hermeneutics could be termed “enchanted hermeneutics” that consist in the “de-monumentalization” of the Qurʾān in order to avoid the Qurʾān's historicization to an extent that would reduce its meaning to merely reflecting a particular moment in history. His approach elucidates that epistemic violence is more than a theory and recognized as such by serious thinkers in Lebanon. While one may not fully accept Jarādī's ontological epistemology, the connectedness of all beings that he posits can also be made useful in western Qurʾānic studies by emphasizing the need to not want to control one's object of inquiry. His is a call for a hermeneutics of responsibility against a scientific drive to control nature and scripture. Jarādī's approach strengthens the argument that the meaning of the Qurʾān does not primarily hinge upon the ontological status of the text but is tied to greater epistemological considerations, and above all, to human nature.

A step toward a rapprochement of western and Islamic Qurʾānic studies may consist in

\textsuperscript{1578} Berman, Disenchantment, 69-75.
\textsuperscript{1579} Bardo, Flight, 51.
reconsidering hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, in the strict sense, presupposes the full adoption of historical consciousness, positing both the understanding self and the object of understanding as contingent and dependent on merely historical circumstances. In this context, one should keep in mind that perspective (the “sense of personal boundedness and locatedness, of 'me-here-now' and only 'here-now'”), so crucial to any modern theory of knowledge, is not trans-historical or universal. Rather, “Our own perspectival norms of perception, which presuppose the dominance of a sense of 'psychic distance' between subject and world, are a cultural product.”\(^{1580}\)

Understanding hermeneutics more broadly as a theory of how we come to understand (which was also Gadamer's original concern) opens the possibility for a wider concept of hermeneutics not determined by a Cartesian or post-Kantian understanding of knowing. Both are theories of knowing: to posit meaning as being produced historically (e.g., as Qānṣū states) or to assume that meaning inheres in things (e.g., as Jarādī contends). Empirically, one cannot prove either one of these theories of knowledge. Both are in the end beliefs about meaning and the ontological constitution of individuals.

Historicizing hermeneutics implicate a certain form of religious subjectivity and politics in which religion is but one among many spheres and religious truth relative. While any form of religious redemption is left behind, the goal becomes secular redemption via scientific translation of the scripture and the secularization of society; faith in religion becomes replaced by faith in progress.\(^{1581}\) Yet, as long as epistemic authority exists, such freedom is unthinkable. The definition of progress remains ambiguous. But most authors who argue in its favor believe it

\(^{1580}\) Ibid., 61–62.
\(^{1581}\) Waldstein, “Self-Critique,” 742.
entails a form of socially and technologically differentiated society in which religion is confined to the private sphere, and the believer can believe what she wants, as long as toleration and peace are secured.

Arguably more so than in western countries, debates over religion in Lebanon are linked to politics because of the particular structural location of its religions between state and society that, as Casanova suggests, determines the public character of any religion. Muslim engagement with historicizing approaches to the Qur'ān in Lebanon is partly the result of answering Christian demands to historicize the Islamic scripture. Many of the Christian thinkers accept the narrative according to which the Qur'ān has to be historicized in order to align Muslim concepts and institutions with modernity. The line between historical-critical scholarship and polemics is easily blurred, and Qur'ān scholarship functions for many of the Christian scholars as expedient in order to mediate their Christian identity and existence in a Muslim milieu, particularly through Christian readings of the Qur'ān.

Several Muslim authors have dealt with historical critique in the framework of Muslim-Christian dialogue. Faḍlallāh conceded that Muslims could use historical critique in approaches to the Qur'ān. In his legal works, however, historical considerations do not play a key role. If one were to interpret Faḍlallāh's silence on historical critique in the practice of fiqḥ, one would have to conclude that he considers historical critique as inconsequential for the Islamic tradition. This silence can indeed be seen as a confirmation of Lawrence's claim that western Qur'ānic studies do not affect Muslims. However, Faḍlallāh's remark that historical critique can have an impact once it brings forth convincing results also challenges this view. It may be the case that he has not come across a historical-critical theory that is convincing enough. One must wonder then what
kind of historical findings would be able to challenge the Islamic origin story.

Faḍlallāh's work further demonstrates that the ontological nature of the Qur'ān does not necessarily impact an author's Qur'ān hermeneutics (he agrees with Abū Zayd's thesis about the createdness of the Qur'ān). Therefore, one can assume that the belief in the Qur'ān's pre-existence, createdness, or uncreatedness does not decide an author's hermeneutics, a myth upheld in western Islamic studies and accepted by some Muslim authors who want to historicize the Qur'ān. More important for the acceptance of a plurality of readings is how meaning is deduced from a text.

In his jurisprudential work, Faḍlallāh applies what can be termed implicit hermeneutics. He accepts the importance of the context of the Qur'ān and the reader. However, the Qur'ān is not completely contingent on the context. Particularly in the legal context, in which naskh, asbāb al-nuzūl and al-takhṣīṣ bi’l-‘āmm constitute interpretive devices, one could assume that historical studies would be helpful, since all of these disciplines point to the wish to retrieve the historical situation of the Qur'ān. Indeed, this is an argument that has been brought forth by several reformers. One example may suffice to demonstrate the problems that inhere in this assumption.

Abū Zayd in particular argues in favor of understanding the asbāb al-nuzūl and naskh as being linked to historical thinking. He thinks that the contemporary religious discourse emphasizes the “generality” (‘umūm) of the Qur'ānic text, while it neglects the specifics of the issuance of the disparate verses, i.e., the asbāb al-nuzūl. In his view, such an attitude ignores not simply the reality of the text but also the gradualness of legislation that is found in the Qur'ān. Abū Zayd refers to one of the most famous examples in the Qur'ān that suggests a progression within revelation: the treatment of wine and the gradual shift in the Qur'ān's attitude toward it.
If one clung to the generality of the wording of the Qur'ānic text, Abū Zayd argues, one would threaten the coherency of Islamic legal application.\textsuperscript{1582} The Qur'ān mentions wine explicitly and in regard to its effect on people four times. First (Q 16:67), wine is being praised by God as a sign of his grace to humankind. In Q 2:219, wine is branded as being both good and harmful. Q 4:43 prohibits Muslims from coming drunk to prayer. Finally, Q 5:90 proscribes wine entirely.\textsuperscript{1583} In Abū Zayd's view, this sequence of verses demonstrates the dialectical relationship between the text and its context. Accordingly, the formula \textit{yas'ālūnaka} (they ask you) in the first verse he quotes proves that the verse was revealed as an answer to a pressing question.

The phenomenon of sequential abrogation that Abū Zayd detects in these verses reveals the Qur'ān's pedagogical intention to persuade the Muslims gradually to give up their "social addiction" to wine. Simultaneously, the example of the prohibition of wine is also a fine example of how the text shaped and changed the society for which it was intended. If one gave up the technique of "specification of the general term" (\textit{takhshīs al-‘āmm}) and ignored the chronology of the revelation of the verses, Abū Zayd contends, one could just hold on to the first verse and declare wine permissible.\textsuperscript{1584} Without accepting gradual revelation and a chronological taxonomy of the verses, so Abū Zayd, one would need to also reject much of the results of legal theory and practical rulings.\textsuperscript{1585}

It may be noted that the ruling is in no need of \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl}. In regard to the connection

\textsuperscript{1582} Abū Zayd, \textit{Maḥfūm}, 117.
\textsuperscript{1583} See also Powers, "Exegetical Genre," 129.
\textsuperscript{1584} Abū Zayd, \textit{Maḥfūm}, 119. \textit{Takhshīs al-‘āmm} refers to a practice in Islamic law and textual hermeneutics in which a particular textual passage or tradition is considered to refer specifically only to a particular moment in history or to a specific person, while the experience of that moment or the person should not be generalized for all Muslims. See Mohammed Fadel, "Is Historicism a Viable Strategy for Islamic Law Reform? The Case of 'Never Shall a Folk Prosper Who Have Appointed a Woman to Rule them'," \textit{Islamic Law and Society} 18 (2011): 131.
\textsuperscript{1585} Abū Zayd, \textit{Maḥfūm}, 118-119.
between asbāb al-nuzūl and naskh, Tillschneider examined al-Zuhri’s (d. 742) Kitāb al-Naskh. Naskh is the most archaic form of legal exegesis, and is part of the earliest Islamic literary tradition overall. After careful analysis, Tillschneider draws the conclusion that the dating of the verses is not the condition for the abrogation but its result. Chronological arguments in the legal discourse are often vague, such as verse x was revealed after verse y, and is mainly based on the logic of the exegete. Rippin comes to a similar conclusion when he states that “Naskh, be it with regard to wine or direction of prayer, always assumes that the present law is known (that is, no wine and facing Mecca), and the verses which contradict this are necessarily invalid, and thus can be logically arranged according to a basic notion of ‘progressive revelation.’” This means that abrogation is independent of the exact occasions of revelation that, in any case, do not cover the entire Qurʾān.

In Abū Zayd’s discussion of the asbāb al-nuzūl, he elaborates on the theological problems that they seem to suggest. That is to say, from a historicist perspective, the asbāb al-nuzūl indicate the dependence of certain verses on their historical context. However, there is no contradiction between the dogma of the uncreatedness of the Qurʾān and the concept of the asbāb al-nuzūl. That the asbāb al-nuzūl entail that the verses were situationally shaped by culture and social context, as modern historians and text critics assume, is an historicist projection. The

1586 Tillschneider, Typen, 207
1588 Exemplarily for such an alternative understanding, Abū Zayd quotes an ʿālim at a conference (unfortunately without naming him): ‘Which revelation (wahy) and which reality (wāqi) are we talking about?’ The revelation in Islam is the Qurʾān and the Sunna. The Qurʾān is God’s eternal word that is unfading, timeless attribute of Himself. It (the Qurʾān) was written on the Preserved Tablet (lawḥ mahfūẓ) in Arabic language before the creation of the heaven and the earth, before the creation of man even before there existed any reality. Concerning the tattle about the asbāb an-nuzūl and nāsikh wa mansūkahu that was all well-known to God since eternity. Then, the nuzūl was imposed upon reality according to a ‘pre-prepared’, meticulously tied up divine plan. Therefore, there is no priority of reality over revelation, neither influence nor a relation because God’s knowledge contains the past, present, and future. He knows about the parts and the whole. Everything we have said, and will ever say is
asbāb al-nuzūl are generally utilized in fiqh but, for the most part, not in exegesis.

The general exegetical literature usually only refers to the asbāb al-nuzūl when the literal wording of a verse collides with common legal norms.\(^{1589}\) The asbāb al-nuzūl often function in a way that affirms a certain legal conformity in those cases where the Qur'ān seems to state something different (as in verse Q 5:93). These observations may suffice to affirm my earlier reflections on the asbāb al-nuzūl and naskh, i.e., that it is difficult to establish a chronology on their basis. However, the discussion over the asbāb al-nuzūl, sīra, and chronology also shows that much research into the Islamic scholarly disciplines still has to be undertaken to gain clarity concerning the Qur'ān itself.

By examining Faḍlullāh's exegesis of the sword verse, which he links to his concept of an Islamic state, one can see that his vision can at least partially be described as secular, if one accepts social differentiation as an essential part of secularization (without privatization and decline of religion). Simultaneously, Faḍlullāh holds on to both the hegemony of Islamic rule and to a legal framework based on fiqh, although he leaves the exact provisions in such a state unaddressed. Faḍlullāh's demand to read the Qur'ān from within an Islamic epistemological framework raises the question of what exactly such a framework would be. Based on Faḍlullāh and Jarāḍī's work, one can conclude that there is not one epistemological framework in the various Islamic hermeneutical traditions, rather, that they are united in viewing the transcendent as an important epistemological category, which becomes destabilized as soon as one embraces historical consciousness wholesale.

\(^{1589}\) Tillschneider, Typen, 372.
Fiqh poses the challenge that it presents a coherent system in itself, in which the Qur'ān is but one variable. It is questionable that the fiqh discourse can adapt to historicizing hermeneutics. In theory, such a hermeneutical turn is possible, yet unlikely. S. Ahmad's objection against taking the fiqh discourse as sine qua non and most authentic representation of Islam is highly relevant in this context. Ahmad argues that the contemporary Islamic discourse focuses disproportionately on fiqh, a trend that is reinforced by western scholarship. All Lebanese authors examined in the subsequent chapters agree with this assessment and provide further proof for this thesis.

One of the scholars who challenges the pre-dominance of the fiqh discourse is Naylā Ṭabbāra, who aims to disentangle the Qur'ān from the fiqh discourse by offering an alternative approach and placing stronger emphasis on the Qur'ān. Her Qur'ān hermeneutics move within the framework of 'ulūm al-qur'ān and draw on western historical-critical scholarship, particularly that of Nöldeke. Her approach demonstrates that 'ulūm al-qur'ān do not conflict with certain forms of historical-critical scholarship as long as the divine authorship of the Qur'ān is kept intact, but that such an approach does not embody the full scale of modern western historicization. To utilize historical arguments does not entail a complete historicization (that is, the reduction of the Qur'ān to its history).

Ṭabbāra's approach affirms further that the ontological nature of the Qur'ān as the word of God is not an obstacle to a historicizing approach or to an Islamic re-interpretation of Christians, Christianity, and theories of salvation. Her starting-point is theology, from which she moves on to the particularities of the qur'ānic text to achieve an inclusivist reading of the Qur'ān. Her approach demonstrates how useful linguistic, philological, and semantic observations are – all disciplines that are equally important for western qur'ānic studies and that can form a strong
connection between the two traditions. Both Faḍlallāh and Ṭabbāra work from the *maqāsid* (general intentions of the text) toward the particulars. While Faḍlallāh does so within a legal framework, Ṭabbāra starts from theological Qur'ānic universals. Her inclusion of tradition makes it part of the present and emphasizes its coevalness with other forms of textual methods.

The goal of her approach is to reclaim Islam from politicization and utilization by military and political actors and to articulate a position acceptable to Muslims for the separation of religious from political identity. To be clear, this separation does not entail the privatization of religion or its de-politicization, rather politics and religion become redirected. Her hermeneutics entail a turn to the reading self as individual, which she achieves by emphasizing Sufi voices in the Islamic tradition. Her political vision includes Islam as a public religion, without granting it hegemony over other religions (as, for example, Faḍlallāh does).

Scholars from the same tradition, while demanding to read the Qurʾān from within an Islamic framework, also adhere to different epistemological presuppositions. Faḍlallāh strongly emphasizes the “weakness” of humans and their limited capacity for understanding, which creates room for a plurality of legal opinions. In contradistinction to his approach, Jarādī emphasizes the openness of humans toward the transcendent and their potential to achieve higher stages of human perfection. This does not mean that they would call each other non-Islamic and bespeaks epistemological flexibility.

Zarāqīṭ and Jarādī want to move away from the *fiqh* discourse. Zarāqīṭ engages directly with Luxenberg's thesis and displays great openness to historical-critical scholarship as long as it can be argued on rational and historical grounds. Zarāqīṭ accepts the presuppositions of historical scholarship as useful for future Muslim Qurʾānic studies without contesting the divinity of the
Qur'ān. Like Neuwirth, he laments that discourse on the Qur'ān in both western academia and the Muslim world is carried out in complete mutual detachment. He envisions that Muslims, too, should make an effort to become a voice in the academic discourse.

While Neuwirth wants to include the Qur'ān in the corpus of western scriptures and make it European by emphasizing the historical-critical approach, Zarāqīṭ wants more (traditionally trained) Muslim scholars to participate in historical-critical scholarship in order to influence the academic discourse and perhaps evoke a paradigm shift. In Zarāqīṭ's view, certain historical-critical approaches lead to the “closing of the text” by reducing it to one meaning, an argument that must be taken seriously in the academic context and affirms Madigan's statement that the literary or historical-critical approach is always only one way of approaching the Qur'ān.

For Jarāḍī, the Qur'ān is a necessity for the ontological well-being of humans and cannot be ignored by any Muslim in relation to the renewal of society. His hermeneutics and epistemology inform his political vision for the relationship between religion and society. Both Jarāḍī and Zarāqīṭ view Sorouch's attempt to redefine the discourse on ṭahār as essentially political, substantiating my claim that the privatization of religion is itself a political move. Jarāḍī's concern for Qur'ān hermeneutics is linked to the social dimension of forming a new ethical society through reforming Muslim selves.

His vision of a society of the “qur'ānic human” necessarily imagines Islam as a public religion, in which qur'ānic interpretation is a communal rather than individual act (i.e., ijmā' is crucial). Meanwhile, he is aware of the fact that the world is religiously and ideologically diverse. While he rejects secularism as an ideology, he accepts the idea of a non-hierarchical society that is built on a (pluralist) constituency. Jarāḍī's reading of the Qur'ān through a Ṣādrian
lens makes him open to a pluralistic society because he believes in the basic goodness of all people and their intellectual products. This reading of Mullā Ṣadrā is not universal, as Khomeini, who was also a scholar of Mullā Ṣadrā, shows. Yet, Jarādi's thought suggests that a form of pluralism in society might be possible that actually accepts different ways of being in the world instead of a model of toleration in which religions first have to be aligned to a post-Christian secular paradigm.

The discussion of Qānṣū's approach aids to discern the difficulties of “reading the Qurʾān as text,” a shibboleth that seems to have become commonsense in much of western Qurʾān scholarship. Reading the Qurʾān in a new light and taking it seriously as “text” is crucial for him to discuss social, religious, and political exigencies of society. To read the Qurʾān as historical or literary text turns out not to be neutral, both because material texts themselves are never neutral (McGann) and because the way Qānṣū conceptualizes text as a social product denies it to be God's word, even if he includes a divine source in his conception of the qurʾānic text. Moreover, to read the Qurʾān as literature or historical document does not merely hinge on method or the ontological status of the Qurʾān but equally on conceptions of human nature.

Qānṣū's leading heuristic values to enact the liberation of the act of reading are the (historically conditioned) subjectivity and freedom of humans. This freedom is based on the ideal of an autonomous self that can make decisions in a self-possessed way – a concept rooted in the Enlightenment conviction that humans ought to make their own mind and conscience the ultimate basis of their decisions and actions. This ideal is often considered to be necessary for the realization of liberal politics. Qānṣū sees human dignity cohere with rational self-actualization that becomes independent from traditional frameworks of arguing and reasoning.
The paradox in Qānṣū's thought is that the human has to be accepted as limited in order to achieve this ideal of freedom. The genealogies of this conceptual tension go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe, as indicated by Jarādī. Rorty argued forcefully that the notion of the mind as an “inner arena” of ideas that functions as a mediator between world and subject arose in the Cartesian era. From now on experience occurred deep within the self which also placed limits on one's experience. Since post-Cartesian philosophers combined the separation of subject and object with the conviction of the tendency of the mind to err and a suspicion of the senses, experience itself became unreliable.

To state this differently, we cannot be sure that our perception does not deceive us in how it represents the “outer world.” What emerged was, in Bardo's words, “a new sense of experience as deeply within and bounded by self.” Even if experience was reliable, it is in any case singular since it is subjective. By stressing the limitedness of human nature, Qānṣū confirms the subjectivity of all humans that refers to both the reader of the Qurʾān and to the prophet and establishes a clear divide between the divine and the human. Translated into Qurʾān hermeneutics, these underlying assumptions lead to the view of revelation as a singular and unique event that cannot be relived and to entirely individualistic Qurʾān interpretations without any claim to certainty.

The western reader will perhaps find her own vision of Qurʾān hermeneutics reflected in Qānṣū's approach. Yet, the reactions to historicizing approaches to the Qurʾān by Muslims demonstrate that the narrative of the liberation of the text, as told by Qānṣū, is too simple. Jarādī

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1591 Ibid., 49-53.
and Zarāqiṭ, for example, both charge historical-critical approaches with narrowing the meaning of the Qur'ān and charge western approaches with the “closing of the text.” Jarādī in particular warns against reducing the Qur'ān to an anachronistic museum piece. Yet, while Qānṣū historicizes the Qur'ān, he does not monumentalize it or reduce it to its pastness. In fact, he creates new space for engaging with the Qur'ān anew and for creatively producing new meanings that do not follow a grammar prescribed by Islamic tradition. Qānṣū represents a postmodern turn in Qur'ān hermeneutics that emphasizes the polyvalence and ambiguity of texts as necessary for the creation of meaning and rejects models of static or objective truths.

One must still contend that the western academic and philosophical traditions cannot guarantee a more open reading of the text partially because academic disciplines equally move in narrow confines, dictated by a certain way of thinking, arguing, self-positioning, and quoting. Academic grammar and structures constitute as much a normative regime of reading texts as the Islamic tradition. The freedom Qānṣū thinks possible to achieve through dispensing with tradition (a regime of reading) is an ideal more so than a fact. In effect, his approach amounts to substituting one regime of reading with another, in which new things become thinkable and others the unthought.

Qānṣū's historicizing Qur'ān hermeneutics have direct political implications, particularly for redefining religion in society. Hermeneutics (in Gadamer's sense of the term) and a secular vision for society are mutually interconnected. Qānṣū accepts the argument that religion in the modern context cannot be the religion from the past, which leads him to fully embrace history and historical consciousness as well as a religious subjectivity that accepts religion as a neatly confined human sphere, unable to trouble anyone. This religious subjectivity relies on the idea of
an autonomous self-possessed individual who can only arrive at relative truths. His emphasis on
the subjective relationship the reader has with the Qur'ānic text challenges the monopoly of a
religious class as its sole interpreters, leads to the privatization of meaning, and therefore, the
privatization of Islam, disqualifying in the process any attempt to produce knowledge for
Muslims communally. Plurality of religious understanding is a natural outcome of interpretation
because humans are diverse and limited in their comprehension, which relativizes totalizing
claims of truth. Again, this plurality is restricted by secular epistemological assumptions.

Qānṣū's project culminates in rendering Islam an “invisible religion,” as Thomas
Luckmann has called religious phenomena without public political voice. Qānṣū's hermeneutical
demands challenge preconceived paradigms as well as the dominant discourse of Muslim
readings of the Qurān and must be understood as inherently political, not despite its outcome
(i.e., the privatization of Islam) but because of it. The privatization of religion is one among other
elements of refiguring religion in society. Qānṣū's approach not only destabilizes the authority of
the Qurān, which (in its materialized form) becomes a “human phenomenon,” but for him, the
question of the Qurān's authority is in the end irrelevant.

Nevertheless, Qānṣū demonstrates that one can write critical Qurān history based on
Islamic traditional material which he knows well. His approach is sophisticated and might incite
further deliberations in the future. His theory of wahy and the Qur'ānic text is an offer to make
sense of the Qurān for a believer who has already accepted a form of individualized and
privatized religious subjectivity. Rather than rejecting him as outside of the Islamic discursive
tradition, one should understand his reading of the Qurān as the outcome of facing what Charles
Taylor has called the “inevitability of choice and difference within modern societies.” The abundance of material alone which he presents in his thesis can be made useful for western Qur’anic studies.

In the 1980s, Mohammed Arkoun pointed to the isolation of many critical Arab and Muslim thinkers. He observed that they rarely quoted one another, at least in the Maghreb area, and deliberated whether they eschewed quoting each other to avoid fruitless polemics. Ursula Günther argued that the isolation of these thinkers stems from censorship and the lack of networks and platforms for propagating their thought. It is also difficult to find a publisher for critical studies in those countries. For the Lebanese context, it should be noted that Arkoun's assessment must be qualified, as the situation has changed since the time in which he wrote.

Examining the discourse in Lebanon demonstrates the sophistication with which both contesters and proponents of historical-critical treatment of the Qur'an engage in hermeneutical discussions and employ political rationalities. Methodological, historical, and hermeneutical discussions about the Qur'an reveal strong convictions about society, religion, and authority. As we have seen, the struggle for different hermeneutics can also be understood as a conflict over the monopoly of interpretation. New methodologies can challenge and redraw the lines of what is considered a legitimate interpretation within an Islamic consensus.

One fact my thesis has asserted is that the Qur'an is a *politicum* – a contested space, along with history itself. The cooperation of western and so-called traditional scholars has just begun. The results are open. Yet, a rapprochement is promising not only for Qur'anic studies but also for

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new and exciting approaches in literary and historical studies. Historical consciousness, in the modern western sense of the term, introduced a new understanding of history and the past and is linked to a secularized notion of society in which religion is confined to the private sphere.

Historical considerations can, however, harmonize with the belief in the Qurʾān as the divine word of God. As there is not one historical-critical approach, there is similarly not one unified Islamic hermeneutics or epistemology.

Neuwirth argues in favor of the commensurability of historical-critical scholarship and Islamic qurʾānic studies. If one conceived of both as traditions, there is no need to deny that dialogue is possible and can produce new results. To allow an analogy, no one would have thought two hundred years ago that dialogue between Catholics and Protestants or Jews and Catholics was possible the way this dialogue is being practiced today. To apply historical-critical scholarship to the Qurʾān is not necessarily a secular undertaking as long as its claims are not formulated in a normative way. Boundaries define who we are and who others are; they are not static but shifting. Moreover, as Martin Heidegger notes, “a boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.”

A boundary can only be a boundary if something, an “other,” is excluded. Any act of creating boundaries therefore needs an “other.” Religious communities and academic traditions tend to create boundaries which help identify who they are; these boundaries are always in flux and, in the process of being redefined, bear in themselves the potential to develop new thought.

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As Bhabha reminds us, “It is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence.”

It seems that the academy is fascinated with marking out its areas of investigation in stringent dichotomies such as insider versus outsider, first- versus second-order concepts, critic-versus-empathetic scholar and theologian versus objectivist. These categories are not without heuristic value. And yet, they lose some of their usefulness as soon as one looks at specific persons/texts/events and social configurations. The complete separation between insider and outsider declares a capitulation before common humanness.

It seems that any understanding is made impossible when the complete separation of insider and outsider or between object and scholar is postulated. The whole endeavor of understanding in that case is rendered useless. The scholar often partakes in the forming of the object she is investigating. This has especially been true for the concepts of religion and scripture that, when applied to non-Christian, non-European contexts, often shaped the “local” traditions and their self-perception. This fact does not need to lead to intellectual resignation. Western Qur'ānic studies, in fact, has a unique position to rethink its categories and engage with an entire global Muslim discourse that has not been sufficiently included in the endeavor of Qur'ānic studies. In the end, whether Muslim ‘ulamā and intellectuals will apply historicizing and critical methods to the Qur'ān depends on whether those methods seem useful to them and can fit into an Islamic worldview. Otherwise why should they bother?

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Appendix

للتلقيت المديرية العامة للأمن العام أن المركز الثقافي الألماني في بيروت، قام بإدخال وتسريح الكتاب
المذكور، من أعداء الدولة، دون الحصول على إجازة إدخال وتوزيع من المديرية العامة للأمن العام م пара
ذلك القانون والمبادئ الإجراءات الواجبة:
1. قانون التضامن لحالة المادة 50 من المادة بالقانون رقم 9199 والقانون 439199.
2. احتجاج رسمي من قبل القنصل في الجمهورية الليبية، موجب الكتاب المذكور ربطًا بجهة
كون الكتاب يتضمن عامليًا إساءة للدبلوماسية الإسلامية وإيذاء للتبعات.
3. بناءً على ما تقدم، ومنع تصرُّفات وإساءات طائفية من النوع الذي أثاره، وما قد يترتب
عنها من التزامات شاقة، يرجى الإبلاغ إلى المركز الثقافي للأمان لتسليط الضوء على الأهم
العام، بخصوص رئيس دولة، المؤرخ المذكور قام بتسليم الكتاب المذكور حسب رقم الواقف
المذكور، بالRITE 789502.

مدير عام الأمن العام