

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Marshall Hodgson Then and Now

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Abstract

Hodgson, the man of conscience makes academics uneasy. As well he should. Yet his moral commitment, the very thing that for so long made him a semi-pariah in academia, is a beacon of hope to a new generation of readers interested in alternatives to the present state of the post-9/11 Middle East field. A Quaker pacifist who was interned in Camp Elkton, Oregon for refusing to serve in World War II, Hodgson was a man of principle and courage whose quirky intelligence produced *The Venture of Islam*, a three volume textbook history of Islamic civilization.

Keywords

World history • Hodgson • Venture of Islam • Historiaography • Civilization

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Hodgson Then

Hodgson, the man of conscience makes academics uneasy. As well he should. Yet his moral commitment, the very thing that for so long made him a semi-pariah in academe, shines a beacon of hope to a new generation of readers interested in alternatives to the present state of the post-9/11 Middle East field. A Quaker pacifist who was interned in Camp Elkton, Oregon for refusing to serve in World War II, Hodgson was a man of principle and courage whose quirky intelligence produced *The Venture of Islam*, a three volume textbook history of Islamic civilization.¹ Hodgson's example poses a challenge to the sort of professional scholarship that pretends that it is someone else's job to see the morality of history, or indeed imagines that there can be no morality in an immoral world (and therefore the best thing to do is adopt an urbane nihilism). But if *The Venture of Islam* were only characterized by its moral engagement, we would not be discussing it. *The Venture of Islam* was at once a methodologically self-conscious history of Islamic civilization and a visionary attempt to locate Islam in the entire history of humankind. These elements are nicely captured in its subtitle: "Conscience and History in a World Civilization."

First published in 1974 by The University of Chicago Press, *Venture* was somewhat quizzically received by the U. S. Middle East Studies field. In 1975 a special panel discussed its merits at the annual meetings of the Middle East Studies Association. There were a scattering of reviews, some enthusiastic, others unconvinced. Other panels and special sessions of academic conferences followed since then. While many agreed *VOI* was a remarkable work, some wondered (quite rightly, as it turned out) whether or not it would find a place in the field. A few hardy souls sought to teach the Islamic history survey using *The Venture of Islam* as a text. Whereas most textbooks served up pre-digested morsels of fact, *The Venture's* complex intellectual questing made it in many respects the anti-textbook. Or perhaps it was the Platonic ideal of the textbook, engraved in golden tablets on high, but written in Victorian English. Most American undergraduates found Hodgson's long periodic sentences baffling and his neologisms (eg., "Islamicate," "the military patronage state," "technicalism") forbidding. While I taught *The Venture* to undergraduates for close to thirty-five years at the University of California at Santa Cruz, I must admit that after the 1988 publication of Ira Lapidus' *History of Islamic Societies*—a pedagogically preferable book for today's students, I combined the two. The better students preferred Hodgson, while the rest ("is this going to be on the final?") were reassured by Lapidus' concise summaries. In the end I came to believe that *The Venture of Islam* is like the proverbial Sufi tale: the more you bring to it, the more you get out of it.

I was introduced to the *Venture of Islam* by my anthropologist colleague Nancy M. Tanner in the fall of 1971 (Tanner, 1981). Tanner worked on the matrilineal Muslim

1 Hodgson's life at Camp Elkton is discussed in Michael Geyer's contribution to this book.

Minangkabau people of Sumatra, Indonesia and had recently arrived from the University of Chicago, where she had sat in on Hodgson's lectures (Tanner, 1982). Initially I was terrorized by its considerable size (over 1000 mimeograph pages). By 1973, I was increasingly chafing at the limitations of the definitions of "the Middle East" then on offer in textbooks. They seemed like the nursery story of the Three Bears, either too big or too small for most purposes (Fisher, 1960). I was ready for something else. It was then that I discovered Hodgson, and began reading the yellowed pages of Hodgson's mimeographed lectures. By the time I reached the end, I resolved never to teach the Middle East history survey again. Seduced by Hodgson and against all of my Marxisant social historian's instincts of the time, I opted for Hodgson civilizational approach. I did so because I found his stiff-necked Quaker moral vision congenial, but also because his non-teleological world historical approach seemed to me preferable to the clichés of both the anti-war Left and the modernization theorists of the time, for whom the state was the great icon to be worshipped.

The subtitle of *The Venture of Islam* immediately signals that we are in the presence of a different historical sensibility, a more morally engaged vision than conventional academic works on Islamic history. At the time when Hodgson's ambitious multi-volume textbook was published, to attribute conscience and historical consciousness to Muslims was to challenge centuries of Western prejudice about Islam and Muslim. It also flew in the face of the then common expectations of the direction of modern history, because it was also deeply skeptical of the prevailing progressive narrative. Conventional wisdom at the time had it that The West had "the right stuff" while The Rest were well advised to follow its lead, or remain forever outside the fold of the developmentally saved.

A lifelong Quaker who had publically asserted his pacifist beliefs and borne the consequences, Hodgson was a strong believer in the duty of the moral individual to assert truth to power. "Conscience" for Hodgson was connected to his Quaker faith, and his belief in the duty of the moral individual to "speak truth to power." The epigraph from John Woolman (an eighteenth century Quaker) with which he prefaces the first volume of *Venture* still has the capacity to startle: "To consider mankind otherwise than brethren, to think favours are peculiar to one nation and exclude others...plainly supposes a darkness in understanding." Hodgson's moral vision did not derive from an epistemological stance relative to the course of human history but rather from his Quaker beliefs.

Hodgson's philosophically grounded history derived from postwar thinkers such as Martin Buber, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Jaspers and Paul Tillich (among others). They sought to make religion relevant to the postwar era, and to address the problem of evil in the world and the possibility of hope in the atomic age. At the core of Hodgson's vision was his insistence that Islam be viewed as one of the

great civilizational impulses that have marked the course of human history (including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism/Taoism, Judaism and Christianity).

Writing in the aftermath of World War II Hodgson was all too aware of the limitations of the earlier civilizational visions. Unlike Arnold Toynbee, whose multi-volume *Study of History* proclaimed a link between material and moral progress embodied in modernity, Hodgson remained pessimistic on the question of human perfectibility. He saw civilizations as the product of inherently complex and always changing multilingual and multiethnic cultural historical interactions.

While the civilizational heritages persisted, the advent of modernity meant that all civilizations were inherently compromised by the enormous transformations of the context in which human lives have unfolded since 1750. Thus for him all civilizations were in important respects artificial, deracinated, having to make unfounded claims as to their essential continuity even as they were continually upended by change. This insight is key to understanding why Hodgson believed the civilizational narrative to be fundamentally flawed as a way of understanding human history.

“Pre-commitments” referred to the modern lenses through which historians viewed the world. Only Hodgson sought to develop a systematic critique of the formative assumptions of modern scholars (which he called “pre-commitments” -- he lists Western, Christian, Marxist, Arab and Persian as examples). Each provided a lens that shaped the views of the historian with its own complementary epistemological assumptions and complementary patterns of distortion. In some respects Hodgson’s concept of “pre-commitment” appears to anticipate Foucault’s “discourse.” This it was because of its elitist and essentialist assumptions about the ostensibly unchanging and monolingual essence. In *The Venture of Islam* he sought constantly to devise strategies to disrupt “moral pre-sets” and essentialist interpretive schemes.

Forty years on, *The Venture of Islam* still has the ability to surprise. But not always in a good way. Younger scholars who encounter it for the first time are disappointed by what they take to be the weakness of its scholarly apparatus and the paucity of its footnotes. They somehow fail to realize that *Venture* is a textbook, indeed a revolutionary one, whose pedagogical mission was to demolish orientalist stereotypes and Eurocentric thinking, the better to instruct and inspire the student. It is also worth reminding such people that Hodgson died in 1968. *The Venture of Islam* was a major challenge to the Middle East/Islam field when it appeared in 1974. Indeed, as the contributions to *Islam and World History: The Ventures of Marshall Hodgson* seeks to explain, in important respects it is still challenging scholars (Burke III & Mankin, 2018).

In what follows I would like to briefly review a few of Hodgson's key innovations to Islamic history and world history, as put forth in *The Venture of Islam*, and how they helped generate a comprehensive rethinking of Islamic history. I start with his reconceptualization of central themes Islamic history.

Marshall Hodgson was a gifted orientalist, with world class philological skills and a deep historical knowledge of Middle Eastern cultures as evidenced in his monograph, *The Assassins* and in his brilliant textbook, *The Venture of Islam*. In what follows, I'd like to consider three important areas of scholarship where Hodgson's re-conceptualizations continue to shape our understanding of Islamic history. They are his views on the nature of Abbasid authority, and on the role of Shi'ism and of Sufism in Islamic history.

Previous historians of early Islamic history had focused upon the caliphs and had emphasized their religious motivation. Hodgson disagreed. Rather than originating in the caliphal palace, he insisted that early Sunni religious institutions like Shari'a law originated in the dense urban networks of the Islamic city. Caliphal authority by contrast, was predominantly secular/political. Sunni authority was therefore divided. Hodgson's bold rethinking of the emergence of Sunni institutions could not be ignored. Boldly deployed in *The Venture of Islam*, = it was picked up and refined by later generation of scholars, among them Ira Lapidus in his book *Islamic Societies* (Lapidus, 1988).

Let us consider his contribution to the re-periodization of Islamic first. Hodgson found the traditional approach to the rise of Islam to be hopelessly provincial. Far from being an isolated region, he insisted Arabia's history was deeply interconnected with the history of Afro Eurasia well prior to the rise of Islam. He insisted that that the rise of Islam can only be understood as arising in a global context (see Lewis, 1958). Whereas most textbooks of the period began with a chapter on "Arabia Before Islam," the first chapter of *Venture* was entitled "The World Before Islam." His re-periodization did not stop there, however. Hodgson provided chronologies that compared developments in the lands of Islam to comparable developments in the civilizations of Europe, South Asia and East Asia in each subsequent period.

Hodgson's rethinking of the 945-1500 period constitutes a second major contribution. As he conceived it there were in fact two Middle periods, with the break occurring in 1258 with the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols. The first Middle Period had been viewed by both Arab and Western historians as an era of decline, during which the authority of the Abbasid Caliph was seriously weakened, the dynasty steadily lost territory, and military and political power was transferred to a new official, the sultan. For Western historians, the Mongol conquest of Baghdad (1258

C.E.) appeared seemed emblematic of Muslim decadence—a kind of orientalist tipping point at which the lands of Islam failed to catch the cresting wave of progress.

Hodgson's take was quite different. While the Arab Caliphate did decline, it was for a series of specifiable environmental and other causes which laid the region open to Mongol depredations. Moreover, while the Caliphate declined in Iraq, powerful regional Muslim states emerged in central and south Asia. Governed by Persian bureaucrats and Turkish military elites, their cultural and economic brilliance was unrivaled. While these regional states were also swept away by the Mongol conquests of western and south Asia, their cultural legacy continued in the Mongol successor states that subsequently emerged.

Hodgson's second Middle Period (1258-1500) covered the gradual emergence of post-Mongol Muslim steppe empires across the region from the Balkans to Central and South Asia. It concluded with the emergence of the Ottoman, Safavi, Mughal empires c. 1500 C.E. Both Middle Periods had in common a number of elements: the salience of Turkish military elites, of Persian bureaucratic norms and high culture. Not everyone was persuaded. However, Hodgson's concern with the inadequacies of the traditional periodizations of Islamic history remains valid. Abdesselam Cheddadi is surely correct when he states in *Islam and World History* that Islamic history is world history (Cheddadi, 2018).

The Venture of Islam was informed not only by Hodgson's reworking of the central themes of classical Islamic history, but also by his systematic effort to locate it in world history. The fact that the world history of the 1950s (when his project was conceived) was deeply flawed by eurocentrism and that the histories of the rest of the world were at the time relatively undeveloped did not inhibit him from attempting to construct a more adequate model. In contrast to the civilizations model of world history (then as now, still the dominant paradigm), in which the contribution of each civilization is discussed independently, Hodgson's world history began with the notion of the interconnectedness of societies in history and indivisibility of human experience (see the essays collected in Hodgson [1993]).

From this perspective, the ascendancy of the West was not predetermined by its alleged moral and technological superiority, but drew upon the cumulative interaction of humans across the inter-connected societies of Afro Eurasia in history. Finally, Hodgson's humanistic conscience and commitment to a non-racist, non-teleological world history based upon the brotherhood of all humans provides a powerful argument against epistemological nihilists and moral agnostics. It was the interrelations of societies in history (and not the histories of civilizations, each locked in its own cultural "specialness") that cumulatively shaped the modern world (Hodgson, 1963).

Hodgson Now

The Venture of Islam appeared in the midst of the Copernican revolution that was the end of colonialism. challenge western bias and developmentalism, Hodgson devised a new approach: while retaining *civilization* as a unit of analysis, he unhooked it from the historical vision in which civilizations were seen as either dead ends or preparatory steps to modernity. In this, Hodgson's paradigm anticipated the new world history (Dunn, 1999). The contrast was between the static, cultural paradigm-driven histories and connected histories that were informed by constantly jostling between levels from state on down, as well as among actors: elites (clergy, military, merchants) and people (artisans, peasants, pastoralists).

In the Cold War atmosphere of the 1950s to dispute that "the West" was the center of the modern world and the source of progress smacked of anti-Americanism. Having lived in South Asia and traveled in the Middle East, Hodgson had come to distrust claims of Western superiority. His skepticism about modernity, which differed both from Cold war Western modernizationism and from Soviet state-led development, remains prescient. The underlying assumptions about Islam, the West and the course of modern history challenged by Hodgson in his magnum opus have remained constant.

It is worth mentioning that the Marxism known to Hodgson in 1968 was the fossilized Soviet Cold War sort, not the academic Marxism that was reviving the discipline of history in Britain, France and the US. It was a Marxism before the rediscovery of the early Marx as well as (perhaps here is a mercy) structuralist Althusserian Marxism. Despite this, Hodgson was in many respects a materialist in the manner in which he assessed the larger historical contexts. The most important sign of this was his chapter on the social order in Vol. II, Book 3. The sources of this materialist streak are unclear but are undoubtedly linked to the changes in American intellectual culture in the Great Depression; historians like Charles Beard (who proposed a materialist interpretation of the origins of the US constitution in the inter-war period) may serve as an example (but also the Steinbeck of *Grapes of Wrath*).

It is also important to realize that when he died in 1968 Hodgson had yet to take on board the perspectives of the new social history then associated with Barrington Moore, Jr., Eric Wolf and Immanuel Wallerstein, or those of the British journal *Past & Present* and the *Annales* school in France. One imagines he would have been invigorated by these developments, though in what ways one cannot say. Here it is important to insist that Hodgson was basically a cultural historian. At a lunch following a panel at the 1988 MESA in his honor, the panelists (many of them Hodgson's students and colleagues) agreed he would not have been a fan of the "cultural turn," a moment when the U.S. field embraced cultural theory (Derrida, Foucault, Gramsci, Said, Habermas and other cultural theorists). As American intellectual culture turned

away from Marxism and social history more generally in the 1980s, Hodgson's intellectual toolkit would have been gradually outmoded. Could he have updated it, and if so how? We will never know. How he would have responded to the emergence of "political correctness" is also unclear, although his Quaker insistence on the dignity of all people—both men and women—and his lifelong opposition to racism, leave room to imagine a creative response.

The gap between Hodgson's death in 1968 and *The Venture's* publication in 1974 is deeply ironic. Even at the time the field for the most part did not know what to make of it. It went largely unreviewed in historical journals like the *American Historical Review* well as in book reviews with a national audience. As a strong opponent of the Vietnam war, and a supporter of conciliation between the University of Chicago and the South Side black community, Hodgson stood out. The proposition that what he called the "Middle Periods" (not the Middle Ages) of Islamic history be considered as a period of equal if not greater creativity as the classical age of the Abbasid caliphate immediately attracted attention. So too did Hodgson's insistence upon the revolutionary potential of Twelve Imam Shi'ism at a time when the Shah was just back on his throne (thanks to MI-5 and the CIA) after the overthrow of Mossadegh. This view was also out of synch with the official world of Middle East Studies and the Washington national security consensus for whom a revolutionary threat could come only from the Left and the actions of supposed Soviet proxies.

The Cold War era constitutes the "now" in which Hodgson lived his life. There's reason to believe that he would have saluted the transformation of the US Middle East field starting in the 1970s, as it gradually shook off the limitations of both orientalist philology and social science modernizationism in response to the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. Would he have embraced the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) and counter-MESA organization of younger scholars (whose delightful acronym was AMESS [Lockman, 2004]) that were emerging by the early 1970s? While he would have been in sympathy with many of their political and intellectual goals (opposition to U.S. imperialism, critical of orientalist stereotypes) and sympathetic to Palestinian rights, he was not a joiner of organizations, but a believer in the Quaker idea of the efficacy of personal witness. Peter Gran (personal communication), a graduate student of his in this period can think of no occasion when Hodgson joined a demonstration for Palestinian rights--although he did participate in anti-war demonstrations (and was reputedly the only tenured faculty member to do so), and in support of the rights of African Americans in Hyde Park against the ghetto-busting tactics of the University of Chicago.² He was also someone whose primary intellectual investment was in the Middle Periods of

2 The PLO was founded in 1964. Arafat did not join it until 1968, and only addressed the UN General Assembly in 1974.

Islamic history, rather than the recent history of the Middle East. After 1968 when Hodgson died, the world and the Middle East field changed dramatically.

As far as the world is concerned, the period began with the US going off the Bretton Woods consensus (1971) and delinking the dollar from gold in response to the strains of the Vietnam War. While not at first understood at the time, the forces of globalization of the world economy, including the compression of time and space caused by the computer revolution, was already in process in the 1970s. In the Middle Eastern region the 1970s witnessed many dramatic events. The 1973 October war saw the Egyptian expulsion of Israeli forces from the Sinai, the end of the Russo-Egyptian alliance and the signing of peace accords between Egypt and Israel. In the same time window came the spike in the international price of petroleum, the Arab oil boycott, and the onset of the Iranian revolution (1979). Although the US lost a key regional ally, Iran, this was to some extent more than compensated for by Soviet over-reaching in Afghanistan, and the defeat of the left in Lebanon. The Iran/Iraq war (1980-88) facilitated the US military penetration of the Persian Gulf. The transformation of the world economy (“globalization”) by the communications and financial revolutions helped expose Soviet economic weaknesses, and led to *Glasnost* and the collapse of the “Evil Empire” in 1989. All of these developments Hodgson missed as a result of his unfortunate early death.

But it is possible to speculate how he might have reacted to at least some of the intellectual developments. Since Persian was in many respects the centre of his professional competence, there’s no question that the Iranian revolution would have provoked his considerable energies. His views would certainly have been worth attending to, since alone against the entire Middle Eastern field of the 1960s Hodgson wrote of the “revolutionary potential of Twelve Imam Shi’ism” in *The Venture of Islam*.³ He would certainly have expressed his opposition to the rising tide of Islamophobia in American political life. Here he would have found himself in substantial agreement with Edward Said, whose *Covering Islam* (1997) expressed an unflinching opposition to the deep biases of the American media (Said, 1997). Said’s earlier *Orientalism* (1978) had an intellectual impact that extended far beyond the borders of the Middle East field. Hodgson, whose moral critique of American Cold War triumphalism and of the racism it anticipated, would surely have engaged the debate although we know not how. Elsewhere I have commented about Hodgson and Said. But I can offer an additional, somewhat ironic reflection. I have long been struck by the coincidence of the intellectual triumph of Said’s *Orientalism* and the collapse of secular progressive nationalism throughout the Middle Eastern region. One of the remarkable aspects of Hodgson’s moral conscience was his resistance to progress-oriented narratives of all sorts, including Left progressive ones, and his

3 *The Venture of Islam*, Chapter V, Book Six, Volume III: “Iran and the Russian Empire: The Dream of Revolution.”

awareness of the continued relevance of Islamic critiques of the state. There is reason to believe that he would have been quick to understand the oppression and corruption of the post-colonial state across the Middle Eastern region.

To continue in this vein risks trying your patience. The point is clear: while increasingly out of synch with the intellectual fads of the 1960s generation, Marshall Hodgson's effort to provide a moral critique of scholarship on Islam and the Middle East region would not have flagged. It would have made of him a reliable compass for those seeking to orient themselves against the changing intellectual currents. It may provide a reason why some scholars have been increasingly turning toward his legacy in this post 9/11 world. The great historian of Islamic art and culture Oleg Grabar, who died recently, had this to say when asked in 2007 to explain the revival of interest in Islam:

Why a revival of (Hodgson=Islam?) This strikes me as easy to answer. We are desperate for explanations of Islam that would make possible a brilliant culture (transmission of Plato, geometry, poetry, etc.) and the existence of a destructive streak. Hodgson tried to show the great variety of Islamic ways and sought to separate himself from the Arab-centeredness of his teacher von Grunebaum or of Bernard Lewis and Said. Also his *Venture* is far more thoughtful than what existed at that time, Hitti, Brockelman, etc.... (Grabar, 2007)

To conclude on this note would leave us all feeling good: "Hodgson, the good orientalist." At least the West produced one such person, if not several. (I am sure each of us has some candidates for this list). But let me spoil the feast. For the era in which Hodgson wrote, the 1950s, was also famously (if egregiously) called "the end of ideology."⁴ Liberal platitudes sprouted like crabgrass in every lawn. While Marxism and Communism might not yet be over, Fascism was for sure. So too was religion. Many leading lights of the American Middle East field believed sincerely that Islam was basically over. At the time, it was fashionable to see secularism as an irreversible world historical process. How much Hodgson personally believed this I do not know. However, one must note that the University of Chicago was a major centre for the production of this progress-oriented narrative in the US. The assumption that Islam was destined (like other religions) to fade away was very much part of the intellectual context in which *The Venture of Islam* appeared. It is encouraging that Hodgson does not appear to have shared this by now discredited view. Yet to propose an account of Islamic civilization crediting Muslims with a moral conscience had one meaning in the 1960s. To view Hasan al-Basri, Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya as redoubtable moral adversaries who dared speak truth to power (when they are claimed as heroes by today's *salafi* jihad-s ?? has quite another resonance in the post 9/11 era. Neither the end of fascism nor that of religion is at present assured.

4 See the famous book of this title by Bell (1965) as well as the debate it provoked: Waxman (1969) and Dittberner (1979).

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