

Islamic Studies: A Field of Research Under Transcultural Crossfire

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Every effort to describe the characteristics and the scope of an academic field is challenging, given that most disciplines look back on a centuries-old history that allowed them to branch out and develop a large range of highly diverse subfields. This is also the case with the field of research defined here as “Islamic studies.”

This essay is part of a themed section that discusses the relevance of the transcultural paradigm for different academic fields of research. Its aim is to reflect upon the consequences of applying the methodological requirements of the transcultural paradigm, as described in the introductory article, to the particular field of Islamic studies. The introduction proffered four different, and partly contradictory definitions of the transcultural approach that were based on how the transcultural paradigm has been employed and defined in an increasingly productive research history of approximately seventy-five years.

According to these definitions, transcultural phenomena can be equated with either I) anthropological universals transcending cultural boundaries; II) shared historical phenomena transcending cultural boundaries; III) spaces and agents mediating between and thus permeating different cultural spheres, or IV) a deconstructionist approach that regards all kinds of conceptual entities—particularly the notion of monolithic cultural systems—as mere intellectual constructs and strives to display the permeability, flexibility, and dynamism of cultural phenomena by insisting on the necessity of engaging with every object of investigation from multiple perspectives and by employing different scales of analysis.

I wish to emphasize that the following effort to relate the very wide and divergent field of Islamic studies to these four definitions of the transcultural paradigm cannot do justice to all issues that might seem relevant to the reader. It is thus impossible to proffer a research history that discusses the tenets and consequences of academic literature produced as part of what is generally known as the “cultural turn.” It is also impossible to comprehensively cover the entire field of Islamic studies, given that the study of Islam and related phenomena has been undertaken since the age of Muḥammad by various, not exclusively academic actors, and in various fields of intellectual activity. Many

phenomena discussed in this essay are well known to specialists in the field of Islamic studies. However, my research specialization in the pre-modern Mediterranean may be responsible for judgements that will not necessarily be shared by scholars with a different specialization in the wider field of Islamic studies, e.g. contemporary India or Indonesia.

Thus, the article focusses on evaluating the relevance and utility of the transcultural paradigm as defined above and should be read as an experimental essay that explores how different intellectual heritages and currents of thought found within the wider orbit of the study of Islam interact with the theoretical proposals brought forward by proponents of the transcultural paradigm.¹

This essay unfolds in six parts. Part one argues that Islamic studies—understood here as a form of intellectual and increasingly scholarly engagement that emerged in medieval and early modern Europe—could be regarded as transcultural from the outset, because it initially provided an external view on a rival religious orbit. Part two provides an overview of an academic field that can be regarded as transcultural because—at least in some institutional settings—it engages with the interaction of different religious, geographical, and linguistic spheres that are subsumed under the super-category of a universalist religious system called Islam. Part three shows that a historical master narrative, which highlights cultural diversity as well as processes of transculturation as an integral part of Islamic history, has been widely accepted in the field of Islamic studies, even before the transcultural paradigm was explicitly formulated. Part four presents a number of subfields of research that investigate processes of cultural interaction and transculturation within and between Muslim and non-Muslim milieus. In addition, it shows that in the past half century, scholars dealing with Islam in the widest sense have increasingly underscored the high degree of internal cultural diversity in predominantly Muslim societies. In spite of this, part five argues, the field of Islamic studies is caught in an area of conflict between two ideological poles, both of which tend to essentialize Islam. One is represented by the Orientalist legacy, whose essentializing tenets are also manifest in recent forms of Islamophobia and right-wing populism. The other is represented by an inner-Muslim quest to define the essence of Islamic and associated cultural (counter-)identities, and manifests itself in various forms of Occidental thought. Essentialist

1 The task of bringing these two themes together demanded great effort. I would like to thank Andrea Hacker, Monica Juneja, Tayebe Naderabadi, Nadja-Christina Schneider, Jan Scholz, and Rosanna Sirignano—who have either read a draft-version of this paper or heard parts of it in a presentation entitled “Transcultural Crossfire: The Study of Islam Between Orientalism and Occidentalism”—for their critical observations, all of which made me rethink various topics and my general approach. It goes without saying that I am solely responsible for any misconceptions and errors that remain.

representations and interpretations of Islam are currently widely diffused and obviously clash with deconstructionist post-Orientalist approaches to Islam, including the transcultural paradigm. Against this backdrop, part six concludes with a final evaluation of the risks and prospects of explicitly applying the transcultural approach in the field of Islamic studies.

At the beginning: Transcultural engagement with “the Other”

From a historical perspective, scholarship on Islam branched in two directions that are separated by religious demarcations. One is represented by the increasingly institutionalized inner-Muslim engagement with the religious system of Islam and the legal, political, economic, and social implications of its theological tenets. This branch comprises various disciplines, which developed over centuries following the preaching of Muḥammad between 610 and 632 CE.² It is important to note that this variant of Islamic studies is not confined to societies in which Islamic normative frameworks are predominant. For example, Muslims under Christian rule in late medieval and early modern Spain pursued the study of Islam, often clandestinely;³ in recent years, European countries with a minority Muslim population such as Germany have even established departments of Islamic theology within various universities.⁴

The second branch which stands at the centre of this article, is represented by forms of scholarly activity whose roots lie in twelfth-century Christian Europe.⁵ This period was strongly marked by two important manifestations

2 These are known under the technical terms *‘ilm al-kalām* (equivalent to theology), *furū’ al-fiqh* (equivalent to an exposition of Islamic norms), *uṣūl al-fiqh* (equivalent to the argumentative foundations of Islamic norms), *‘ilm al-tafsīr* (Qur’ānic exegesis), *‘ilm al-ḥadīth* (exegesis of traditions concerning the prophet Muḥammad). Cf. N. Calder, “Uṣūl al-fiqh,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 931.

3 Cf. Luis F. Bernabé Pons, “Los manuscritos aljamiados como textos islámicos,” in *Memoria de los Moriscos: Escritos y relatos de una diáspora cultural*, ed. Alfredo Mateos Paramio (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2010), 27–44.

4 Cf. the presentation of the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research under <https://www.bmbf.de/de/islamische-theologie-367.html> [Accessed on 27. January 2017] as well as one among several evaluations of this initiative by Arnfrid Schenk, “Mission erfüllt? Vor fünf Jahren wurde an deutschen Unis das Fach Islamische Theologie eingeführt: Eine Bilanz,” *Die Zeit*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.zeit.de/2016/07/islamische-theologie-universitaet-fach-studium-bilanz/komplettansicht> [Accessed on 27. January 2017].

5 On these origins see Johann W. Fück, *Die arabischen Studien in Europa bis in den Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1955), 1–29; Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), 271–308; Richard W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1962), 1–109; Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l’Islam* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2003), 35–53.

of Latin-Christian expansionism into Mediterranean regions then under the rule of Muslim elites: the so-called Reconquista and the Crusades.⁶ The Latin-Christian desire to engage with Islam in this period was nurtured by the desire to understand the tenets of the Islamic faith with the aim of formulating Christian counterarguments and of strengthening Christian identity vis-à-vis its rival Islam. This polemic engagement with Islam led to the translation of a corpus of Arabic texts including the earliest Latin translation of the *Qur'ān*. The latter was commissioned by Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), abbot of Cluny.⁷ Not knowing Arabic himself, he drew on the linguistic capacities of individuals engaged in translating and assimilating a large and influential corpus of scientific and philosophical literature in Arabic, that reproduced and elaborated on ancient Greek intellectual achievements. The Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, and the crusader Levant, i.e. regions that had only recently come under the control of Latin-Christian elites, constituted early centres of Arabic-Latin translation activity.⁸

Thus, from the beginning, the European-Christian or “Western” intellectual engagement with Islam and its societal dimensions had what we could call a “transcultural” component. On the one hand, it was based on active othering and the dichotomy of the observer and the observed, pursuing the aim of describing a religious system from an external—not necessarily friendly—perspective. On the other hand, it involved the reception of a shared, originally Greek heritage that had permeated and continued to permeate Jewish, Christian, and Muslim milieus around the Mediterranean.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, men of the Roman Catholic church formulated the earliest ideas to institutionalize the study of Arabic in the

6 On the phenomenon of Latin-Christian expansionism see the series *The Expansion of Latin Europe, 1000–1500*, ed. James Muldoon and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, 12 vols. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007–14).

7 Petrus Venerabilis, *Contra sectam Saracenorum*, in *Schriften zum Islam*, trans. and ed. Reinhold Gleib, Corpus Islamo-Christianum, Series Latina, 1 (Altenberge: Echter, 1985), prologus, chap. 17, 52–55; cf. James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964); Ulisse Cecini, *Alcoranus latinus: Eine sprachliche und kulturwissenschaftliche Analyse der Koranübersetzungen von Robert von Ketton und Marcus von Toledo* (Münster: Lit, 2012), 81–84.

8 Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, “Translations and Translators,” in *La transmission des textes philosophiques et scientifiques au Moyen Âge*, ed. Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny and Charles Burnett (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994), 421–462; Charles Burnett, “Translation from Arabic to Latin in the Middle Ages,” in *Übersetzung: Ein internationales Handbuch zur Übersetzungsforschung*, ed. Harald Kittel, vol. 2/2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 1220–1231. The fact that these translations take place in recently conquered territories is emphasized by Dag Nikolaus Hasse, “The Social Conditions of the Arabic-(Hebrew-)Latin Translation Movements in Medieval Spain and in the Renaissance,” in *Wissen über Grenzen: Arabisches Wissen und lateinisches Mittelalter*, ed. Andreas Speer and Lydia Wegener (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 71–72.

Christian societies of Europe, e.g. proposals to institute chairs for the study of Arabic in Oxford, Paris, Salamanca, Bologna, and Rome. Aside from studying and translating Arabic texts, the holders of these chairs were to provide linguistic training to missionaries.⁹ Increasingly, this missionary zeal was not only directed at Arabic-speaking Muslims, but also at various groups of Arabic-speaking Christians in the eastern Mediterranean, finding expression, for example, in the early modern production of polyglot bibles.¹⁰

In the course of the late medieval and early modern period, the intensive engagement with the Graeco-Arabic scientific tradition as well as the missionary aim of acquiring the necessary linguistic skills to convert the Muslim “infidel” engendered an increasing appreciation of the potential contributions the study of Arabic could make to various fields of knowledge, such as calendar systems, history, or biblical studies.¹¹ This interest in Arabic, nurtured in various early modern centres of intellectual activity, was soon extended to other languages used in predominantly Muslim societies, i.e. Ottoman Turkish and Persian. The increasing recognition of the importance of foreign language skills for the maintenance of diplomatic and economic relations with Muslim societies became manifest in the establishment of the Venetian *Scuola dei giovani di lingua* (1551), or the French royal foundation of the *École des jeunes de langue* (1669).¹² Such initiatives helped to consolidate academic institutions of learning, dedicated to the study of Arabic, Persian, Ottoman, but also Syriac texts, as well as to the engagement with what was often regarded as the dogmatic, historical, economic, political, legal, and social manifestations of Islam.

9 John Tolan, “Porter la bonne parole auprès de Babel: les problèmes linguistiques chez les missionnaires mendiants, XIIIe–XIVe siècle,” in *Zwischen Babel und Pflingsten: Sprachdifferenzen und Gesprächsverständigung in der Vormoderne, 8.–16. Jahrhundert*, ed. Peter von Moos (Berlin: Lit, 2008), 533–548.

10 Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* [GCAL], 4 vols. (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1944/1947/1949/1953), vol. 1, 93–97. Cf. Bernard Heyberger, *Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la réforme catholique: Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVIIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1994).

11 See the overviews in Fück, *Die arabischen Studien*, 25–140; Gerald J. Toomer, *Eastern Wisdom and Learning: The Study of Arabic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14–52; Felix Klein-Franke, *Die klassische Antike in der Tradition des Islam* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1980), 17–52.

12 Francesca Lucchetta, “La Scuola dei ‘giovani di lingua’ veneti nei secoli XVI e XVII,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 7 (1989): 19–40; Marie de Testa and Antoine Gautier, *Drogmans et diplomates européens auprès de la Porte ottomane* (Istanbul: Isis, 2003), 41–52.

Variants of classification: A research field of transcultural scope

During the early modern period, the study of Islam and of the Arabic language increasingly branched out into various subfields. Until the late twentieth century, these subfields were often gathered under the controversial epithet “Oriental studies” (cf. German *Orientalistik*, French *Orientalisme scientifique*). Since the publication of Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* in 1978,¹³ the activities of “Orientalists” are often associated with a particular “European” or “Western” mind frame that, although interested in Muslim societies as such, subjects scientific efforts to the dictates of an imperialist rationale intent on denigrating and mastering an “Oriental Other.”¹⁴ As a consequence, it became necessary to distinguish between two different definitions of the term “Orientalism,” i.e. its use as a hypernym for all academic fields engaging with so-called “Middle Eastern” and “Far Eastern” societies on the one hand, and Said’s critical depiction of these academic fields on the other. To distinguish clearly between these two definitions, the epithets “Oriental studies” or “Orientalism” tend to be avoided as generic labels of research on these societies since the late twentieth century. In its non-Saidian function as an umbrella term for all academic fields engaging with societies east of Europe, it has been replaced by a large variety of designations. However, this large and sometimes confusing variety of denominations should not be regarded as a mere counterreaction that served to distance the wider field of Oriental or Islamic studies from the colonialist and imperialist variant of Orientalism. Rather, it arose from the necessity to accommodate an increasing range of specializations.

Describing, interrelating, and classifying the range of existing fields poses a challenge. At first sight, it may seem as if the institutionalized field of Islamic studies focuses on a specific religion, a restricted number of ethnic groups, and a limited number of languages and could thus be defined as a multifaceted “area study” of certain regions that in one way or another have been influenced by Islam. However, every researcher working in this field is aware that, over the centuries, Islam has become a highly complex global phenomenon. The Arabic-Islamic expansion of the seventh and eighth centuries led to the subjection of various non-Muslim groups to Muslim rule; from this period onwards, these new groups formed an integral part of Muslim societies.

13 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

14 Cf. Alexander L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Bernd Adam, *Saids Orientalismus und die Historiographie der Moderne: Der „ewige Orient“ als Konstrukt westlicher Geschichtsschreibung* (Hamburg: Diplomica-Verlag, 2013); François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin, eds., *After Orientalism: Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-Appropriations* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

Furthermore, due to the specific Islamic practice of accepting the existence of (mainly monotheist) non-Muslim religious groups within societies under Islamic rule, Islamic societies retained important non-Muslim populations (not necessarily numerical minorities) since the era of expansion.¹⁵ Thus, research in the field of Islamic studies also considers the social status, activities, and cultural production of these non-Muslim groups. It is possible, for example, to encounter researchers in a department of Islamic studies who work on the history and society of the Copts of Egypt.¹⁶ Moreover, due to the increasing numbers of non-Muslims of different ethnic origin converting to Islam, the originally “Arab” Muslim elites of early Islam soon became ethnically diversified.¹⁷ Thus, research in the field of Islamic studies does not only focus on “Arabs,”¹⁸ but deals with various ethnic groups in and around the Mediterranean, in Central Asia and its Soviet predecessor, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the United States, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. Hence, it covers more or less the entire earth and a timeframe that ranges—depending on when Islam was introduced to the region in question—from late antiquity to the present. In general, however, European and Western research has focused (and still tends to focus) on the “traditional” regions of Islam, i.e. the Middle East and North Africa, and has only recently begun to pay more attention to Islamic phenomena that are of relevance to societies in Europe, the Americas, and South Asia.

Because of its multifaceted nature, defining the scope and characterizing the field of Islamic studies is decidedly difficult—also from a methodological point of view. The various subfields of Islamic studies draw on methods from other fields of research such as history, philology, literary studies, political sciences, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, comparative religious studies, or theology. Thus, the field of Islamic studies does not really feature a particular methodology of its own.¹⁹ In consequence,

15 Cf. Fred Donner, “The Islamic Conquests,” in *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*, ed. Youssef M. Choueiri (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 28–51.

16 This is the case, for example, for the recent study on Copts in Egypt, authored by Sebastian Elsässer, *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

17 For the struggle of non-Arabs to gain equal footing in the early Islamic empire see Susanne Enderwitz, “al-Shu’ūbiyya,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 513–516.

18 On the complex history of this ethnonym and the debates revolving around it, see Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

19 Cf. Marco Schöller, *Methode und Wahrheit in der Islamwissenschaft: Prolegomena* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2000), 1, 7.

one finds scholars working in this field who question if Islamic studies actually constitute a proper academic discipline, who explicitly associate themselves with a more basic disciplinary framework such as history, philology or linguistics, or who insist that their specialization constitutes an academic field of research in its own right. The following overview is thus tentative and aims at giving an overview over the large variety of specializations rather than at establishing interdependencies or even hierarchies among them.²⁰

The general field of Islamic studies (cf. German *Islamwissenschaft(en)*; French *islamologie*) involves research on the theological, ideological, legal, political, economic, social, and cultural manifestations of Islam as a religious system in historical and contemporary societies featuring inhabitants of Muslim faith. Arabic studies (cf. German *Arabistik*) focuses on the philology and literature of the Arabic language that—this should be noted—was never exclusively used by Muslims, but was and still is the medium of expression of many Christians and Jews.²¹ Iranian studies (cf. German *Iranistik*, French *Iranologie*) and Ottoman studies (cf. German *Osmanistik*) feature a comparable philological and literary orientation with a focus on Persian and Turkic languages, but also include a social and historical dimension dedicated, among other things, to the pre-Islamic and other cultural features of the Persianate and Turkic spheres.²² Finally, the branch of Middle or Near Eastern studies, occasionally enlarged to the so-called MENA-region (Middle East and North Africa), aims to understand the recent history of and contemporary political developments in predominantly Muslim societies around the Mediterranean.

It is noteworthy, that the study of Islam and Muslim societies in other regions of the world such as India, Indonesia, Europe, or the United States has so far not received a disciplinary label in Western scholarship. Research on these

20 For alternative and complementary descriptions see Azim Nanji, ed., *Mapping Islamic Studies: Genealogy, Continuity, and Change* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997); Timothy Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science,” in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David L. Szanton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 74–118; Abbas Poya and Maurus Reinkowski, eds., *Das Unbehagen in der Islamwissenschaft: Ein klassisches Fach im Scheinwerferlicht der Politik und der Medien*, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008); Andreas Kaplony, “Die deutschsprachige Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft: Aktuelle Herausforderungen und mögliche Reaktionen,” in *Geisteswissenschaft heute: Die Sicht der Fächer*, ed. Dieter Lamping (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2015), 270–281; Richard C. Martin, Heather J. Empey, Mohammed Arkoun, and Andrew Rippin, “Islamic Studies,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World: Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395> [Accessed 11. September 2015].

21 Cf. Graf, *Geschichte*, vols. 1–4; Geoffrey Khan, “Judaico-Arabic,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Arabic Language*, ed. Kees Versteegh, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 526–536.

22 Cf. *Handbuch der Iranistik*, ed. Ludwig Paul (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2013).

phenomena is either executed within the larger field of Islamic studies or in neighbouring fields such as South Asian studies, sociology or political science.

One should also note that important research on phenomena relevant to the field of Islamic studies is carried out in other disciplines or by scholars moving between disciplinary boundaries. The history, social status, and cultural production of Jews and Christians under Muslim rule, for example, are also studied in the fields of medieval history, Byzantinology, or Jewish and Semitic studies, whose researchers are able to access source material written in languages traditionally not associated with Muslims, such as Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, and Latin.²³ Historians specialized in European history of the nineteenth century, political scientists, sociologists and cultural anthropologists, in turn, have made important contributions to understanding Middle Eastern politics, migratory phenomena, or forms of European Islam that are essentially based on the analysis of source material in Western languages.²⁴ These examples show that it is ultimately impossible to draw a line demarcating the field of Islamic studies from other fields of research on social phenomena involving Muslims.

The problem of clearly separating Islamic studies from other disciplines also arises because representatives of Islamic studies often tend to question the “Islamic” character of the phenomena they investigate. For example, the subdiscipline of “Islamic art history” features heated debates about the question what is actually “Islamic” in the particular forms of artistic expression under scrutiny.²⁵ Equally, one could question why the history of Latin-Christian polemics against Muslims has become a subdiscipline of medieval European history and not of Islamic studies.²⁶ The reason for this is primarily pragmatic: unlike in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth

23 Cf. e.g. Cyrille Aillet, *Les Mozarabes: Christianisme, islamisation et arabisation en péninsule Ibérique, IXe–XIIe siècle* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2010), with its parallel use of Arabic and Latin sources.

24 Werner Schiffauer, *Die Gottesmänner: Türkische Islamisten in Deutschland; Eine Studie zur Herstellung religiöser Evidenz* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000).

25 Cf. Syrinx von Hees, “Kunst im Nahen Osten und der ‘islamische Code’,” in *Bonner Islamwissenschaftler stellen sich vor*, ed. Stephan Conermann and Marie-Christine Heinze (Schenefeld: EB-Verlag, 2006), 89–112; Avinoam Shalem, “What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Islamic Art’? A Plea for a Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012): 1–18.

26 All important studies on medieval European perceptions of Islam are written by historians of medieval Europe, cf. Daniel, *Islam and the West; Southern, Western Views*; Philippe Sénac, *L’Occident face à l’Islam: L’image de l’Autre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983); John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

century, when European departments of Orientalist studies could expect their students to have mastered Latin during their humanistic secondary education, contemporary students of Islamic studies in Europe, including those with a migratory background, can no longer be expected to learn this language in addition to Arabic, Persian, and (Ottoman) Turkish.

In view of the history, but also of the thematic diversity within the field of Islamic studies, the question arises whether this field is not transdisciplinary and transcultural *per se*: employing the methodologies of various academic disciplines and dealing with the aforementioned large range of regions, societies, and languages, it clearly exceeds the boundaries both of a traditional discipline and of an area study.

A master narrative: Transcultural universalism in the rise of Islam

To answer the question whether the field of Islamic studies can be regarded as transcultural *per se*, it is necessary to provide a short working definition of the transcultural approach that synthesizes the four, partly divergent definitions provided in the introduction and summarized at the beginning of this article. According to this synthetic working definition, the transcultural approach is defined methodologically and thematically.

From a methodological point of view, it refuses to accept the existence of clear-cut, monolithic, and stable cultural entities defined in terms of race, ethnicity, origins, language, customs, traditions, religion, or territory. Instead, it insists on the inner multiplicity, heterogeneity, dynamism, and flexibility of cultural phenomena. According to the transcultural approach, culture is thus always in the making, has no essence, but consists of interacting phenomena of multiple origin that appear differently if regarded from different angles. The methodological imperative to analyse cultural phenomena from various angles (multiperspectivity) builds on the conviction that these phenomena rarely remain stable over longer periods (processuality, dynamism) because they are formed by various actors (agency) who hold different, often contradictory views.

In view of these methodological imperatives, the transcultural approach focuses on material and abstract phenomena that transcend cultural boundaries resulting from conceptions of ethnicity, language, customs, traditions, or religion. Its aim is neither to (re)construct anthropological constants or universals, i.e. phenomena that are common to humankind in general (e.g. crime, intellectual activity, etc.), nor to (re)construct the systemic character of social systems in the widest sense. Rather, the transcultural approach highlights and focuses

on processes of exchange, interaction, interplay, reciprocity, appropriation, accommodation, transmission, and reception. These processes lead to the diffusion and interaction of specific cultural phenomena in smaller or larger areas inhabited by various groups and societies (cultural transfer, diffusion) to the effect that specific cultural features in multiple variations become a characteristic of greater parts of the world (e.g. Christianization, Islamization, globalization). In the long run, these processes can contribute to the emergence of “new” but continuously evolving cultural phenomena that are based on the creative mingling, mixture, and fusion of originally diverse cultural elements (transculturation). Transcultural phenomena are thus generally produced by agents who connect hitherto separated spheres (entanglement) thus crossing and, in some cases, obliterating pre-existing boundaries (ethnic, linguistic, normative). Such agents are known as (cultural) border-runners, brokers, or mediators.

To evaluate whether Islamic studies fulfills the methodological and thematic requirements of the transcultural approach as defined here, the following paragraphs will present a “traditional approach” as formulated in a manual, first published in 1988 and authored by Ira M. Lapidus, under the title *A History of Islamic Societies*.²⁷

Part One of this manual begins with a description of the pre-Islamic period (*al-jāhiliyya*) that is centred on the Arabian Peninsula of the sixth and early seventh century, but also provides an insight into the geopolitical constellation that characterizes the Middle East of the same period. An Arab-centred narrative of the foundation period of Islam, still focusing on the Arabian Peninsula and its immediate surroundings, leads up to an analysis of the Muslim expansion and its effects, i.e. the imperialization of Arab rule and the inclusion of entire non-Muslim societies into this new imperial framework. The related social processes are defined as “the formation of new communities” and the “mutual assimilation of peoples.”²⁸ The Arabization of the Persian and Graeco-Syriac literary heritage of the conquered Middle Eastern regions receives special attention.²⁹

In Part Two, the manual describes the fragmentation of the Abbasid-led Islamic empire and the formation of various, regionally-based Islamic societies in an area stretching from South East Asia to the Iberian Peninsula and sub-Saharan

27 Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (1988; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

28 Lapidus, *History*, 52.

29 Lapidus, *History*, 91–97.

Africa. Particular attention is given to the integration of Mongol and Turkic groups as well as to the interaction between Muslims and European Christians, the latter increasingly active in and beyond the Mediterranean in areas that had previously been strongly influenced by Islam.

Finally, Part Three discusses the effects of “modernity” in European colonial garb on Muslim societies in the Arab world, Iran, the Indian subcontinent, Indonesia and Malaysia, Central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. It emphasizes how various forms of Islamic revival are an important aspect of the transformation of Muslim societies in reaction to modernity. As opposed to the second revised edition, the 1988 version of the manual does not consider the growing importance of Muslim minorities in Western European and North American societies, but focuses on Muslim minorities and their problems of maintaining a Muslim religious identity in the Soviet Union, China, and various African societies.

A manual of, all in all, 1002 pages, can neither do justice to every detail of Islamic history nor focus on transcultural phenomena. However, in his effort to provide an overview of approximately 1600 years of history in an area covering three continents, Lapidus clearly pays considerable attention to processes of exchange, interaction, interplay, reciprocity, appropriation, accommodation, transmission, reception, as well as to the emergence of new cultural phenomena that are based on the creative mingling, mixture, and fusion of originally diverse cultural elements. Lapidus’ terminology reflects this: He highlights that the emergence of “Islamic civilization” takes place in a wider Middle Eastern context. It involves the creative mingling of Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim elements within the framework of an “Arab-Muslim imperium” that produces a form of “cosmopolitan Islam” and an “Islamic culture.” The latter then provides the cultural foundation for the “worldwide diffusion of Islamic societies” that then undergo individual, but nonetheless parallel processes of “transformation” when confronted with “modernity.”

Thus, Lapidus’ master narrative of the history of Islamic societies pays considerable attention to processes and phenomena that could be described as transcultural. Although Lapidus also dedicates considerable attention to the formation of specifically Islamic normative, political, and social systems, his manual does not convey the image of a single, monolithic, and stagnant cultural entity, but of a plurality of evolving societies in Asia, Africa, and Europe that are pervaded by a highly variegated and flexible cultural phenomenon called Islam, which was and is open to many influences.

This nuanced master narrative remains unquestioned in the more recent *Oxford History of Islam*, published in 1999, which features a collection of sixteen articles by eminent scholars in the field. Although this book covers the same geographical and chronological perimeter as Lapidus' *History of Islamic Societies*, it is not written in chronological, but in thematic order. Some of the articles focus on topics that are of high relevance to the transcultural approach, e.g. the "historical, religious, and cultural interaction" between Islam and Christendom, "transnationalization, Islamization, and ethnicization" in the contact zone between Central Asia and China, the effects of European colonialism, and the "globalization of Islam." All in all, however, the master narrative characteristic of this volume does not essentially differ from the one proposed by Lapidus.³⁰

We may conclude that a history of Islamic societies cannot be written from an ethnic or nationalist perspective. In fact, any historical narrative describing the rise of a universal religion—be it Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism—penetrating various evolving societies in a grand process of diffusion and reception that entails innumerable and complex phenomena of interaction, cannot build on a concept of homogeneous and monolithic cultures. In short, such a history seems to be transcultural *per se*.

One must consider, of course, that the field of Islamic studies has also produced research written from an ethnic, national, and even nationalist perspective. Even Philip Hitti's *History of the Arabs* or Albert Hourani's *History of Arab Peoples* do not focus on one ethnic group alone. Although they increasingly focus on the Arab sphere, i.e. the area stretching from Morocco to Iraq, as soon as they deal with late modern and contemporary phenomena, they describe the history of a cultural tradition built on a religious and cultural heritage in Arabic.³¹ Histories with a seemingly national focus, such as Johanna Pink's *Geschichte Ägyptens*, cannot but consider the many instances of transculturation of Pharaonic, Ptolemaic, Roman, Coptic, Byzantine, Persian, Arab, Berber, Kurdish, Turkic, and other elements that have characterized the history of societies centred on the Nile Valley between antiquity and the present.³² Again, histories of the Ottoman or Safavid Empires cannot be written without considering a similar array of variegated cultural elements. However, more recent publications put stronger emphasis on the cultural heterogeneity and supra-regional entanglement of these polities.³³

30 *Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

31 Philip Khuri Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: MacMillan, 1937); Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991).

32 Johanna Pink, *Geschichte Ägyptens: Von der Spätantike bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Beck, 2014).

33 Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600* (London: Phoenix, 1994),

Although they deal with a large range of transcultural topics, neither the master narrative of the rise and diversification of Islamic societies, nor the more restricted ethnic or national narratives present themselves explicitly as exponents of the transcultural approach as defined in the synthetic working definition above. And it is certain that teaching curricula and general histories of Islam and Muslim societies accord much importance to a rather structuralist depiction of the religious phenomenon that is Islam and the societies influenced by it—in many cases for didactic reasons. Introductory courses to Islamic law (*sharīʿa*), for example, are particularly prone to presenting Islam as a coherent, self-contained system, in spite of the fact that the issuing of legal rulings by Muslim juridical authorities has, throughout Islamic history, never been centralized.³⁴ All this cannot obliterate, however, that the field of Islamic studies can neither confine itself to a single region, ethnic group, or language and thus transcends bounded cultural spheres.

The in-between: Transcultural phenomena within and at the margins of Islam

That the field of Islamic studies transcends the boundaries of traditionally defined cultural spheres also becomes evident if one takes a look at some of its subfields of research that clearly focus on transcultural phenomena without explicitly calling them so.

One of the oldest transcultural subdisciplines within the field has its origins in the Arabic-Latin translation movement of the twelfth century. The transmission of ancient Greek science via Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin translations has elicited academic comments from the late fifteenth century onwards at the latest, and continues to be studied by several eminent scholars.³⁵

provides a “classical” imperial history. In transcultural terms, this “classical narrative” is certainly more nuanced in Daniel Goffmann, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It* (London: Tauris, 2007); Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). On the Safavid and Moghul empires see Willem M. Floor and Edmund Herzig, eds., *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age* (London: Tauris, 2012); Ali Anooshahr, “Mughals, Mongols, and Mongrels: The Challenge of Aristocracy and the Rise of the Mughal State in the *Tarikh-i Rashidi*,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 18, no. 6 (2014): 559–577; Anna Kollatz, *Inspiration und Tradition: Strategien zur Beherrschung von Diversität am Mogulhof und ihre Darstellung in Mağālis-i Gahāngīrī (ca. 1608–11) von ʿAbd al-Sattār b. Qāsim Lāhōrī* (Berlin: EBVerlag, 2016).

34 Cf. the classical study by Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), and recent criticism in Léon Buskens and Baudouin Dupret, “The Invention of Islamic Law: A History of Western Studies on Islamic Normativity and Their Spread in the Orient,” in Pouillon and Vatin, *After Orientalism*, 31–47.

35 On the history of this subdiscipline see Klein-Franke, *Die klassische Antike*. For the individual

Another important focus of Islamic studies concerns the social status of non-Muslims under Muslim rule, a topic of discussion in Muslim and non-Muslim sources written in the wake of the Arabic-Islamic expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries in various languages such as Arabic, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, or Latin. This subject has gained particular importance in literature with a clear Islamophobic tendency that depicts Islam exclusively as an expansionist and violent phenomenon threatening non-Muslim lifeworlds.³⁶ It has also been dealt with in apologetic literature insisting on the peaceful character of the Islamic expansion.³⁷ In response to both, various studies have made efforts to approach the issue in a balanced way.³⁸

Conversely, the status of Muslims in societies ruled by non-Muslim elites has received much attention in recent years. This is also due to most contemporary Western societies featuring substantial Muslim minorities who face the challenge of retaining their Muslim identity in an essentially secular environment that is strongly marked by Christian traditions. However, this issue is by no means new. It already became relevant in the wake of Latin-Christian expansionism into territories formerly held by Muslims from around the eleventh century onwards.³⁹

translation movements, see Javier Teixidor, "D'Antioche à Bagdad: Bibliothèques et traductions syriaques," in *Des Alexandries: Du livre au texte*, ed. Luce Giard and Christian Jacob (Paris: Éditions BNF, 2001), 249–262; Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society, 2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1998); Charles Burnett, *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages: The Translators and Their Intellectual and Social Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); Gad Freudenthal, "Arabic and Latin Cultures as Resources for the Hebrew Translation Movement: Comparative Considerations, Both Quantitative and Qualitative," in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 74–105.

36 Cf. Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam* (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

37 Cf. Nabīl Lūqā Bībāwī, *Intishār al-Islām bi-hadd al-sayf bayna l-ḥaqīqa wa-l-iftirā'* (Cairo: Dār al-Bibāwī li-l-nashr, 2002).

38 Xavier de Planhol, *Minorités en islam: Géographie politique et sociale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997); Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

39 Brian M. Catlos, *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, ca. 1050–1614* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Clifton E. Marsh, *The Lost-Found Nation of Islam in America* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2000); Dennis Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan, and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2005).

A last example concerns the reactions of Muslim societies to European colonialism and imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth century, a topic of study that constitutes an integral part of the master narrative of Islamic history sketched out above.

Because research in the wider field of Islamic studies has given and must give considerable attention to phenomena that are only loosely connected to issues of Muslim faith, researchers in the second half of the twentieth century began to consider the epithet “Islamic” as not being fully adequate to describe social constellations in historical and contemporary societies with a predominantly Muslim population. In the three-volume work *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* published in 1974, some of which had already been published in earlier studies in the late 1950s and 1960s, the US scholar Marshall G.S. Hodgson (1922–1968) called for the necessity of clearly distinguishing between Islam as a religion and societies marked by this religion.

I plead that it has been all too common, in modern scholarship, to use the terms “Islam” and “Islamic” too casually both for what we may call religion and for the overall society and culture associated historically with the religion. I grant that it is not possible nor, perhaps, even desirable to draw too sharp a line here, for (and not only in Islam) to separate out religion from the rest of life is partly to falsify it. Nevertheless, the society and culture called “Islamic” in the second sense are not necessarily “Islamic” in the first. Not only have the groups of people involved in the two cases not always been co-extensive (the culture has not been simply a “Muslim” culture, a culture of Muslims)—much of what even Muslims have done as a part of the “Islamic” civilization can only be characterized as “un-Islamic” in the first, the religious sense of the word. One can speak of “Islamic literature,” of “Islamic art,” of “Islamic philosophy,” even of “Islamic despotism,” but in such a sequence one is speaking less and less of something that expresses Islam as a faith. (...)

I have come to the conclusion that the problem can be solved only by introducing new terms. The term “Islamdom” will be immediately intelligible by analogy with “Christendom.” “Islamdom,” then, is the society in which the Muslims and their faith are recognized as prevalent and socially dominant, in one sense or another—a society in which, of course, non-Muslims have always formed an integral, if subordinate, element, as have Jews in Christendom. It does not refer to an area as such, but to a *complex of social relations*, which, to be sure, is territorially more or less well-defined. It does

not, then duplicate the essentially juridical and territorial term “dār al-islām”; yet, in contrast to “Muslim lands,” it is clearly collective—frequently an important point. Sometimes the phrase “the Islamic world” is used much in this sense. I prefer not to use it for three reasons: (a) in compound phrases where “Islamdom” can be a useful element, the three-word phrase can become clumsy; (b) the phrase itself uses the term “Islamic” in too broad a sense; (c) it is time we realized there is only “one world” even in history. If there is to be an “Islamic world,” this can be only in the future.

On the other hand, if the analogy with “Christendom” is held to, “Islamdom” does not designate in itself a “civilization,” a specific culture, but only the society that carries that culture. There has been, however, a *culture*, centred on a lettered tradition, which has been historically distinctive of Islamdom the *society*, and which has been naturally shared in by both Muslims and non-Muslims who participate at all fully in the society of Islamdom. For this, I have used the adjective “Islamicate.” I thus restrict the term “Islam” to the *religion* of the Muslims, not using that term for the far more general phenomena, the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions.⁴⁰

Hodgson thus called for a new terminology that does justice not only to the ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity of societies in which Islamic norms hold sway, but also to the fact that predominantly Muslim societies do not necessarily function according to a set frame of “Islamic” norms defined in the religious sense by uncontested authorities. He thus demanded the recognition of one of the most important aspects of transcultural theory, i.e. the recognition of cultural diversity in any given society and, as a result, of complex processes of cultural interaction and transculturation within the society itself.

In addition to highlighting the inner diversity of Islamicate societies as advocated by Hodgson, research of the past decades has increasingly focused on phenomena of cultural interaction and transculturation involving Islamicate societies and their non-Muslim environment. The following examples of studies, all of which focus on historical developments in the wider Mediterranean, illustrate this tendency: As opposed to the European medievalist Henri Pirenne, who still regarded Islam as “another religion

40 Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977), 57–58.

[...] and an entirely different culture” in the 1930s,⁴¹ scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth and Robert Hoyland have made efforts to understand the emergence of Islam as a phenomenon closely linked to other religious phenomena in late antiquity.⁴² Almut Höfert’s recent study on “imperial monotheism” describes the medieval Latin-Christian and Byzantine emperors and the caliph as three manifestations of an ancient institution cast into monotheistic forms, thus pointing to the shared political and ideological heritage of different medieval societies.⁴³ The debate about the nature of Christian-Jewish-Muslim cohabitation on the medieval Iberian Peninsula, subsumed under the controversial keyword *convivencia*, provides an example for the critical evaluation of cultural interaction and transculturation on the medieval Iberian Peninsula as a whole.⁴⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis’ study on Leo the African, alias Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Fāsī, stands for the heightened scholarly interest in personalities of the early modern period who transgressed normative and social barriers between Christendom and Islam.⁴⁵ Jocelyne Dakhliā’s study on the Mediterranean *lingua franca* and its use up to the nineteenth century, in turn, focuses on a linguistic medium that facilitated communication between Christians and Muslims within and outside predominantly Muslim societies.⁴⁶

Such studies show that, especially in the last decades, scholars working in the wider field of Islamic studies have not been content with the above-mentioned

41 Henri Pirenne, *Muhammad and Charlemagne* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939), 284.

42 Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Frankfurt a. M.: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010); Robert Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1053–1077.

43 Almut Höfert, *Kaisertum und Kalifat: Der imperiale Monotheismus im Früh- und Hochmittelalter* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2015).

44 María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002). The concept of *convivencia* has been harshly criticized, e.g. by Maya Soifer, “Beyond *convivencia*: Critical Reflections on the Historiography of Interfaith Relations in Christian Spain,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 19–35; Kenneth Baxter Wolf, “*Convivencia* in Medieval Spain: A Brief History of an Idea,” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 72–85; Eduardo Manzano Moreno, “Qurtuba: Algunas reflexiones críticas sobre el Califato de Córdoba y el mito de convivencia,” *Awraq: Estudios sobre el mundo árabe e islámico contemporáneo* 7 (2013): 225–246.

45 Al-Fāsī, a North African Muslim, spent several years as a Christian convert under the tutelage of Pope Leo X before—in all probability—returning to North Africa at the end of his life. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

46 Jocelyne Dakhliā, *Lingua Franca: Histoire d’une langue métisse en Méditerranée* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008).

master narrative according to which the rise of Islam was a process of diffusion and transculturation that transcended cultural boundaries. Rather, they felt the need to focus on liminal transcultural spaces and agents situated within and at the margins of Islam.

Orientalist legacies and Occidental counterreactions: Caught in transcultural crossfire

The existence of these and comparable studies notwithstanding, many specialists see the primary task of Islamic studies not necessarily in researching cultural border zones, third spaces, cultural brokers, and other phenomena either within Islamic(ate) societies or linking Islamic(ate) societies to non-Muslim milieus and environments, but in understanding and describing these societies from within, without imposing any conceptual framework.

In an essay on the methodological foundations of Islamic studies written in 2000, Marco Schöller harshly criticized approaches that unreflectingly force their own categories of thought on what he defined as “Islamic culture.” Schöller pointed to a long history of European-Christian and Western, i.e. Orientalist scholarship that largely saw in Islam what it wanted to see, instead of trying to understand how the cultural worlds of Islam presented themselves. To avoid such distortions, Schöller pleaded for an approach guided not only by empathy for, but by the object of study itself, i.e. of letting the sources speak rather than silencing them by imposing one’s own view on them.⁴⁷ Although Schöller did not engage with the transcultural paradigm as such, his plea to liberate the field of Islamic studies from its Orientalist legacy prompts the question if the transcultural approach is really guided by the object of study or by the conceptually inspired desire to unearth more and more evidence for its pre-defined conceptual framework. If the latter were the case, i.e. if the transcultural approach first defined its tenets and then applied them to its object of study, it could be interpreted as falling in line with older academic approaches of Western origin that claimed universality, but actually imposed their conceptual framework on their object of study.

Since the end of the nineteenth century and long before Edward Said published his influential definition and criticism of European and Western Orientalism,⁴⁸ strong currents in Arab and Muslim discourse criticized European and American scholarship on Islam for seeking to impose its

47 Cf. Schöller, *Methode und Wahrheit*, 7–38.

48 Said, *Orientalism*.

conceptual framework on Muslim societies with the aim of deconstructing the latter's ethnic, national, or religious identities.⁴⁹ In such forms of discourse, European and American scholars of Islam constitute prime targets of criticism, e.g. in various analyses of Western Orientalism (*al-istishrāq*) or Orientalists (*al-mustashriqūn*). The Arabic internet site "Collection of Copied Books" (*Jāmi' al-kutub al-muṣawwara*) features a bibliography of 211 Arabic works on Orientalism, approximately covering the period between the 1960s and the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁵⁰ In this list, we find a few studies such as Najīb al-'Aqīqī's three-volume oeuvre *The Orientalists* (1964–65) that treat Orientalist scholarship rather favourably. Without neglecting the polemical, often Islamophobic aspects of this Orientalist heritage, the detailed manual concludes with praise for the contributions of Western Orientalism towards ensuring the preservation of Islamic heritage(s).⁵¹ Other works focus on how Western Orientalists depict(ed) specific aspects of Islam. Although titles such as *The Impact of the German School of Orientalism on Qur'ānic Studies: Presentation and Analysis*,⁵² *The Opinions of the Orientalists on the Understanding of Revelation*,⁵³ or *Opinions of the Orientalists on the Holy Qur'ān between Equitability and Prejudice*⁵⁴ seem rather neutral, their content shows that their authors deemed it necessary to engage with a tradition of scholarship that was and is regarded as at least partly problematic. In the treatise *The Production of the Orientalists and its Influence on Modern Islamic Thought*, the Algerian author Malik Bennabi (Mālik b. Nabbī, 1905–1973) proffers a clear if unsatisfactory definition of "good" and "bad" Orientalist scholarship by distinguishing between Orientalists "praising Islamic civilization" and Orientalists "criticizing it, thus damaging its reputation."⁵⁵ In most works featuring in the above-mentioned list—many of them of a recent

49 Ekkehard Rudolph, *Westliche Islamwissenschaft im Spiegel muslimischer Kritik: Grundzüge und aktuelle Merkmale einer innerislamischen Diskussion* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1991), 4–119.

50 Cf. <http://kt-b.com/?p=5062> [Accessed 15. February 2017].

51 Najīb al-'Aqīqī, *Al-Mustashriqūn*, 2nd rev. ed., 3 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif bi-Miṣr, 1964–1965), 3:1122, 1163, 1166.

52 Nāṣir bin Muḥammad bin 'Uthmān al-Manī', "Athār madrasat al-istishrāq al-almāniyya fī l-dirāsāt al-qur'āniyya. 'arḍ wa-tahlīl," *Hawliyya markaz al-buḥūth wa-l-dirāsāt al-islāmiyya* 6 (2009): 297–458.

53 Idrīs Hāmid Muḥammad, *Arā' al-mustashriqīn ḥawla maḥmūd al-waḥī*, <https://islamhouse.com/ar/books/450166/> [Accessed 24. January 2017].

54 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Juyūṣī, "Arā' al-mustashriqīn ḥawla l-Qur'ān al-karīm bayna l-inṣāf wa-l-ijhāf," *Majallat jāmi'at al-shāriqa li-l-'ulūm al-shar'iyya wa-l-qānūniyya* 7, no. 1 (1431h/2010): 43–69.

55 Mālik b. Nabbī, *Intāj al-mustashriqīn wa-atharuhu fī l-fikr al-islāmī al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: Dār al-irshād, 1967), 5.

date—European or Western scholarship on Islam is sweepingly regarded as consciously destructive, as aiming at deconstructing the essence of Islam and of Muslim identity. Some titles speak for themselves, such as *The Influence of Orientalism on the Campaign Against the Prophet of Good, God Bless him and give him Peace*,⁵⁶ *The Three Wings of Deceit and its Feathers: Proselytism—Orientalism—Colonialism: Study, Analysis and Strategy*,⁵⁷ or *Roles of the Orientalists in the Corruption of the Guideposts of the Prophetic Tradition*.⁵⁸ One, and certainly not the least important reason for such negative evaluations of the production of European or Western scholars is that the latter generally work(ed) on various facets of Islam without endorsing, often even questioning the theological position that the latter constitutes divine revelation. Muḥammad Mohar Ali, formerly professor for the history of Islam at Madina Islamic University and Imām Muḥammad Islamic University, Riyad, claimed as late as 2004 that “the Orientalists leave no stone unturned to assail the Qur’an. This attempt of theirs has been going on since the beginning of Orientalism in the late middle ages.”⁵⁹

This criticism of Orientalist scholarship is closely related to forms of discourse that regard not only Western scholarship on Islam, but many other facets of Western influence, as menacing. This kind of discourse constitutes one of many counterreactions to the shocks of modernization brought about by the confrontation of largely traditionalist Muslim societies with European colonialism and Western imperialism in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century; it too has to be regarded as a transcultural phenomenon.⁶⁰ Whereas earlier authors such as Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935) and Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966) mainly criticized their contemporaries for imitating “Western” forms of behaviour and of thus losing the core of their Muslim identity,⁶¹

56 ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Namla, “Athar al-istishrāq fī l-ḥamla ‘alā rasūl Allāh,” *Majalla al-jāmi‘a al-islāmiyya* 148 (1430h/2009): 167–203.

57 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥasan Ḥanbaka al-Maydānī, *Ajnihāt al-makarr al-thalātha wa-khawāfihā: al-tabshīr – al-istishrāq – al-isti‘mār. dirāsa wa-tahlīl wa-tawjīh wa-dirāsa minhajīyya shāmila li-l-ghazw al-fikrī*, 8th enl. ed. (Damascus: Dār al-qalam, 2000).

58 Qaḥṭān Ḥamdī Muḥammad, “Adwār al-mustashriqīn fī tashwīh ma‘ālim al-sunna al-nabawīyya,” *Majallat al-dirāsāt al-tārīkhiyya wa-l-ḥaqāriyya* 3, no. 10 [2016?]: n.p.

59 Muḥammad Mohar Ali, *The Qur’an and the Orientalists* (Ipswich: Jam‘iyat ‘Ihya’ Minhaaj al-Sunnah, 2004), 353.

60 Cf. Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 127; Schöller, *Methode und Wahrheit*, 14n18; Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Random House, 2001), 98, 112–134; Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 141–188.

61 Cf. Rashīd Riḍā, “Renewal, Renewing, and Renewers,” (originally published 1931), trans. Charles Kurzman, in *Modernist Islam 1840–1940*, ed. Charles Kurzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

fundamental texts such as Jalāl Al-e Aḥmad's *Occidentosis (Gharbzadagi, 1963)* or Mehmet Doğan's *The Treachery that is Westernization (Batılulaşma İhaneti, 1975)* emphasized the disruptive impact of Western influences on Islam, Muslims in general, as well as the authors' respective societies in particular.⁶²

Against the backdrop of this perceived destructive Western impact on Muslim societies the Egyptian philosopher Ḥasan Ḥanafī's *Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism* (1991) insists on the necessity of strengthening Arab and Muslim identity by formulating an "Occidental" vision of Western societies analogous to the Orientalist vision of Muslim societies. Ḥanafī's volume of 875 pages deals with a large variety of topics and many facets of European history and thought. Its aim, however, is to propagate a new science called Occidentalism that reacts against Orientalism and Eurocentrism. It promotes intellectual forms of dealing with the West that end a period of passive reception of Western culture in non-Western societies and launch a new period of active innovation in the Muslim and, specifically, in the Arab sphere. This is to be achieved by analysing and explaining the composition of what Ḥanafī calls "the European consciousness" as it grew over the centuries, by using the same methods of critical deconstruction that have been applied to Islamic civilization by Orientalist scholars. By doing this, Ḥanafī seeks to expose the specifically European character of European civilization and thus to rebuke claims that Europe and the West have created a universal civilization to be imitated by all humans. He furthermore intends to demonstrate the historicity of European civilization, i.e. to show that the rise of European power must be followed by its fall, as was the fate of every civilization or culture, and that it is subjected to periods of growth and decay.⁶³

Ḥanafī's call for an explicitly Occidental approach to the West is partly based on the assumption that non-Western scholars have become intellectually dependent on ideas and concepts formulated in the West. In a contribution to the debate on globalization entitled "What is Globalization?" Ḥasan Ḥanafī goes as far as classifying debates and terminologies of Western origin as

2002), 77: "In our attempts to acquire the novel and borrow the modern we have only clung to the fringes and have never been able to reproduce it fully. What we have of the old and the modern is a shell of imitation, like the shell of an almond or a walnut that lies under the outer wooden layer, it is useless in itself and cannot preserve the core."; Sayyid Quṭb, *Social Justice in Islam* (originally published 1949), trans. William Shepard (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1. "People in this so-called 'Islamic world' do not review their own spiritual capital or intellectual heritage before they think about importing principles and plans and borrowing systems and laws from across the deserts and beyond the seas!"

62 Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell, comm. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984).

63 Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Muqaddima fī 'ilm al-istighrāb* (Cairo: al-Dār al-fanniyya), 1991.

a new, post-colonial means of achieving global hegemony vis-à-vis “nationally liberated” non-Western societies. Ḥanafī comments:

After the phase of national liberation, the Arab world in the southern part of the Mediterranean became independent, and the West returned to its natural borders—at least with regards to its military activity. But its influence remained—this time economically and culturally. Moreover, the West wanted to lead the planet into a new phase that would overcome the phase of national liberation. It thus developed new forms of hegemony by creating a terminology that was propagated outside its proper borders: “Globalization,” “one world,” “the end of history,” “clash of civilizations,” “governance,” “electronic revolution,” “global village,” “universalism” are terms that are not as innocent as they seem. They are terms that show how—in the modern world—the centre dominates the periphery. They are terms that force the intellectuals of the world to run after them panting to explain and comment on them without noticing that the process of commenting and of writing footnotes is not equal to producing texts independently. It rather is a way to expel them from history, a sort of summons to the periphery to follow obediently and to leave innovation and creative activity to the centre.⁶⁴

Thus, from Ḥanafī’s perspective, any idea or concept emerging in a European or transatlantic academic framework must be regarded as an intellectual continuation of Orientalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Although Ḥanafī has not commented on the issue of transculturality so far, it seems that his criticism of any approach of Western origin would also apply to the transcultural approach, regardless of the fact that the term “transcultural” leads back to Fernando Ortiz’ critique of racism and cultural essentialism in a transatlantic context marked by colonial ideologies.

Ḥanafī can be regarded as an intellectual mouthpiece for certain currents of thought in Arab and predominantly Muslim societies that nurture considerable mistrust and suspicion of Western intellectual efforts at understanding and describing phenomena in regions of the world beyond the West, Islamicate societies in particular. The statement quoted above shows that this mistrust is regarded as justified in view of around two centuries of European and American military, political, and cultural dominance vis-à-vis predominantly Muslim societies from Morocco to Afghanistan.

64 Ḥasan Ḥanafī, “Al-‘Awlama bayna l-ḥaqīqa wa-l-wahm,” in Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Šādiq Ġalāl al-‘Azm, *Mā al-‘Awlama?* (Damascus: Dār al-fikr, 2002), 45–47, translation by Daniel König.

The present state of Islamic(ate) societies from North Africa to Central Asia does nothing to alleviate this mistrust. Various foreign, including Western countries continue to interfere actively, and often violently, in the their affairs. In large and important parts of the Islamic(ate) sphere such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the legacy and contemporary manifestations of this external impact interact with power struggles closely related to conflicting forms of collective identity. The latter define themselves against each other: in religious terms vis-à-vis other interpretations of Islam and non-Islamic religions, in cultural terms vis-à-vis globalized “Western” influences, in ethnic terms vis-à-vis other groups perceived as different. According to the Syrian poet and essayist Adonis, otherwise a harsh critic of Western interventionism,⁶⁵ the inability to deal constructively with alterity has to be regarded as an important obstacle to the termination of these conflicts. Cited by *The Guardian*, he states:

In our tradition, unfortunately, everything is based on unity—the oneness of God, of politics, of the people. We can’t ever arrive at democracy with this mentality, because democracy is based on understanding the other as different. You can’t think you hold the truth, and that nobody else has it.⁶⁶

More often than not, these identitarian reactions against any form of alterity provide the ideological varnish to more complex constellations that are inextricably linked to geopolitical circumstances and a long history of power abuse in the respective societies themselves. However, this cannot conceal the fact that rhetorics of collective identity and collective othering play an important part in these conflicts. Against this backdrop, it is questionable if the transcultural approach—a “Western” approach that ultimately strives to dissect and deconstruct any notion of community, including Islam itself—will be accepted by Muslims who try to formulate different “solutions” to the problems ravaging their societies.

A collection of Friday sermons published in 2003 by the Syrian preacher Maḥmūd ‘Akkām, long-time mufti of the district of Aleppo and preacher in the Great Umayyad mosque of the same city,⁶⁷ can elucidate the Occidental frame of mind described above: not only are three sermons dedicated to a discussion of the relationship between “us” and “the West,” based on a clear dichotomy between “our situation” and “their situation,”

65 Adonis, *Violence et Islam: Entretiens avec Houria Abdelouahed* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), 125–132.

66 Maya Jaggi, “Adonis: A Life in Writing,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jan/27/adonis-syrian-poet-life-in-writing> [Accessed 14. September 2016].

67 See the author’s CV on <http://www.akkam.org/?type=cv> [Accessed 23. August 2016].

between “what they demand from us and what we demand from them,” as well as between “our history and their history”;⁶⁸ in a sermon entitled “Conversation between an Oriental and an Occidental” Maḥmūd ‘Akkām also addresses the problem of instable cultural identities. In this sermon, a young Syrian Arab Muslim is approached by a young man “from the West” who asks the former about his identity. The Oriental replies that he is “a Syrian” and “an Arab.” The Occidental does not accept these self-definitions and regards them as mere geographical and ethnic (*irqī*) epithets. When the Oriental hesitates to define himself as a Muslim because he feels incapable of explaining what Islam actually is, he is taken aside by another Oriental, who “outclasses the first-mentioned young man in that he represents [...] the son of the messenger of God, peace be upon him [...]” This ideal Muslim warns the first-mentioned young man,

not to look for an identity outside Islam. For they—including this young Westerner—are truthful if they search for their own identity, and it is fitting that they do so, for they do not possess a history and do not possess principles (*uṣūl*), and they will seek refuge in your religion in the hour of hours. Oh young Oriental, oh son of my country, oh son of my Arabhood: you are a Muslim, and what would civilization in Europe be like if it had lacked the seed planted by Islam on their territory? Listen, oh son of Syria, listen oh Arab: it is fitting for the others to search for their identity, and they will not tarry to find this identity in Islam at some point. So why do you tarry? Those whom you imitate, oh son of Syria, are those whose clothes you copy, are those from whom you import your weapons, are those from whom you import your car. If you can find a single person among them who displays a true identity in Islam, then the summons has been fulfilled. What is going on with you that you are ashamed of stating your correct identity, of saying to them: truly, I am a Muslim!⁶⁹

Such statements suggest that Muslims trying to defend the integrity not only of Islamic or Arabic, but of any form of non-Western cultural identity may very well regard deconstructivist forms of discourse as represented by the transcultural approach as a form of Western intellectual aggression that, once again, aims at dismantling non-Western concepts of identity to the advantage of European or Western interests. Seen from their perspective,

68 Maḥmūd ‘Akkām, *Fikr wa-manbar: Qaḍāyā al-insān wa-mafhūmāt al-risāla fī khuṭbat al-jum‘a*, ed. Muḥammad Adīb Yasirjī (Aleppo: Fuṣṣilat, 2003), 93, 107, 119, 131.

69 Maḥmūd ‘Akkām, “Muḥāwara bayna Sharqī wa-Gharbī,” in ‘Akkām, *Fikr wa-manbar*, 432–433, translation by Daniel König.

the transcultural approach cannot be accepted as an instrument of methodological precision that aims at achieving a less essentialist and more objective analysis of socio-cultural phenomena—in spite of the fact that its proponents generally position themselves within an academic tradition of post-colonialism and anti-Eurocentrism. Rather, it will appear to be a continuation of Western Orientalism, a new effort at deconstructing the “essence” of a particular brand of non-Western collective identity, even as part of a Western intellectual “crusade,” if one has recourse to the aggressive terminology and imagery used in *Dabiq*, the English-language propaganda magazine of the so-called Islamic State.⁷⁰

In his analyses of the debate surrounding Ḥanafī’s *Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism*, Thomas Hildebrandt classified different Occidentalists milieus. According to Hildebrandt, many Muslim intellectuals of the last century and a half have grappled with the challenge of defining the cultural identity of their own societies vis-à-vis a Western world perceived as oppressively dominant.⁷¹ Formulated in a period of severe political, economic, and social crises, their respective analysis of the problem and their proposed solutions differ considerably. Intellectuals with left-leaning or secular tendencies criticize Eurocentrist interpretations and the structural dominance of Western intellectual discourses over Arab and Muslim thought as well as Western political and economic hegemony, and plead for the promotion of processes of what could be called “egalitarian internationalization.” Thinkers who identify more strongly with Islam, in turn, have a tendency to regard ideas of Western origin as a menace to traditional values and religious dogmas, and plead for a complete refusal of foreign cultural influences as well as a revival of what they perceive as indigenous and authentic Islamic thought.⁷²

It should be emphasized that many Muslim intellectuals neither found nor find culturalized or religiously interpreted forms of Occidentalism convincing or attractive. In a conference held 1995 in Cairo and dedicated to Ḥanafī’s *Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism*, the latter’s colleague, the philosopher Faṭḥullāh Khulayf, accused Ḥanafī of joining hands with the prevalent fundamentalist discourse which draws clear boundaries between an

70 These magazines, under such titles as “The Failed Crusade” (no. 4 / Dhū l-Ḥijja 1435, i.e. October 2014) can be downloaded at <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq> [Accessed 29. August 2016].

71 Thomas Hildebrandt, *Emanzipation oder Isolation vom westlichen Lehrer? Die Debatte um Ḥasan Ḥanafīs “Einführung in die Wissenschaft der Okzidentalistik”* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1998), 1.

72 *Ibid.*, 101.

Islamic Self and a Western Other and condemns any form of free and critical thought. In addition to pointing to the irony that the basic concept of othering used by Ḥanafī in this work is actually taken from a European or Western thinker—Jean-Paul Sartre—Fathullāh Khulayf claims that, in Ḥanafī's treatise on Occidentalism,

the Islamic groups in the Arab world are excused for their current return to long flowing garments, beards, an Islamic way of being, prophetic medicine as well as the camel and the tent. It is astonishing that a philosopher of many possibilities and profound thought such as Ḥasan Ḥanafī remains stuck with the imbroglio of this time as well as with the remains of ignorance among the Ḥanbalītes who used to trouble the scholars of the *umma* as well as its philosophers, and who believe that receding into reflection is equal to [unlawful] innovation and [religious] error.⁷³

Fathullāh Khulayf's criticism of Ḥanafī's hypotheses has been prefigured, repeated, and enlarged in various other publications by Arabic-speaking intellectuals such as Ṣādiq al-'Azm.⁷⁴ Many of these intellectuals question simplistic cultural dichotomies and discuss terminologies of cultural interaction not only in terms of power asymmetries and dominance, but also in terms of fruitful interaction and acculturation. A contribution from the late 1990s to a volume entitled *Globalized Culture and the Culture of Globalization*, may serve as an example. Written in Arabic by the Syrian-French sociologist Burhān Ghalyūn, former professor at the University of Paris-Sorbonne III and leading figure in the opposition to Bashshār al-Asad around 2012, this article recalls Arab and Muslim experiences of Western colonialism, imperialism, and cultural hegemony. However, it also uses an Arabic equivalent to the English term "transculturation," and even asks if the effects of globalization do not force us to think beyond the conceptual categories of cultural interaction used hitherto.

Thinking about the relations between cultures (*al-thaqāfāt*) is not a new issue in global scientific and ideological discourse. Anthropology and cultural sociology have both coined various and potent terms to understand the mechanisms that govern the

73 Fathullāh Khulayf, "Ta'ammulāt fī 'Muqaddima fī 'ilm al-istighrāb,'" in Hildebrandt, *Emanzipation oder Isolation*, 119. Translation from the Arabic by Daniel König

74 Cf. Yudian Wahyudi, "Arab Responses to Ḥasan Ḥanafī's 'Muqaddima fī 'Ilm al-Istighrāb,'" *The Muslim World* 93 (2003): 233–248. Preceding Ḥanafī's publication: Sadik J. Al-Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," *Khamsin* 8 (1981): 5–26, repr. in Macfie, *Orientalism*, 217–238; postdating Ḥanafī's publication: Sadik J. Al-Azm, "Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Islamism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30, no. 1 (2010): 6–13.

clash (*al-ṣirāʿ*) or the mutual interaction (*al-tafāʿul*) of cultures. Among these various terms are the term “mutual acculturation” (*al-tathāquf*), which has dominated the studies of scholars in the past, as well as the term “spoliation,” which preceded it and which is linked to the analysis of the profound negative influences exerted by the era of colonialism (*al-ḥiqba al-isti māriyya*). Following this period and adding to these two scientific terms, studies proliferated that speak of “cultural hegemony” (*al-haymana al-thaqāfiyya*) or “cultural imperialism” (*al-imbaryāliyya al-thaqāfiyya*) or, taking things one step further, of “cultural invasion” (*al-ghazw al-thaqāfi*). Do the imprints that globalization will leave among the cultures of humankind fall into the frame provided by the terms that are currently circulating or that have preceded them? Or is it necessary to develop new terms that are more adequate to describe the constellations (*al-awḍāʿ*) resulting from the coalescence of the world through media and communication (*damaj al-ʿālam i lāmiyyan wa-ittiṣāliyyan*), and that are more effective and applicable (*akthar fāʿiliyyatan ijrāʿiyyatan*) to achieve an understanding of the future relations between these cultures?⁷⁵

Ghalyūn’s statement is part of a series of essays published since 1998 by Dār al-fikr, a publishing house with branches in Damascus and Beirut, under the title *Dialogues for a new Century* (*hiwārāt li-qarn jadīd*). Each of the forty-five volumes juxtaposes two essays on a given subject with the aim of documenting contemporary currents of thought, of encouraging dialogue between their respective proponents, and of promoting engagement with different opinions.⁷⁶ This highly interesting series thus testifies to the variety of intellectual milieus in the Arab sphere, featuring very different opinions on important social, political, and cultural issues.

In addition, one should consider that forms of Occidentalist thought are also questioned outside the academic intellectual sphere, e.g. in films. In an Egyptian comedy, produced 2005 under the title *The Night of the Fall of Baghdad* (*Laylat suqūt Baghdād*), a school headmaster tries to entice his former pupil Ṭāriq to construct a lethal weapon that might save Egypt from the dreaded American invasion. The film certainly addresses concrete

75 Burhān Ghalyūn, “Thaqāfat al-ʿawlama,” in *Thaqāfat al-ʿawlama wa-ʿawlamat al-thaqāfa*, ed. Burhān Ghalyūn and Samīr Amīn, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 2002), 44–45, translation by Daniel König.

76 See the homepage of the publisher listing all volumes, which cover a wide range of topics including laicism, the future of Islam in the “East” and “the West,” sociology in the Arab world, gender issues, modernity, the future of Israel, or the critical situation of minorities in the Arab world: <http://www.fikr.net/article/ديج-نرقل-تارواح-ظلسلس> [Accessed 27. January 2017].

anxieties arising from the complex geopolitical constellation in the post-2003 Middle East, defined in terms of “American oppression” (*al-qahr al-amrīkī*) on the film’s dust jacket. However, considering the film’s slapstick humour involving a Marihuana-smoking Tāriq falling in love with the headmaster’s daughter, one cannot really regard it as a serious attempt to disseminate Occidentalist thought.⁷⁷ Equally, Sāmīr Jamāl al-Dīn’s 2014 *Iraqi Odyssey*, an autobiographical documentary film produced in Switzerland, reminds us of the many complex family stories that involve members of predominantly Muslim societies seeking a life in a “Western” society.⁷⁸

In spite of this colourful diversity, forms of either political, economic, intellectual, cultural, or religious Occidentalism are a recurrent feature of discourse in predominantly Muslim societies. Accordingly, they have been detected and analysed in various social and regional contexts. Since the nineteenth century, they have been formulated—in varying intensity—in fiction, the media, and in government propaganda, not only in Arabic-speaking, but also in other predominantly Muslim societies such as Iran or Indonesia.⁷⁹ In an intellectual climate in which, despite its diversity, Occidentalist elements are rampant, Western scholarship on Islam, especially of a critical and deconstructivist nature, often elicits negative responses. According to Gudrun Krämer, such negative responses insert themselves into the wider discourse of what she terms “Orientalist-bashing.”⁸⁰ Voices engaging in the latter generally

77 Muḥammad Amīn, *Laylat suqūt Baghdād*, written and directed by Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo: Rotana Distribution, 2005).

78 Samir, *Iraqi Odyssey: Eine weltumspannende Familiensaga von Samir*, written and directed by Samir (Zurich: DschointVentschr Filmproduktion, 2014).

79 Cf. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); Akeel Bilgrami, “Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on the Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 33 (2006): 3591–3603; Rasheed El-Enany, *Arab Representations of the Occident: East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006); Meltem Akisha, *Occidentalism in Turkey: Questions of Modernity and National Identity in Turkish Radio Broadcasting* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Robbert Woltering, *Occidentalisms in the Arab World: Ideology and Images of the West in the Egyptian Media* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Fruma Zachs, “‘Under Eastern Eyes’: East on West in the Arabic Press of the Naḥḍa Period,” *Studia Islamica* 106, no. 1 (2011): 124–143; Typhaine Leservot, “Occidentalism: Rewriting the West in Marjane Satrapi’s ‘Persépolis,’” *French Forum* 36, no. 1 (2011): 115–130; Laetitia Nanquette, *Orientalism Versus Occidentalism: Literary and Cultural Imaging Between France and Iran Since the Islamic Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Susanne Enderwitz, “Orientalismus—Okzidentalismus,” in *An der Zeitenwende—Europa, das Mittelmeer und die arabische Welt*, ed. Bernd Thum (Stuttgart: ifa, 2012), 72–80; Judith Schlehe, “Concepts of Asia, the West, and the Self in Contemporary Indonesia: An Anthropological Account,” *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 3 (2013): 497–515; Ehsan Bakhshandeh, *Occidentalism in Iran: Representations of the West in the Iranian Media* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

80 Gudrun Krämer, “Unterscheiden und Verstehen: Über Nutzen und Missbrauch der

fail to take into account that proponents of (formerly) Orientalist disciplines have taken great pains to reflect critically upon their Orientalist heritage; in addition, these voices do not acknowledge that deconstructivist efforts to highlight the diversity of Islamic phenomena are also necessary to counter the monolithic interpretations of Islam that are proposed not only by Islamic fundamentalists, but also by Islamophobic groups.⁸¹

The legacy of othering and essentializing Islam that plays such an important role in the textual history of Western societies⁸² characterizes a large range of more recent Islamophobic statements and literature published in Western societies.⁸³ In the current geopolitical constellation, it has even been a defining factor in the formation of right-wing populist movements such as the Germany-based PEGIDA-movement, founded 2014, whose members regard themselves as “patriotic Europeans” battling “against the Islamization of the Occident” (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*).⁸⁴ It is a characteristic feature of Islamophobic voices that they regard arguments insisting on the permeability and inner diversity of the macro-category Islam as but another form of escapist “multicultural” propaganda. In the Islamophobic view, such efforts at differentiation—fully endorsed by the transcultural approach—serve to minimize the dangers of Islamization by ignoring or even deliberately downplaying what they regard as Islam’s violent and expansionist “true essence.”⁸⁵

Islamwissenschaft,” in Poya and Reinkowski, *Das Unbehagen in der Islamwissenschaft*, 266: “Es wäre eine große Erleichterung und Ermutigung für alle diejenigen, die sich mit dem Islam beschäftigen, wenn das innerhalb und außerhalb der islamischen Welt betriebene Orientalisten-*bashing* allmählich außer Mode käme. Anstatt anklagend mit dem Finger auf die immer gleichen Wissenschaftler zu zeigen (die meisten von ihnen tot oder hochbetagt), würde es sich lohnen, zur Kenntnis zu nehmen, was sich derzeit auf dem weit gefassten Gebiet der Islamwissenschaft tut, und zwar nicht nur in englischer Sprache.”

81 Ibid., 267–268.

82 Cf. Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 271–309, on “The survival of medieval concepts.”

83 Ayhan Kaya, “Islamophobia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 745–769; Todd H. Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Lanham: Fortress Press, 2015).

84 Lars Geiges, Stine Marg, and Franz Walter, *Pegida: Die schmutzige Seite der Zivilgesellschaft?* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015).

85 An image recently put into literary form by controversial bestselling author Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015). On fears of an Islamic takeover in Europe see also Daniel König, “Wie eine Religion Staat und Gesellschaft durchdringt,” in *Staat und Religion in Frankreich und Deutschland*, ed. Felix Heidenreich, Jean-Christophe Merle, and Wolfram Vogel (Berlin: lit, 2008), 12–62.

In sum, efforts to present Islam as a historically dynamic plethora of multifarious, even contradictory, phenomena—certainly a matter of concern to the transcultural approach—incurs the wrath of groups favouring monolithic definitions of “Islam” and “the West.” Consequently, the field of Islamic studies is caught in the crossfire of two essentialist world views—formulated in terms of Occidentalism and Islamism on the one side, in terms of Orientalism and Islamophobia on the other. Since adherents to these world views explicitly situate themselves on opposing sides of a perceived cultural and religious divide, Islamic studies is caught in what one could playfully describe as “transcultural crossfire.”

Some conclusions: Risks and prospects of applying the transcultural approach

This essay set out to investigate how the wider field of Islamic studies interacts with the transcultural paradigm. We have seen that the variant of Islamic studies that emerged in medieval and early modern Europe could be classified as “transcultural” from the outset, because it dealt with Islam and predominantly Muslim societies as the religious and cultural Other. Soon, the field of Islamic studies acquired an additional transcultural dimension, in that it began to engage more intensively with the various different religious, geographical, and linguistic spheres that form part of the historical and contemporary orbit of Islam. This is reflected in widely accepted master narratives of Islamic history, a number of well-established, highly specialized subfields and the more recent emergence of conceptual theories and studies that highlight the inner diversity and wider entanglement of societies influenced by Islam.

Scholarship in Europe and the Americas has produced many contributions that highlight the extremely rich cultural productivity of Islamic societies—ranging from the most traditional exegesis of the *Qurʾān*⁸⁶ via Hindu-Muslim Sufi shrines⁸⁷ to Egyptian pop-music.⁸⁸ In spite of these efforts, no European or American scholar working in the wider field of what has been defined here as Islamic studies can avoid being confronted with extreme forms of essentialization and dichotomization, both of which build on a long history of Christian-Muslim othering and religious polemics. This is meticulously documented—for the period

86 Cf. Fuad Sezgin, *Qurʾānwissenschaften, Ḥadīth, Geschichte, Fiqh, Dogmatik, Mystik*, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 1–49.

87 J.J. Roy Burman, *Hindu-Muslim Syncretic Shrines and Communities* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2002).

88 Daniel J. Gilman, *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

from the beginnings of Islam to the early twentieth century—in the multivolume series *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*.⁸⁹ As heirs to the monotheistic belief in universal and absolute truth,⁹⁰ Christians and Muslims throughout history have actively contributed to the creation of strong boundaries between their respective ingroup and an outgroup very often perceived not only as “pagan” or “infidel,” but as menacing to one’s proper collective identity.⁹¹ Othering in its many variants—ranging from seemingly harmless statements to scholarly descriptions to crusading or *jihād*-propaganda—plays a role in every analysis of relations between non-Muslims and Muslims or between Europe and the Islamic(ate) sphere. This holds true even if such an analysis actively seeks to deconstruct the artificial dichotomy inherent in these religious and geo-cultural categories,⁹² favours a supra-religious “Mediterraneanist” approach,⁹³ or seeks to rehabilitate the open-mindedness of medieval Islamic scholarship vis-à-vis non-Muslim societies by challenging the long-cherished cliché that Muslims showed no interest in non-Muslim societies before the nineteenth century.⁹⁴

The variants of Occidentalist discourse presented in this article show that over the centuries the categories used in such forms of othering have shifted. Arabic-Islamic texts of the pre-modern period defined a European Other in geographic,

89 David Thomas, ed., *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, 7 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2009–2015).

90 Cf. Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaïsche Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich: Hanser, 2010); Yūsuf Zīdān, *Al-Laḥūt al-‘arabī wa-uṣūl al-‘unfal-dīnī* (Beirut: Dār al-shurūq, 2009).

91 See e.g. Janina M. Safran, *Defining Boundaries in al-Andalus: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Islamic Iberia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

92 John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein, and Henry Laurens, *Europe and the Islamic World: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), deals with various forms of active othering, but emphasizes on p. 4: “Readers should therefore not be fooled by the title of the book. (...) It will deal not with the relations between two ‘civilizations’ but with the complex and diverse relations between many individuals and groups that belong to what we lump together, with all the ambiguity already noted, under the umbrella terms ‘Europe’ and ‘the Islamic world.’”

93 Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) and David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London: Lane, 2011) have strongly contributed to a recent upsurge in “Mediterranean studies.” On the various facets of this perspective see Rania Abdellatif et al., eds., *Construire la Méditerranée, penser les transferts culturels: Approches historiographiques et perspectives de recherche* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2012); Mihran Dabag et al., eds., *Handbuch der Meditterranistik: Systematische Mittelmeerforschung und disziplinäre Zugänge* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2015).

94 A cliché forcefully propounded in Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (1982; repr. New York: Norton, 2000); criticized in Nabil Matar, *Europe Through Arab Eyes, 1578–1727* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Nizar F. Hermes, *The [European] Other in Medieval Arabic Literature and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2012); Daniel G. König, *Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West: Tracing the Emergence of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

ethnic, genealogical and, of course, religious terms, but never depicted Europe as a clearly bounded cultural entity.⁹⁵ Experiences with European and North American forms of secularism, colonialism, and imperialism since the late eighteenth century seem to have given rise to the conceptualization of a civilizational Other called “the West” whose intellectual culture is marked by a particular, hegemonic approach to non-Western religions, societies, and cultures that strives to dissect, deconstruct, and thus rule the latter. Intellectual reactions to this perceived threat have in more than one case taken the form of essentializing constructions of cultural and religious identities defined, in one way or the other, by Islam.

In view of all this, scholars working in the wider field of Islamic studies and propagating the transcultural approach as a deconstructionist tool will, in all probability, be accused of continuing an Orientalist intellectual tradition that misunderstands or even consciously misrepresents Islam. Radical fundamentalist Muslims will not accept such deconstructionist endeavours, because they tend to regard Islam as a divinely revealed and thus ahistorical, unalterable guideline to individual and social perfection. Intellectuals, in turn, including some Western specialists of Islamic studies and Muslim thinkers open to complex forms of Western thought, may raise the question, if an active propagation of the transcultural approach does not continue an Orientalist tradition of imposing concepts of Western origin on other parts of the world. At the same time, such efforts to deconstruct will also receive criticism from Islamophobic groups who tend to regard Islam as an equally ahistorical and unalterable form of systemically organized religious violence. In the wider field of Islamic studies, scholars promoting the transcultural or any other deconstructivist analytical approach to Islam thus seem to be caught between the hammer and the anvil: deciding not to apply such methods would leave the power of defining Islam to forces promoting monolithic, ahistorical, and often very intolerant versions of Islam; applying them, provokes accusations that these scholars are either trying to damage Islam or, conversely, belittle its menacing potential.

A large number of studies dealing with the Orientalist legacy and their Occidentalist repercussions discusses the difficult position of scholars in the wider field of Islamic studies, and proposes more fruitful solutions to dealing with these issues.⁹⁶ Such proposals could be strengthened by asserting that, from a methodological point of view, the transcultural approach insists on the necessity of acknowledging the large variety of different perspectives on a particular

95 König, *Arabic-Islamic Views*, 343–347.

96 See notes 14 and 20.

object of study. In concrete terms, this would mean that no academic analysis pertaining to the field of Islamic studies can be regarded as truly transcultural, if it does not take into account the diversity of Muslim and non-Muslim opinions on the subject in question, including Islamophobic and radical fundamentalist perspectives. In this way, the transcultural approach could support tendencies in post-Orientalist Islamic studies that strive to highlight the inner diversity and large variety of “Western” and “Muslim” opinions on any given subject, and to promote an understanding of the large range of the perspectives involved. In this way, the transcultural approach can contribute to strengthening the ethical foundations of scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities, which should display and explain the large variety of (entangled) perspectives on any given subject rather than passing judgement on them. In addition, it could lend support to the great number of Muslims and non-Muslims in and outside the academic sphere who reject processes of dichotomization, but whose voices are often not loud enough in geopolitical and social circumstances that are often dominated by oppressive and authoritarian political forces.

The transcultural approach’s thematic focus on phenomena that transgress the constructed borders of any perceived entity will remain challenging to all those who adhere to normative notions of ethnic, religious, or cultural hierarchization or evaluate transgressions of these perceived boundaries in categories of “right” and “wrong.” However, in view of the geopolitical and global economic constellations characterizing our age, one could claim—especially from a Eurocentric perspective—that this thematic focus is not only desirable, but necessary. Muslims form an integral part of European history since the eighth century CE. Important historical manifestations of Islam have existed on the Iberian Peninsula, in southern France, the Mezzogiorno, various Mediterranean islands, and the Balkans, always interacting with their non-Muslim environment. Non-Muslim European societies, in turn, have massively influenced predominantly Muslim societies in and beyond the Mediterranean in the modern period. Since the 1960s—in a French colonial context even earlier—large Muslim populations have become an integral part of European and Western societies, and—largely successfully—have found or are finding ways to become full-fledged members of these societies while retaining their Muslim identity.⁹⁷ In recent years, increasingly multireligious Western European societies have been taking and continue to take in large numbers of Muslim refugees and migrants, first during the wars that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, then during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015–2016 that witnessed the massive influx of people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and other countries into European societies.

97 For an overview see *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam*, ed. Jocelyne Cesari (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Thus, transcultural phenomena related to Islam and Europe have been, are, and will continue to be of high relevance to those societies populating the wider Euromediterranean. The essayist and journalist Muḥammad al-Akhḍar commented in an article, published in September 2015 on the internet news-outlet *Bawābat al-Sharq al-iliktrūniyya*, that the so-called refugee crisis has elicited various fears of what exponents of the transcultural approach term “transculturation”: many Europeans were afraid that the intake of large numbers of Muslim refugees might lead to an Islamization of Europe, whereas many Muslims dreaded that the refugees’ integration into European societies could result in their Christianization.⁹⁸ By unearthing more and more, and not necessarily harmonious or harmonizing evidence for phenomena that have to be situated between different manifestations of Islam and their non-Muslim cultural environments, the transcultural approach can support existing tendencies to deconstruct the long-cherished dichotomies of “Orient and Occident,” of “Islam and the West,” and of “believers and infidels” that play such an important part in these and similar fear-ridden visions of the future. Such evidence could play a big role in creating an intellectual and societal atmosphere that encourages processes of mutual adaptation and assimilation that do not automatically destroy cultural, including religious identities of either host societies, immigrant groups, or any other social formations trying to find a place in this wider Euromediterranean and ultimately global setting. Such a critical, analytical, but also understanding transcultural perspective on the past and the present will certainly be able to show that the future holds many more possibilities than either “Islamization” or—what the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* translates as—“Westoxification.”⁹⁹

98 Muḥammad al-Akhḍar, “Hal tataḥawwal Ūrūbbā ilā l-islām ... am yatanāṣṣir al-lāji’ ūn?” *Bawābat al-Sharq al-iliktrūniyya*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.al-sharq.com/news/details/368291> [Accessed 23. August 2016].

99 *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, s.v. “Westoxification,” www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2501 [Accessed 29. August 2016].