

On Understanding Islam



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On Understanding Islam

Selected Studies

WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH
Harvard University

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General Editor's Preface

At the present time a scholar of religion who lectures, reads papers and publishes will inevitably find his various products dispersed over a number of periodicals, *Festschriften* and other volumes, mostly published in different countries and often in different languages. This presents a problem which is especially pressing for those colleagues and students who want to follow the publications of a particular scholar over a number of years because of their scholarly standard and inner coherence of thought.

We are glad that Professor Wilfred Smith, an Islamicist of repute, has consented to bring together in one volume a selection of his contributions in the field of Islamic studies, papers and articles. Some of these have been published in non-Western journals, and others appear here for the first time. These contributions originated on different occasions, often in response to solicitations by colleagues and institutions. The record of their origin as contained in the various introductions shows an inter-human dimension of scholarly work which contrasts with those times when a scholar's findings were communicated mainly to his immediate pupils.

Professor Smith has never kept aloof from intellectual and moral engagement. Born in Toronto in 1916, he first studied Oriental Languages there, obtaining his B.A. in 1938. After two years of studying Theology and Oriental Languages at Cambridge, England, he went to Lahore where he taught Indian and Islamic History during the war, from 1941 to 1945. Here he published his *Modern Islām in India: A Social Analysis* in 1943. After the war he continued his study of Oriental Languages at Princeton University where he obtained his M.A. in 1947 and his Ph.D in 1948. After having spent another year in Lahore he was appointed Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University, Montreal, in 1949, and in 1951 Director of the then just founded graduate Institute of

Islamic Studies at the same university. In 1957 his *Islam in Modern History* appeared. After a sabbatical year spent in India, Dr. Smith was appointed in 1964 Professor of World Religions at Harvard University, and Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions which was founded in 1957 and attached to the same university. In the meantime, in 1963, his *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* was published. After an interlude from 1973 until 1978, when he was Professor of Religion at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, Dr. Smith returned to Harvard University in 1978 as Professor of the Comparative History of Religion, and Chairman, Committee on The Study of Religion. After some books published earlier, in 1979 his *Faith and Belief* appeared. In 1976 the anthology *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith* had been published as a pocket book, edited and provided with a general introduction plus introductions to the different chapters by Dr. Willard G. Oxtoby. That book also contains a complete bibliography of Dr. Smith's publications up to 1975.

Anyone who is at all familiar with the main books of this author will recognize here problems and techniques of research which led to those books but which perhaps find a clearer formulation here. The great themes are the relations between different religious communities, the rise of particular religious orientations and movements, and specific problems with which Muslim communities have found themselves confronted in different historical and social situations both in the past and in recent times. The author's concern is the meaning that life and the universe have for Muslims in the light of the Islamic symbols, and the implications of a life lived within the particular symbol system of Islam. For him, Islam should be studied according to its historical and its non-mundane, 'transcendent', dimension which latter is mediated by revelation perceived by Muslims as the disclosure of a transcendent pattern of prescribed behavior. Moral responsibility linked to faith is recognized as a central fact of Islam over against which processes of reification and the rise of communalism are seen as degradations of faith and moral sense. Part IV, in particular, in-

cludes a penetrating reflection on how to interpret Muslim-Christian relations. Specific concepts and kinds of analysis are used to make the different religious traditions mutually intelligible. Dr. Smith stresses the existence of a joint Christian-Muslim history. Those readers familiar with the author's books on the modern period may find to their surprise essays here also dealing with what may be called classical Islam. With a keen analysis of basic concepts Professor Smith explores the dimension of faith and moral responsibility contained in early *kalām* texts.

It is not enough to say that Dr. Smith's work represents an effort of understanding on a level and a scale worth noting in Islamic studies and also beyond them. His particular, 'personalized' way of studying Islam itself deserves further attention. There is indeed, behind all the erudition and logical argumentation, an intricate relationship between the scholar's treatment of religion in terms of faith, tradition and truth perception, and his work on Islamic materials. Professor Smith reveals himself to be at the same time an Islamicist and a scholar of religious studies and also a thinker on religion, exploring the dimension of faith in Islam and in other traditions. This has led to several original interpretations of Islamic materials, to which the present volume testifies.

One of the current problems in Western scholarship concerned with religious data in non-Western cultures is that of grasping the meaning of those data for the people concerned, and the extent to which certain Western concepts may be helpful in grasping such meanings or, conversely, may create misunderstandings when applied indiscriminately. Throughout his work, Dr. Smith shows a self-critical attitude with regard to concepts and categories, and he wants to identify himself both as a historian and as an intellectual. He shows particular attention for the way in which religious matters have been conceptualized from within a given religious tradition and in particular religious schools and movements. It is perhaps precisely through his concern with the religious dimension of religious differences that he has become so strongly aware of the dangers of misunderstanding and has striven for improvement of the conceptual tools with which to study religious data. In Islamic

studies this has meant that he has kept in mind, in his effort of understanding, that Muslims, too, would be potential critics.

It is hoped that this volume will find its way to scholars of Islam both Muslim and non-Muslim, as well as to a broader public whose interest for Islam 'beyond politics' has increased in recent years.

Utrecht, January 1980

JACQUES WAARDENBURG

Preface

In the course of my life I have been bold enough to write two substantial books on Islām, and have included substantial Islamic chapters in my two or three volumes on understanding the comparative history of religion more generally. In addition, on Islamic matters, I have written individual articles or given individual addresses, some published here and there in various journals, *Festschriften*, conference proceedings, and the like, some not previously published. Among these the most significant are here collected, and through the courtesy of the editor of the *Religion and Reason* series, made public.

The title that I have chosen, 'On Understanding Islām', has a double significance. First, in a quite straightforward way it enunciates a hope, I trust not too arrogantly, that these various pieces, arranged here as chapters constituting a more or less coherent book, may contribute to such understanding on the part of any who take the trouble to read this work. A sincere scholar naturally hopes that the studies on which he works and that he finally publishes will enable others to understand better the subject with which they deal. In the case where that subject is a religious tradition and its community and their faith, the matter becomes a mighty one; and understanding, a question delicate and profound. Misunderstanding is so easy and has been so common, of any religious position by outsiders, that one essays to overcome it, however partially, with some trepidation, and yet with stalwart courage. When in addition a modern writer on Islām has in view Muslim readers also, the enterprise is doubly venturesome; once again, trepidation and courage combine.

Secondly, however, the title suggests that in evidence here is a reflection on the very attempt towards understanding Islām; on what is involved in the endeavour of a scholar, himself a participant in another and often 'rival' religious process—the Chris-

tian—to understand. Accordingly, at the suggestion of the series editor, my friend and colleague Dr. Jacques Waardenburg, I have prefixed to each item in this collection a brief introductory note. Although each is minor, cumulatively they may illuminate the path along which one contemporary student of our religiously diverse world has travelled towards such understanding as he has been given the grace and has ferreted out the data to attain—of that world, and within it of the Muslim sector of our common humanity.

W.C.S

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General Introduction

The first half of this volume deals with Islamics in and of itself, as it were internally; the second half (Parts III and IV) treats of Islamic involvement with the world around it. For any religious tradition, both are significant. The procedure in the former case (Parts I and II) is to consider specific concepts, with sufficient closeness to allow each to illuminate a way of perceiving the world, and what this entails. In Part I, the particular concepts are of a high order of generality in their import, so that these serve as introductory; in Part II, the items examined are more technical, although the implications are major, which is why they have been chosen. (To me it proves delightful, as well as rewarding, to find that the nuance of a particular grammatical form, for example, may serve as a clue to a profound human orientation to the cosmos.) Of the two sections on Islamic relations with others, Part III deals with India. The sector of the Islamic world that I know best, Pakistan and Muslim India, has for a thousand years been involved with the Hindū complex, and more recently with the British Rāj and Western-derived modernity. Part IV deals with Islamic relations with the Christian tradition—that of my own religious group—with which Islām has been involved throughout its time on earth, theologically, historically, and in many other ways—as well as being involved today through, for instance, scholarship such as this.

Eight (that is: half) of the chapters here have not previously been published in the Western world; one has not previously appeared in English; and three have not before been published at all.

PART ONE

General Presentations

Islamic History as a Concept

This piece, here published for the first time, was an address given to the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America in 1975. The invitation to speak to the concluding plenary session of that gathering (held that year in Louisville, Kentucky) provided an opportunity to put together and to clarify certain thoughts that I had been developing on this highly general topic, in seeming contrast to the more meticulous work on detail that was also occupying me at about that time, such as the study of the meaning of the word arkān (below, Part II of this present volume) which was published a few months later. To understand the life of Muslims involves an appreciation both of the comprehensive framework of the whole, and of specific items within it. It seems good to give careful consideration to both; we begin this collection with reflection on the over-all theme.

The two-word phrase 'Islamic History' falls often from our lips quite glibly. Yet glibness here, I would suggest, is out of order. The monumental mightiness of the matters involved should give us pause. Each word is a mouthful, over which the sensitive might well choke; let alone, the two together. 'History' denotes a reality broader, deeper, more complex, more mysterious, than any human being can possibly understand. 'Islām', similarly. Not to be astonished, tremulous, diffident, dismayed, agog, in pronouncing either term would be obtuse; a phrase that links the two is well-nigh overwhelming.

At the very least it is worth our careful reflection together for a few moments.

I distinguish between historiography and history. By the word 'history' some mean an account of past events; but I mean those

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events themselves, and the dynamic process in which they are embedded: the course of human affairs, which we historians attempt, always inadequately, to discern, to understand, and as historiographers to make knowable to others, and intelligible. It is important that our concept of history formally and explicitly transcend our awareness of its content. Just as the world of nature is a reality to which scientific knowledge approximates, so too the reality of history is something to which our historiography only approximates, less or more closely.

Any of us from the outside who visit the Muslim world, especially if we stay in a city, are probably involved during the day in busyness and the hubbub of activity that distract or drown this out. In the early morning, on the other hand, if we are awake in time to listen, through the cool night air and against the still background of the first white streaks of dawn we may hear the *adhān* call to prayer as it floats melodiously: a splendid recitative, voiced from a nearby mosque, full of artistic beauty and—particularly, of course, for the Muslims themselves—full of rich meaning. I myself used to hear it so in Lahore. It is no small matter that the same call, at the same times of the day, in the same magnificent Arabic, is heard throughout the Muslim world: from Indonesia or the Philippines or China, through India and Central Asia and Iran, to the eastern and southern Mediterranean and down into Africa. It is a large world; its inhabitants form a large community; Islam is in every sense a *great* affair. The Muslim in Lahore, or in Samarkand or Kano, does not feel isolated, but is vividly conscious of belonging to a living community spread across the globe.

Not only does the call put him effectively in a setting that stretches far in space, from Java to Morocco. Also, it places him in an historical setting, stretching back in time, to a past glory of which he is both aware and proud. The same call to prayer, with its serene dignity, has been repeated five times each day over the centuries. By it, and the faith that it expresses, the Muslim is firmly related to a past that stands imposingly behind him, bequeathing him traditions and institutions that have stood the test of age, and are bound to patterns of life that made his ancestors great. A

thousand years ago his civilization was the impressive world leader, along with China and Japan; the West was the third world, an under-developed area. Who knows how things will stand a thousand years hence?

In this call and in various other ways, the Islamic complex relates its participants to a present-day, world-wide community, and to an historical past. More important than either of these, however, it relates them to God. That call to prayer has profound secondary associations. Yet essentially, we must remember, it is a personal call, to each Muslim, to pray. It, and the many other symbols and rites and habits through which his faith is expressed and mediated, lift the individual out of his humdrum workaday world and place him in a setting that is theocentric, facing God. The morning call summons him in the name of Cosmic Truth to be up and doing. The faith that it intones is to permeate his life from dawn to nightfall, and from his inner chamber to his busy shop in the crowded market-place. Over the centuries, the Muslim has regulated the smallest detail of his life by the sacred law, and still to-day the memory of that suffusing spirit is alive.

Islam historically has changed the face of the world. Historically, it has also changed the heart of the Muslim. Space, time, and God are linked, not to say fused, at least ideally, in the Islamic moment. Space and time constitute the realm that we regularly designate as 'history'; that call to prayer exemplifies that insofar as history has been Islamic history, not merely space and time but also God are involved, are held in unity, *tawḥīd*. The *adhān* in particular, and Muslim history in general, pose the question of the significance of history, religiously—or: of faith, historically. To use one particular phrasing to designate the matter, they introduce us to the relation between time and eternity.

Western historians have tended at times to imagine, or to assume, that it is possible to deal with the historical without raising that portentous issue. A neat dichotomizing of the temporal and the eternal, of the secular and the spiritual, of the historical and the transcendent, is calculated to evade this problem. A study of Islamic history, if it be serious, will not let us off the hook so

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lightly. To study Islamic history is to study that relation, empirically manifested, historically operative.

I re-iterate, then, that we must remember with what a mighty category we have to do when we speak the category 'history'. The development of the concept of history in the nineteenth-century West was an enormous intellectual achievement—as great, one could contend, as the development of science. Indeed I am inclined to the view that an eventual fusion of these two, perhaps beginning now to emerge, will be requisite to our salvaging of our own Western civilization from disaster. I leave that aside for the moment, although we shall return to it finally. I myself am an historian, through and through. Yet (or therefore) I argue that our concept 'history' requires critical analysis. Great though it be as our inheritance, the category yet needs refining if it is to serve us adequately, for our apprehension of reality, specifically the reality of human affairs. One of the joys and responsibilities of studying a major civilization other than one's own, as we Western Islamicists are engaged in doing, is that it can help enormously towards enabling us all in the West to become intelligently self-critical of our own Western conceptual patterns. Our loyalty to a pursuit of truth enables us to move beyond a loyalty to our own predilections, and those of our society. We see the danger of subordinating the data that we study to the ideational patterns of our own always limited vision, and thus we are enabled to move significantly forward towards an improvement of our own windows on the world.

This is so particularly in the matter before us. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the West, understood humankind's religious life even less than do we, and thought it more negligible. To a considerable extent the concept of history that we have inherited tends to omit the religious, even the spiritual, altogether, and certainly the transcendent (this last, dogmatically?).

It would be idle to study Islamic history if this did not contribute to our better understanding of human history generically. We also are human; we also are historical. To enlarge one's apprehension of Islamic or of any other human history is to enhance one's self-awareness.

Let us see how this works in this specific case. In particular, we shall see that it disrupts any complacency in supposing that the historical and the transcendent are two separate categories.

Let us begin in the realm of art. My reason for this particular starting-point will become more fully evident later on. Yet right away one may recognize, in considering any work of art, that it is a synthesis of two elements, two that some have thought to call respectively historical and timeless. The word 'timeless' may or may not please you; I am not too happy with it—my own vocabulary tends to opt for 'transcendent'. Nor is the word 'historical' in this polarity felicitous; for it suggests that what it names is discrete from the other, whereas human history is especially characterized by their intertwining. Whatever one's phrasing to describe the situation, however, the fact is clear. Art has two dimensions. This fact sets our problem.

Each painting or sculpture, each piece of music, each poem that human beings produce has a context. In addition, each has also an intrinsic meaning; or shall we say, a human meaning. The former quality is never missing. No artistic creation but emerges out of and reflects its particular time-and-place setting (often called its historical setting). Nonetheless, if it not transcend that setting, then it is of little interest, and of little worth. The difference between great art and ephemeral lies here. Yet the difference between great art and ephemeral is not that great art has less of the historical, but rather that it has more of the timeless. In truly great art, the contextual is not negated; it is used, is subsumed, and is transcended.

Religious people are found saying that the eternal breaks through into time. This seems to imply that it was not there already. One's ability to see it is no doubt a breakthrough. Art, one might say, is an instance of something that breaks our ordinary obtuseness in such a way as to enable us to recognize a certain dimension as indeed there.

The literary critic Northrop Frye has remarked¹ about one of Shakespeare's great plays: 'You wouldn't go to *Macbeth* to learn about the history of Scotland—you go to it to learn what a man

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feels like after he's gained a kingdom and lost his soul'. Frye was thinking of eleventh-century Scotland; one cannot deny that *Macbeth* is an historical document of Shakespeare's own time, and students of the play may and should know something, or even much, of that early-seventeenth-century context. It would be rather pitiful, however, not to move beyond that. For reasons such as Frye gave, the play is as relevant to the twentieth century as it was to the seventeenth; though it had two links with the seventeenth, one of which no longer obtains. It has two links with the twentieth, too, but one of them is different, one the same. If you or I see or read *Macbeth*, that fact is then an event in our century; and if we are merely entertained by it, or merely 'interested' in it, then it remains at the level of mundane history. If, on the other hand, we are moved by it, are open to its transcendently human quality, if what Frye calls our souls—I do not know what you call them; but whatever your vocabulary, I hope that you have not failed to notice that they are there—if our souls are changed, then from the experience there is a link of some sort not only with eleventh-century Scotland and seventeenth-century England and twentieth-century America or wherever, but also with that timeless or transcendent realm to which great artists help us to actualize our inherent potentiality to rise.

Similarly, The World of Islam Festival in London presently will bring together, one hears, many striking examples of the art of Muslims over the ages and around the world. These will illustrate Islamic history and culture, and those of us who can visit it bringing to it much historical-background awareness will be enabled the more adequately to appreciate the exhibition. Yet, unless also we can appreciate the art as art, as things of beauty, of intrinsic human significance, we shall have missed something. Art illuminates the world, and not merely illustrates its period. Unless the display helps to elucidate the human condition as such, and unless it can be appreciated by the non-specialist, the non-historian, then the exhibition will have failed.

If Beethoven were interesting only to musicologists, he would not really be interesting at all.

The optimum for approaching any work of art is, of course, to know both dimensions. It is possible, alas, to discern either alone. One can fail to appreciate any aesthetic quality in a given instance; alternatively, one may fail to appreciate any historical background. In the former case, there is erudition without sensitivity. The latter case, a seeing of the aesthetic dimension alone, can lead to a lowering even of that aesthetic appreciation—or eventually, especially in a later or radically different cultural situation, to a loss of it.

The academic task in such matters is delicate: to enhance historical awareness and historical criticism in such a way as to further accurate appreciation of the aesthetic, the transcendent—not to substitute for it.

To some degree, this type of consideration applies not only to art, but to all human matters. Certainly, to all humane matters. In this as in other ways, human life is like a work of art. Some might wish to insist that human life, individual and corporate, *is* a work of art, less or more effectively wrought; so that to study its affairs at any lower level is to distort, or to understand inadequately. This is perhaps to see things in too deliberate a fashion; better would be *vice versa*? Art is intrinsically human. It is not an addendum tacked on to human life, nor an ornament. It is not an extra frill that may be dispensed with in the apprehension of human affairs, of interest only to those who happen to be interested in it, as one among other aberrant extras. Rather, to fail to appreciate art is to fail to appreciate humankind.

The human is more than art, but includes art as an integral component.

Man is more than science, also; yet one understands neither humanity nor the scientific enterprise unless one sees science too as essentially, integrally, human—and man as essentially, integrally, a being that, as Aristotle said, desires to know, and to whom the rest of reality is in some degree intelligible. (To this scientific matter we shall be returning in a moment or two.)

Human life has a transcendent dimension, to use the vocabulary that I personally affect. The phrasing is certainly not important,

but to see the aspect of human life that it connotes, is. Human life not only has, but from the beginning—from palæolithic times—has had, such a dimension. Accordingly, human history is paradoxical. Unlike the history of galaxies or seemingly of hippopotami, the history of men and women and children is that movement through time and space of persons for whom time and space constitute only part of the truth about their living, their being. Every work of art has a timeless dimension: it is the more compelling, the greater be the art. Every human life has a timeless dimension, the more salient the more truly human the person. Human history is the arena of the interplay between the temporal and the timeless—between the mundane and the eternal, the transcendent, or however one wish to call it. Human beings are self-transcending beings—a perplexing fact, admittedly; indeed, mysterious: yet an observational fact, nonetheless. One facet of this is that human beings are free: not fully, certainly, and yet not negligibly. We are conditioned—by our past and by our environment; that is, by mundane history. Yet we are not altogether determined by them, by it. The minority of thinkers who disagree with this do so out of dogmatic pre-conviction, not on the basis of evidence. To be a human being means to be partially open to sources of inspiration, aspiration, courage, loyalty, love, imagination, obligation, rationality, integrity, not given in one's mundane environment.

History is not a closed system.

All this is especially relevant, of course, for humanity's religious life. I am not suggesting that the non-historical dimension of human life is the religious dimension: that religion is concerned with the timeless. There have been certain other-worldly stances that have propounded some such view, perhaps; yet these are much rarer even among, for instance, Hindūs than is often supposed. Rather, what I am urging is that to live historically, as all human beings do, with a non-historical or a non-temporal, non-mundane dimension to their life, constitutes that life as human. The religious is what one does about this prior fact.

Human life is like a work of art; this is true of what it means to be human. Man is more than a link between causes; he and she are

more than an item within a determined sequence. This is not a religious belief, but an empirical observation. Religious belief is an interpretation of it. The Islamic, for instance, to which we shall come in a moment, is one particular interpretation. The fact, however, is universal. If there be any who do not agree—do not understand what I am averring, do not see these facts, or whose own religious or irreligious beliefs stand in the way of seeing it, at least such will note that the overwhelming majority of intelligent people at most times and places throughout human history have seen the world so, and still do. *That* is a fact, certainly, which one must recognize, and must struggle to understand.

The work of art that Muslims produce is, becomes, Islamic art. The work of art that is the lives of Muslims, and in extension over a sequence of centuries the history that is constituted by the corporate human lives of Muslims, is similarly Islamic. In both cases, the artistic and the historical, the inspiration is in part Islamic, in part personal, in part contingent. The material in both cases is contingent, temporal. The result in both cases is in part contingent, in part timeless, transcendent. In the one case it is Islamic art, in the other case Islamic history.

Those who know anything about the history of the Jewish people know, of course, that for Jews, one day in seven is the Sabbath, holy unto the Lord; but will recognize that he or she would be a fatuously inept historian who imagined that a history of Judaism as a religion would be a history of life on those Sabbaths, while a secular history of the Jews would be a history of the other six days of each week. Rather, the symbolic sacred time of the Sabbath redeems and gives significance to, permeates, and largely shapes, the living of the entire week. Jewish history is a seamless whole, drastically different from what it would otherwise have been because every week throughout its course has been lived in the light of the Sabbath, and of what the Sabbath signifies. I am contending that no historian can understand the history of those other six days in Jewish life who does not understand what is happening on the Sabbath; that particular pattern that has served Jews for concentrating and symbolizing and giving pattern to their

human involvement in transcendence. Theists have a vocabulary calculated to explicate what was happening; those who are not theists are challenged to hammer out some other interpretation of these centrally important matters, and are certainly not exonerated from wrestling with them, taking them very seriously.

Similarly, of course, with Christian history, but since that is my own, I shall not elaborate it, lest it be thought special pleading.

Similarly with Islamic history. It too has been not in two sectors, a religious and a secular. Rather, Islamic history in its totality has been what it has been because each day of that history has been lived by men and women whose lives have been enacted in a context that was mundane and, less or more richly, vividly, in a spirit that was transcendent. *Every* day began with that *adhān*, that call to prayer. And the history of every day has been in part (perhaps small part) shaped by it. More accurately, one should say that the everyday history of Muslims has been in part shaped by a bilateral truth: on the one hand, the *adhān*; on the other, the fact that we human beings are the kind of creature who know how to, and do, respond to such things: to realities in us and in our world that such things symbolize and reveal.

The business of the Islamic historian is to discern, to understand, and to make intelligible, the amalgam of mundane and divine without which the movement would not have been human, let alone Islamic. The Islamic has been that particular form of our generic human involvement in earth and heaven.

It is a mistake to think of the Islamic as one of the several ways of being religious. Rather, for fourteen centuries the Islamic has been one of the salient ways of being human.

Let me suggest three levels at which Islamic history offers itself for apprehension; three steps, if one will, that an outsider must take if he or she is to understand that history; three modes of this reality that we designate in our overly facile phrase, 'Islamic History'.

First, Islamic history is the framework within which Muslims have so lived. To live a human life is to live within a temporal context, a mundane framework, and to be conditioned, circum-

scribed, characterized, and yet not finally determined by it. Freedom, creativity, bungling, are individual or group responses of persons to situations that are historically given. In the case of Muslims—with the partial exception of those few who have lived as small minorities within others' cultures—the environment within which they have lived their personal lives, an environment in space and in time, has been what we as observers call Islamic history. So far it has gone through what may be termed three major periods. These may be called the classical, the mediaeval, the modern. These were a predominantly Arabic-speaking phase; there followed a predominantly Arabic-and-Persian cultural phase, presently giving way to a multilingual, with Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdū, Malay, and the like; these have been followed by a modern era about whose salient characteristics there is as yet no clear consensus. Geographically, the center of population, and perhaps of gravity, has shifted to the Indian Ocean area; linguistically, this is an era where all leaders of thought and society in the Muslim world have been and are, not merely bi-lingual, but linguistically bi-cultural, each knowing, and thinking in, at least one European language in addition to at least one Islamic language; and so on with economic, political, technological, and other involvements. Some analysts still affect a hoary polarity, to describe this era, between traditional and modern, as if that characterized what is happening; but that has been true ever since the beginning: all Muslims from the year one *hijrī*, like all human beings since the year one on any scale, have waked up every morning to live between what was then traditional and what was that day new. The establishment of an Umawī empire; al-Shāfi'ī's launching of a concept *Sunnat al-nabī*; the fall of Baghdād to Hulagu; the spread of the Ṣūfī orders: all were innovations presenting the Muslim world with a modernization problem much as have recent technological or economic involvements.

At this level, one's task is to apprehend the richness and variety, the dynamic and power, the depth, intricacy, beauty, and bathos of Islamic history: the range of human potentialities that were realized, and the changing pattern plus persisting continuity of

their realizations. We all know a little of this. The more one knows, the better; but also the more one knows, the more vivid one's sense of how far this reality transcends our grasp. A life-time study is far too little, of course, to rise to this task, although even a little that some of us have done is enough to be entrancing and to let one begin to see the point. Our task at this moment, however, is neither that life-time's work, nor some small sector of it; but rather a reflection on seeing that history as a whole, and as a concept.

A basic point to be made here is that history still continues.

On November 8, 1980—a day not far off—the first fourteen centuries of Islamic history will come to a close. It is of the utmost importance, I suggest, that anyone considering Islamic history should realize with vivid sensitivity that *one* of the dramatic possibilities is that the most interesting, most creative, even most profoundly religious, sector of that history may lie in the future, not in the past. At the very least, one must recognize that Islamic history is still today very much in process. When I arrived in Harvard a decade and more ago, I found in the curriculum a course entitled 'Islamic History' which covered the period up to, in effect, the fall of Baghdād in 1258. There was another course listed in the university catalogue and entitled 'Near Eastern History', which continued the story from that point on. When I arrived in Lahore twenty-some years earlier, a course at the university there entitled 'Islamic History' was still more restricted, to the early centuries of Arab history; even the Muslim period of Indian history was omitted (was studied under another heading), and a great deal else. I predict that a time will come when both universities will recognize that this was wrong. The historical perception embedded in this tacit affirmation that Islamic History came to an end long since (an affirmation made casually in both cases, and on quite divergent grounds) is, I suggest, false—on at least two scores. For one thing, it fails to recognize the post-classical, or mediaeval, Islamic exuberance in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, of which among Western Islamicists for instance the late lamented Marshall Hodgson has striven mightily and marvellously to set us

right. Islamic creativity—political, artistic, intellectual—in the Ottoman, Şafavî, and Mughul empires and elsewhere, not only, are involved but also expansion, in Africa and Indonesia and other far parts of the world. Secondly, the perception was false insofar as it postulated, at least in the Harvard case, once again that Western turn-of-the-century habit of thinking of Asia in general and of religion in general as *passées*: the ruthless insistence of modern secularism upon seeing current developments, self-triumphantly, as indisputably Westernizing secularist.

I do not know the future; nor do I feel that anyone is a good historian who imagines that he or she can know it, and especially not if one surreptitiously assumes that history, particularly the history of other peoples, is of course going in one's own direction. I certainly cannot predict that the next fourteen hundred years of Islamic history will be more spectacular than these last fourteen hundred; nor anyone else, that they will not be. I admit that a strong argument could be mounted that the signs of an Islamic renaissance are less clear today than I thought that I discerned twenty years ago when I wrote *Islam in Modern History*. On the other hand, he or she would be a bold and venturesome prophet who was ready yet to opine that the increase in the price of oil will not prove of significance primarily in the religious history of the Muslim peoples.²

Westerners have grown accustomed to treating economics as determinative. I have reservations, but we need not here quarrel about that, and one may go as far as one likes in regarding economic matters as major in Islamic history throughout its course, and until today, and yet it is still Islamic history in which it has played and no doubt continues to play its role.

My point is that economics also has been, and still is, a factor not alongside the Islamic, but within the Islamic complex. (This will be true even if, as may happen, the future religious history of our race subsumes, rather than preserves as separate, the various traditions.)

For it is a fallacy growing out of the particularities of the modern West to think of religion as one of the factors in human

life, one among others. To impose this Western-cultural aberration on one's understanding of other civilizations is to distort. I would repeat my thesis that the Islamic has not been a particular way of being religious, but rather a particular way of being human. Economics is certainly important in human life, as are many other matters. Yet let none of them blind us to the fact that that life is human; and this means, in the Muslim case, that that history is Islamic.

It is this factorizing view, also, that was in part responsible in the Western case for calling only the classical period Islamic history. In this outlook, many factors in the development of the Near East from the seventh century A.D. to the thirteenth were at play, and during this particular era the Islamic factor appears to have been salient. Hence, to call this period 'Islamic history' can even be thought of as a kind of compliment to Islām in those days. As I have on more than one occasion stressed, however, Islām is not a factor in the life of Muslims. Rather (unless hypocritically idealized), it is the pattern that the various factors form. It is the meaning that the otherwise disparate elements have. It is the coherence and the quality of those otherwise diverse elements. It is the meaning that life in its variegated profusion has.

Islām is not the meaning that the Islamic symbols have for a Muslim; rather, it is the meaning that life and the universe have, in the light of those symbols.

Certain specific elements, themselves evolving dynamically in the course of history, have served to purvey this meaning, to foster the coherence, to enable the pattern to hold: elements such as the Qur'ān, the law, and the other overtly 'religious' items. These, however, mediate and express and nurture, but they do not constitute, the Islamic quality of Islamic living and Islamic history. The Qur'ān, the law, the mosques, the poetry of the Ṣūfīs, the *adhān*, and all the rest would have had but minor significance were it not that they enabled Muslims to deal with other matters, from medicine to military defeat, and from economics to ecology, in the particular ways that they did deal with them—ways that *are* Islamic history.

This brings us to my second level. The first was that Islamic history has constituted the framework within which Muslims have lived their human lives. The second is that it can be seen also as the goal of those lives. Islamic history has been Islamic in intention as well as in background.

Muslim men and women across the centuries have found themselves born into and surrounded by a world inherited from earlier generations of Muslims and stamped with an Islamic quality. The art by which their sensibilities were refined we call Islamic art (they did not know that it was that); the institutions by which their practices were moulded we call Islamic institutions; and generally, the context or framework for their living was that historical context or framework that we call Islamic. In every case, however, not only did they inherit this environment, willy-nilly; but in turn they also contributed to it, more often willy than nilly. They rejoiced to be Muslims; and the miniscule or large addendum that their living contributed to the on-going structure, and that they in turn bequeathed to generations following them, was not merely a mechanical reaction to that context but, they being human, was a small or large creative modification of it, fashioned in part by their choice, their will, their freedom. To some degree, like other human beings, they exercised that choice, that will, that freedom in mundane, selfish, petty, mean, or corrupt ways; but to some degree also, being human, they did so in visionary and inspired and lofty and transcending ways. Their vision, such inspiration as came their way, such loftiness as they attained, such transcendence as they were enabled to aspire to or to sense, took one or another Islamic form. The Islamic was the channel and the pattern through which was made visible their openness to transcendence, their human awareness of mystery and greatness, of beauty and truth and goodness.

One may or may not like their vision, their particular sense of mystery and greatness. Their awareness of beauty and truth and justice may or may not converge with one's own. Their response to being human may or may not jibe with the observer's response. That is the observer's problem. All that I am saying is that Islamic

history has been what it has been, is what it is, and will be what it will be, because the Muslim response to being human has been, is, and quite possibly will continue to be, Islamic. Human beings are the creators, and not merely the victims, of history.

My second point, then, is that not only has Islamic history made Muslims, individually and corporately, what they have been; but also that those Muslims, *qua* Muslims, have made Islamic history what it has been. Islamic history has made Muslims Muslim. Muslims have made Islamic history Islamic.

The monumental significance of this fact must not escape us. For the Islamic relation to history has been quite special. In a sentence, certainly overly simplified and yet not absurd, the Muslim venture has been a vast endeavour to bend history to the will of God. Muslims have set out to *make* history Islamic—in a sense that we can understand only if we study the Qur’ān with drastic thoroughness, and then study and appreciate the elaborations and vicissitudes and innovations and diversities of the *tafāsr* over the centuries; and the development of *fiqh*, and the machinations of the Macchiavellian politicians, and the poetry of the Sūfis, and so on and on. We can understand, only if we listen with care to that *adhān* that summoned them to face each new day as it came along.

The Islamic ideal as apprehended by varying groups of Muslims has varied in time and space, and has persisted in diversified continuity through varying times and spaces. The ideal has elicited the effective response of Muslims in dramatically varying degree. Many another objective, conscious or unconscious, petty or grandiose, nasty or noble, has intertwined in its operation. Nonetheless, this ideal has seldom been totally absent, and perhaps never far away. For the entire Islamic movement has been a history-oriented enterprise—in a fashion that differentiates it, for instance, not only from Hindū but from Buddhist and even from Christian. Christian endeavours over the centuries to set up, for example, the Kingdom of God on Earth have been sporadic—intermittent with doctrines of a separation between Church and State. As a result Western history has seldom been Christian

history; perhaps nowhere outside Byzantium. And Indian history has almost deliberately *not* been Hindū history. It has by no means been central to the Hindū genius to make history Hindū. Even the enormously energetic Buddhist missionary movement has cheerfully interpenetrated, and on principle accepted co-existence with, other movements in China, Japan, South-East Asia—so that there has not been, and it has not been intended that there be, a Buddhistic history comparable formally to Islamic history. In the Weltanschauung of Muslims, God has been seen as operating through the Muslim community to render history Islamic—that is, to have it rise to His will for it (*riḍā*). Muslims have in varying degrees been well aware that the material through which He was working to this end was recalcitrant, as well as that His will was in part inscrutable; so that the actualities of Islamic history were recognized as approximating to that divine will in problematic (sometimes highly problematic) ways. At this *second* level, Islamic history has been and is today Islamic problematically, yes; but not negligibly. (Theoretically, the problem is the relation between *riḍā*, or *riḍwān*, and *maṣḥūʾah*.)

(The Muslim reason for thinking at times of only the earliest period as Islamic History, has been the subsequent tendency to mythologize that period, omitting human foibles, contingency, and the mundane from a perception of that pristine era. The mixture may differ from time to time and from place to place, no doubt; at no time and at no place, however, is human history not a mixture of, an interaction between, the mundane and the transcendent. This is what it means to be human.)

We pass, finally, to our third level, where we must in fact move beyond the notion of Islām as an historical phenomenon. Of the various articles that I have published, the one whose title most titillates me is 'The Historical Development in Islām of the Concept of Islām as an Historical Development' [See below in this present collection, pp. 41-77]. As is well known, Muslims were almost from the beginning among the world's greatest historiographers. Yet for many centuries Islām was for them the name not of an historical movement but of a personal relationship

to the ultimate truth of the universe, or of the personal act of self-dedication by which one responded to that truth and to its claims upon one. Only gradually did it become the name of the overt corporate results of that act, of the institutional complex of patterns resulting from the personal relationship, the name of a system. It was in the second half of Islamic history thus far that the term became at all widespread as the name of a religious system as an ideal; and only in very recent times that it has become the name of such a system empirically, in its historical and ever-changing development.

Specifically on the historical matter, not even in our own day, except peripherally, have Muslims, under Western ('modern') influence, de-transcendentalized their concept of Islamic history to the point of perceiving it, the way Westerners have been pushed by their own prejudices towards doing, as one subordinate sector among others within world history generally, under a ceiling posited by a this-worldly naturalism.

It is well known that Ṭabari and others perceived world history as a whole and what we call Islamic history as taking its appointed place within this comprehensive drama; so that the point that I am now endeavouring to make is subtle. Let me see whether I can make it clear. For I feel that there is here a quite basic issue. It involves becoming critical of our own presuppositions about history, and indeed about humankind; but then, I need hardly belabour the point that if one is to understand a civilization other than one's own, one has to transcend one's own predilections, and to be self-critical of one's own assumptions. This last point that I would proffer is delicate and difficult, yet rewarding.

Again, to put the point in a nutshell, oversimplifying yet perhaps not absurdly, one must face the question as to whether Islām is a subsection of history, or *vice versa*. The former possibility we can see readily enough. What does the latter mean: history as a subsection of Islām?

Before approaching this, let me make a detour via that matter of science and history once again. At issue in these matters are questions as to which of one's categories are to be considered more

basic than the others. There are some moderns for whom the category of 'science' is so ultimate that they would wish to make their understanding of history scientific; and even in some sense also, their understanding of humanity. For such minds, man is what science does or can or will adjudicate him and her as being. For me, on the other hand, history, and certainly humankind, are much more profound categories than is science. Science has arisen historically, is developing historically; its truths are just as historically relative as are any others, and in some ways conspicuously more so; and the role of science in culture will change historically in the future, quite possibly for the better. Certainly so far as humankind is concerned, I see science as a human achievement. It is one of the great things that we human beings have produced, certainly one of the most brilliant and most powerful; yet it is but one among others. I would take a humane view of science rather than a scientific view of man.

History is a wider, deeper, greater category than is science. Yet history, many have held, is not itself the final category. It is possible, and many would urge that it is right, to see the human as a category greater, wider, deeper, and more ultimate even than history. What does this mean? It is true that each of us is born at an historical time and place, and lives within an historical context, and dies. Yet it is not the case that the historical exhausts the human. At least, most intelligent persons have held this; and it is obtuse not to understand what they have been getting at: what the grounds for this judgement are, and what the meaning of it is. If it be true at all, it is true for every human life, presumably. Here, however, we are concerned only with the Islamic instance. The Islamic, I have urged, is the particular shape of the way in which Muslims have been human. What is meant, then, by saying that history is a facet of the Islamic, rather than *vice versa*?

It is not difficult to understand that Islamic art, for example, may be seen either as one sort of art, or as one aspect of Islām. Islamic art may be treated in the art department of a Western university, as one instance of the many kinds of art that have been produced by persons here and there throughout the world. Islamic

art may be treated also within an Islamics programme in such a university, as one of the ways in which the Islamic spirit has expressed itself, one of the forms in which Islamic culture has been crystallized, one of the illustrative and then formative instances of Islamic life.

The same is true of, for example, Islamic theology. It may be considered as one form, among others, of theologizing. Alternatively, it may be considered as one way in which the Islamic enterprise has expressed itself: as an articulation in rationalistic prose of Islamic faith. That faith has found expression in many ways: in *Ṣūfī* forms and sensibilities, in ritual, in moral-legal patterns and procedures, in social institutions, in—as we have said—art (especially architecture and calligraphy and poetry), and also in theology. Among these many ways, the theological has been not the greatest or most central, and certainly not the primary, expression. Yet neither has this expression been negligible, and I personally continue to find it entrancing. Yet it is certainly seen truly if it be seen as a subordinate facet of the Islamic complex in its entirety. Islamic theology is one facet of *Islām*.

Similarly, Islamic history can be seen as one facet of Islamic life, of the Islamic spirit, of the Islamic pattern. That spirit has been expressed in many ways. The expression in the historical realm is one such way: central; immensely important; and yet ultimately, secondary.

To what? Perhaps I can illustrate what I mean with reference to the concepts of Heaven and Hell. It is possible to perceive these—and indeed, by using the word ‘concepts’ I have encouraged us to perceive them—as ideas in the minds of Muslims. In this fashion, as historians, we can see these ideas as subordinate aspects of a larger historical whole. We can trace their rise, as concepts, in a certain part of the globe at a certain era of time, and can trace their development and florescence, and perhaps their present-day decline. An historiographical study of the ideas of heaven and hell, ferreting out exact evidence, detecting development and influence, analysing processes, and all, could be a voluminous, precise, and impressive work. It would constitute, however, a monograph: con-

centrating on one subordinate item, of a quite specialized nature, within the broader spectrum of human history. In this vision, heaven and hell are particular items, and in the long run relatively minor ones, in the larger role of human history.

There is another way of looking at this matter, however; in some ways the reverse of this. It is the way that most Muslims have at most times looked at it. For them, Heaven and Hell are not ideas in their minds; rather, they are parts of the universe. In such a view, this world (*al-dunyā*) is also part of that universe, but it is a less major part, a less lasting part, a less ultimate. Human history, from this vantage point, is seen (and felt) as one facet of a larger whole; a rather transient aspect. God existed before, and will exist after, this world. You and I, also, shall remain, long after history is over. I have always been charmed that, unlike most Indo-European languages with a single word meaning 'eternal', Arabic has two terms, *azāl* and *abad*, meaning, on the one hand, that which has always existed, had no beginning in time, and on the other hand that which will always exist, will have no ending. Only God, in Islamic thought, is both. You and I, as human beings, are *abad*, in that once created we shall never pass away. The world, human history, is neither. It has a beginning; it will have an end.

It is in this sense that Islamic history is a subordinate part of Islām in general. Human history is one part of the Muslim's total vision.

This is not to belittle history. On the contrary, Muslims take history—human history—*very* seriously. It is for them the arena of ultimate concern, in the technical sense. Those who may have chanced to read my *Islam in Modern History* will remember my comparing there the Muslim attitude to history with the Hindū, the Christian, the Jewish, the Marxist, and the secularist. Just as, for Jews, the holiness of the Sabbath enhances the significance of the other six days of the week rather than degrading it—'If something is not ultimately significant, then ultimately nothing is significant at all; . . . for those for whom there is not something absolutely valuable, for them in the end nothing is valuable at all. If one day is not holy, then all days are boring . . .'³—so here the