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Islamic or Secular History:

Reassessing the Categories of Muslim Historical Writing by Tarif Khalidi and Thomas Bauer

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Abstract

The growing acceptance to challenge long-held notions have led to many new insights and opened up ways to access the Islamic scholarly tradition anew. This applies especially when it comes to the categories of Islamic and Secular. The present paper focuses on the works by Tarif Khalidi, a historian of Palestinian origin, and Thomas Bauer, a German scholar specializing in Arabic language and literature, and tries to achieve three objectives. First, applying the concept of cultural ambiguity to the formative period and observing it in its formative stages. Second, showing how and when a secular approach to history became the norm. Third, demonstrating how Muslim scholars demarcated a *shar'ī* realm in which the subject matters of the different sciences were in one way or another dealing with the revelation. This self-imposed boundary opened up a space for other discourses with their epistemologies based on reason and empirical knowledge. From a very early stage, history was to be found in this non-*shar'ī* realm of secular sciences.

Keywords: Islamic, Secular, History, Cultural Ambiguity, Western Discourse.

İslamî yahut Seküler Tarih:

Tarif Khalidi ve Thomas Bauer'in Müslüman Tarih Yazımı Kategorilerinin Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

Öz

Uzun süredir tedavüldeki kavramlara yönelik meydan okumaların giderek kabul görmesi, birçok yeni düşüncelerin ortaya çıkmasına neden olmuş ve İslâmî ilim geleneğine yeniden erişmenin yolunu açmıştır. Bu özellikle *İslâmî* ve *seküler* kategorileri söz konusu olduğunda geçerlidir. Bu makale, Filistin kökenli tarihçi Tarif Khalidi ile Arap dili ve edebiyatı konusunda uzmanlaşmış Alman bilim adamı olan

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Thomas Bauer'in çalışmalarına odaklanmakta ve üç hedefi bulunmaktadır. Birincisi, "kültürel müphemlik" kavramını teşekkül dönemine uygulamak ve bunun aşamalarını izlemek. İkincisi, tarihe seküler tarzda yaklaşımın nasıl ve ne zaman norm haline geldiğini göstermek. Üçüncüsü de, Müslüman alimlerin, farklı ilimlere ait konuların bir şekilde vahiyle temas kurduğu şer'î alanı nasıl sınırlandırdıklarını göstermek. Bu kendi kendini sınırlama, akıl ve ampirik bilgiye yaslanan epistemolojilerle farklı söylemlere de bir alan açmıştır. Tarih çok erken dönemlerden itibaren seküler bilimlerin bu şer'î olmayan alanı içine konumlandırılmıştır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: İslâmî, Seküler, Tarih, Kültürel Müphemlik, Batılı Söylem.

Introduction

It is possible to divide the modern academic scholarship dealing with historical sources into three orientations or trends. A number of academics do not delve into deep discussions related to source criticism. Their aim is directed at giving a coherent description of Muslim history based on Muslim sources. [1] Another orientation can be observed amongst mainstream orientalists of the past two centuries. The question of reliability is much more important to them as they try to find out what "really happened". Generally speaking, they focus more on the early period of Islamic history and accept the Muslim sources but at the same time look for alternative socio-political explanations. [2] The third approach is labelled as "revisionist" and look exclusively at sources outside from the Islamic tradition.[3]

The main problem in finding a compromise position between these trends seems to be the lack of knowledge about "the historiographical tradition itself and of how it had evolved; for in order to judge or to comment on the historicity of these sources, one had first to understand clearly how, and why, they had come into existence in the first place."[4]

In this context, Franz Rosenthal makes an important remark: "The historiography of any group that does not form part of modern Western civilization is subject to different environmental factors and is conditioned by a very different scale of intellectual values."[5] He summarized two issues. First, that a historian coming from a modern Western frame of thought must acknowledge the different perspective a pre-modern Muslim historian will have on the subject of history. Second, one must find a way in understanding and looking from that perspective to comprehend how

1 See, for example, the works of Karen Amstrong and Martin Lings.

2 Representative for this approach are Gustave Weil (d. 1889), Abaraham Geiger (d. 1874), Reinhart Dozy (d. 1883), Aloys Sprenger (1893), William Muir (1905), Alfred von Kromer (d. 1889), Julius Wellhausen (d. 1918), Josef Horovitz (1931), David Margoliouth (d. 1940), Leone Caetani (d. 1935), and W. Montgomery Watt (d. 2006).

3 Judith Koren – Yehuda D. Nevo, "Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies," *Der Islam* 68 (1991), 87-88.

4 Abd al-Aziz al-Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), x-xi.

5 Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 8.

and why this frame of thought came about. This is where Tarif Khalidi's work becomes important.

In his book, titled *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period,* Khalidi attempts to detect the factors that shaped historical writing among Muslim scholarship and how it changed over time. By introducing a novel periodization for which he used different terms he tries to organize the types of approaches of historical writing.[6] As frequently observed in every attempt of periodization, we face a problem of overlapping in his categorisation. Khalidi himself admits that his periodization is "somewhat arbitrary" but he intended to "elicit a new debate on the subject and move away from previous categories."[7] There have been quite a few texts about periodization in recent times.[8] Given that Khalidi's book was published in 1994 and that the recent research is barely citing him or not citing him at all one could question the impact of his book. However, contemporary research is doing what Khalidi was hoping for and that is reconsidering the previous categories.

As useful as his approach might be, the present inquiry will broadly follow his narrative but not emphasize the aspect of periodization. The focus will instead be on two other categories which are central: *Islamic* and *Secular* in the context of historical writing and function of the science of history. Khalidi did not emphasize these two categories but still reached important conclusions about them. Thus, one aim of the present paper is to follow Khalidi's narrative broadly and distill the way he approaches *secularity* in historical writing. To expand and render it more precisely, the investigation will include Thomas Bauer's book "Die Kultur der Ambiguität" (The Culture of Ambiguity)[9]. This work focuses more on the question of the categories of *Islamic* and *Secular* within the Muslim intellectual tradition and the presence of *cultural ambiguity* in it. By that, he means the simultaneous existence and acceptance of two or more interpretations of the same phenomenon without giving one of them the exclusive claim of validity.[10] Bauer's work was limited to the classical period (from the eighth/fourteenth century onwards) and various sciences including history. The intention in this present research is to take Bauer's approach of cultural ambiguity

6 He uses terms like: epistemic canopies, modes or domes and divides the Arabic historical thought into four sections under which it developed in interaction with different sciences and literary styles: History and Ḥadīth (1.-4./7.-10. century), History and *adab* (3.-5./10.-9.-11. century), History and *ḥikma* (4.-5./10.-11. century), and History and *siyāsa* (6.-9./12.-15. century). See Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xii.

7 Tarif Khalidi, "The Books in My Life: A Memoir (Part 2)", *Jerusalem Quarterly* 74 (Summer, 2018), 36.

8 The journal *Der Islam* has dedicated a whole issue to this topic: Stefan v. Heidemann (ed.), et al, *Der Islam,* 91/1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 1-160. Thomas Bauer has also dedicated a whole book to this question with a focused critic on the concept of *Medieval Islam.* See: *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2019).

9 Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Welt Religionen, 2011).

10 Bauer, *Ambiguität,* 27. This is a part of a more extensive definition.

and his findings concerning the *Islamic* and *Secular* and applying it to Khalidi's findings in the context of historical writing.

By looking at the works by Khalidi and Bauer, it is hoped that three objectives can be achieved. First, applying the concept of cultural ambiguity to the formative period and observing it in its formative stages. Second, showing how and when a secular approach to history became the norm. Lastly, how the Modern Muslim discourse broke away from its tradition and the causes for that. This last objective is crucial as its roots lie in a postcolonial discourse that was picked up by Muslim thinkers although they opposed the Western discourse. Yet, these thinkers adopted the categories and certain assumptions with which the discourse was led.

These two aspects, i.e. categories and assumptions, will be central to the present studies. Thus, before turning to the main inquiry the terms *Islamic* and *Secular* shall be looked at in order to lay the foundation for the rest of this work.

1. Islamic '*Secular*'

Since the term 'secular 'is very ambiguous and in some contexts ideologically charged, we first need to specify how it is used in this paper. Recently, there has been several insightful research done about the notion of a 'secular realm 'within the Islamic world. This is important to the extent that it is often assumed that the religion of Islam defies "the distinction between the sacred and profane" which results in "a dichotomous bifurcation between the "Islamic" and the "secular," according to which an act idea or institution can be described either as Islamic or secular, but never both."[11] In this understanding the Islamic law becomes an "all-embracing body of religious duties" which regulates "the life of every Muslim in all its aspects."[12] A common understanding shared by modern Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

But a closer look reveals that pre-modern Muslim scholars were aware of a clear distinction between a *sharʿī* and non-*sharʿī* realm. Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), for instance, rebuked the "ignorant friends of Islam" for condemning non-Muslim natural sciences "as contravening Sharia." He, as well as others, insisted that "the religious law has nothing to say about these sciences, either positively or negatively."[13] One of the most common approaches to classify sciences was the distinction between: rational (*al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqlīya*) and Islamic (*al-ʿulūm al-sharʿīya*) or religious sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-dīnīya*). The first being based on rational and empirical inquiry and the latter being defined as: "received on authority from the prophets (…) through

11 Sherman A. Jackson, "The Islamic Secular", *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 34/2 (2017), 2.
12 Jackson, "Islamic Secular", 7.
13 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, nd), 102.

studying the Book of God and the Sunnah of His messenger and understanding their meanings upon receiving [them] through tradition."[14]

Contemporary researchers give this non-*sharʿī* realm different names: *Islamic secular*[15] or *religious free realm.*[16] Whatever the name might be, the idea is basically the same and can be summarized with the following working definition: "that for concrete knowledge of which one can rely neither upon the scriptural sources of Sharia nor their proper extension via the tolls enshrined by Islamic legal methodology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*)."[17] Inattentiveness towards this realm will lead to an "over-*sharīʿatized*" conception or complete "Islamization" of what is commonly called Islamic civilization and history.[18] Although it is very commonly used we will try to be cautious in employing the term *Islamic* as it tends to blur the limits between areas that should be conceived separately. So, whenever this term is used in our inquiry it should be understood to describe the religious *sharʿī* realm.

2. '*Islamic*' culture

Another conception that tends to obscure historical studies of Islam is the idea of an *Islamic culture*. Researchers have observed that when speaking of the five major civilizations, i.e. Europe, India, China, Japan and Islam, all of them are designated geographically except Islam which denotes a religion. "This fact, just like the civilizational paradigm (*Zivilisationsparadigma*) that goes back to the 19th century, proves itself to be a fundamental conceptual obstacle."[19] So the term "Islam" signifies a religion, with "a clear set of religious norms", and at the same time a culture, which is not necessarily congruent with the former. In other words, the term "Islamic culture" encompasses the religion of Islam and everything that happens on a cultural and scientific level. This blurred perception leads to absurd assessments in which one can find labels like "Islamic wine jugs". The result of this conception was summarized by Bauer as follows: "Whole areas of secular life are terminologically sacralized by the term 'Islamic', whereby the differentiations in the societies of the Middle East become obscured."[20] Thus, the plurality of discourse, especially within the sciences, become negated. But, according to Bauer, the fact of the matter is that "in the classical Islamic world there was a *parallel* existence of discourses which existed relatively independent from one another and in each case they exhibited their own normative system."[21] He then continues characterizing the pre-modern Muslim societies in which "the individual subsystems are easily and clearly recognized. There is Law,

14 Alexander Treiger, "Al-Ghazālī's Classifications of the Sciences and Descriptions of the Highest Theoretical Science", *Dîvân Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi* 16/30 (2011), 13.
15 Jackson, "Islamic Secular", 1.
16 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 193.
17 Jackson, "Islamic Secular", 11.
18 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 193.
19 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 193.
20 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 194.
21 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 196.

Sufism, Theology, Ḥadīth, Medicine, Literature, etc. - each with their own standards, experts and discourse. In all of these fields religion plays a very different role."[22] The mistake that historians of the Muslim world make is

> To distort reality when they consider the religious discourse *a priori* as the more important and more correct, or when in case of contradictions between religious and nonreligious discourses, they take the religious discourse as the norm and the nonreligious as the deviation, just because we call the culture we investigate 'Islamic' and assume the religious 'penetration' of this culture. Rather it is more important to ask what kind of significance each discourse has for each group of society[23]

The same applies to the study of history within Muslim scholarship. By applying the term or category *Islamic History* the conception of the past becomes distorted. The following investigation will attempt to avoid this problem and show how history as a science changed over time, what the role of religion was for its discourse and what significance it had within society.

3. From jāhilīya to Sacred History

In his book *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period,* Tarif Khalidi tries to explain the changing of the *Zeitgeist* or *mood* in historical thought and what caused it to shift. The obvious starting point of historical writing is the time before the revelation took place where the addressees were the pre-Islamic Arabs. Here, according to Khalidi, we do not find history in the formal sense. The pre-Islamic or *jāhilī* mindset didn't have a scientific worldview in order to generate a science of history. For them, there were no moral lessons or patterns to be extracted from the past nor anything to be anticipated in the future. Their idea of time, which they called *dahr*, was a faceless, patternless and endless power that due to its obscurity could not be analyzed. Yet, this non-patterned past brought forth a pattern within their poetry in which there is grief about the past and dread of the future. The only element taking the center stage here was the poet and his *jāhilī* model life itself.[24]

With the Quran, according to Khalidi, the Arabs not only received a new religion but also a new conception of history. But this Quranic conception of history, according to Khalidi, wasn't properly dealt with until the third/ninth century. Khalidi sees two reasons for that: First, the historical circumstances. Second, the systematic scholarship that was still emerging before the third/ninth century. On one hand, the *status quo* for the first generation of Muslims intellectually was an old *jāhilī* conception overlaid with the Quranic conception and on the other hand a very rapid change took place within a short period of time socially and politically. For the first two centuries, according to Khalidi, the social and political events had a bigger impact on historical writings than the stimuli coming from the Quran. The rapid change for

22 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 200.
23 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 202.
24 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 3-4.

the first generations of Muslims was so drastic that within one lifetime a bedouin Arab could rise to become a governor of an ancient and high culture city in Persia or Syria. Although the Muslims from their own perspective were witnessing the godly promised success in their expansion, they simultaneously had to deal with the traumatic experience of inner civil turmoils right after the Islamic empire was born. So according to Khalidi: "*The painful birth of the early empire was the single most important motive for the emergence of Islamic historiography.*"[25]

By looking at the historical development from a distance and considering a wider timeframe - from the pre-Islamic period until the third/ninth century - three different stimuli that were shaping the historiography can be discerned: the *jāhilīya,* the Quran and lastly the social and political changes and events. An additional factor shaping the early-Islamic scholarly discourse were local differences. Although Khalidi acknowledges that scholars were very mobile and not bound to a specific place, the local circumstances and culture still influenced their specific scholarly approach in writing history. Especially when it comes to the search of origins in historical writings he identifies three locally different approaches to history in Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula and Syria.[26] Khalidi does not substantiate his claim and thus the question remains on how to pin point local differences when the scholars are mobile? Be as it is, the overall focuses, according to Khalidi, lay on tribal history, sacred history and 'world' history. Later, all these locally and thematic differences would slowly disappear under the rubric of a 'pan-Islamic' interest and study of the Quran and the prophetic *ḥadīth.*

The importance of the emergence of *ḥadīth* in the context of the development of Islamic scholarship cannot be overemphasized. Khalidi and Fuat Sezgin point out that the science of *ḥadīth* is "a unique product of Islamic civilization"[27] and that the knowledge of it is "indispensable for a correct understanding of the formation and development of the entire Islamic literature."[28] They are also in agreement about the three stages and chronology the *ḥadīth* corpus went through, beginning with [1.] the collection in the first half of the first century, [2.] compilation between the end of the first and beginning of the second century and [3.] classification in the first half of the second century.[29]

The Umayyad caliphs, according to Khalidi, played a major role when it came to the second phase of compiling the *ḥadīths*. The scholars working under the caliphate were introducing new rules on how *ḥadīths* were to be transmitted when books were replacing the personal transmission from the narrators. Hence, the

25 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 14.
26 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 15. Al-Duri makes a twofold distinguish of historical schools: "Iraqi school in Kufa and Basra and the Hijaz school in Medina." Al-Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, 152.
27 Khalidi, *Historical Thought,* 22.
28 Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 1/53.
29 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 20 and Sezgin, *GAS,* 55.

scholars were becoming more rigorous concerning the authenticity of the *isnād* (chain of transmission). This, in turn, brought forth a new science with its elite practitioners who were sought-after by the rulers for their expertise. Furthermore, these scholars started to author monographs which initiated the third phase of classification in the first half of the second/eighth century.[30] The science of *ḥadīth* and its scholarship started to distinguish itself from other forms of discourse about the past. By demarcating their field in content (by focusing mostly on legal issues) and its criteria of transmission (*isnād*) the remaining space around the *ḥadīth* discourse was now left to other approaches with their own parameters. This is where historiography would later take place.

4. Demarcation between Hadith and History

The aim in this is section is to give points of illustration on how the science of history started to become a secular science by distinguishing itself from the science of ḥadīth and to explain how the historians became more independent of the rigorous parameters crucial to the science of ḥadīth and began to come up with their own narratives and rules.

In Ibn Isḥāq's work, according to Khalidi, we are starting to see an engagement with the larger Quranic view of history and its moral sense. With greater attention to "the literary polish of his narrative" Ibn Isḥāq brings together poetry, narrations, explications of the historical circumstances of the Quran, biblical narrations and most importantly his own reflections. The focus here becomes the interpretation and chronology of history and the *ḥadith* become points of illustration for his own narrative.[31] A few decades after Ibn Isḥāq, according to Khalidi, the break between *ḥadīth* and historiography becomes "more or less complete" with Al-Wāqidī and Ibn Saʿd.[32] They are both more systematic and have specific methods in their approaches.

With regards to the concern with dating and chronology, al-Wāqidī and Ibn Saʿd divided the past into generations (*ṭabaqāt*) "one of the earliest time divisions in Islamic historiography."[33] This way they not only linked the past to the present but were also able to detect anachronisms in other narratives. Unlike Ibn Isḥāq, their focus lay on the history of the Prophet and his community up to their present. With their intent of factual accuracy, they removed tales and made history a soberer academic endeavor. With this approach, the Prophet was in al-Wāqidīs narrative "primarily a political-leader and only secondarily a prophetic lawgiver."[34]

Another noteworthy trend in the third/ninth century was the usage of *isnād* and terminology. Scholars like al-Wāqidī started using the *isnād* in two different ways: [1.] "detailed and explicit for controversy and [2.] collective and impersonal for more

30 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 19-24.
31 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 38.
32 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 48.
33 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 46.
34 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 48.

mundane events." Furthermore, terms like *akhbār* (reports) started to denote a historical report in general and thus the line between ḥadīth and history was also becoming clearer terminologically. With this differentiation we start to see various modes of how Muslim scholars were looking at the past. Two of them shall serve as points of illustration.

The first approach was genealogy. Khalidi points out that genealogy *(naṣab)* was an ancient pre-Islamic practice among the Arabs. It is similar to the *ṭabaqāt* division with two major differences: [1.] *naṣab* could be employed to divide animals as well as humans independent of their religion unlike *ṭabaqāt* which only deals with humans and Muslims and [2.] *naṣab* deals with family trees aligned by tribes whereas *ṭabaqāt* have a religious and topical structure.[35] As the subject matter of the different sciences was becoming defined, the genealogists, according to Khalidi, started to occupy an uncomfortable place within the Islamic sciences as they appeared more and more anachronistic with their pan-Arabic outlook. [36] But a shift of mood redirected scholars to write genealogy as a "homage towards pious Muslim ancestors rather than one of pride in a heroic Arab past."[37] Yet, this more religious perspective was not going to be the only way in which historians would look at important people of the past. A good example is al-Baladhūrī's *Anṣāb al-Ashrāf*. Structurally, it is loosely arranged around prominent families. The earlier heroic and religious sense was replaced by a more 'romantic' and "more consciously jocular approach aimed at the secretarial class to which the author himself belonged."[38] He also seems to have been adopting bureaucratic approaches in his work. Unlike al-Wāqidī who uses the phrase *al-mujmaʿ ʿalayhi (*the agreed-upon position), al-Baladhūrī uses *wa hādhā al-athbat* (and this is the firm, established position).[39] This language suggests a lesser religious undertone since the concept of *ijmāʿ* (consensus) was becoming central within the Islamic scholarship.

Another way of looking at the past can be seen in works on conquests. Khalidi argues, that at the beginning of this genre two main intentions can be spotted: [1.] The conquests were seen as an extension of the conquests of the Prophet and put in line with the God-given victory to him and his Companions and [2.] the desire to narrate how different tribes and lands were conquered which then could be used for dramatic public recitation. Later in the third/ninth century another intention started to emerge. Again, a more areligious reason was behind this shift as historians attempted to record an accurate account of the events in which Khalidi sees bureaucratic reasons.[40] To substantiate this claim he uses another important work of this genre once more by al-Baladhūrī called *Futūḥ al-buldān*. Khalidi points out five important

35 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 49.
36 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 50, 54.
37 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 56.
38 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 59.
39 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 60.
40 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 65.

aspects of this famous work: [1.] Al-Baladhūrī doesn't limit his work to a specific region as it was done before him, [2.] uses a wide array of material from oral, written to archival sources, [3.] gives detailed accounts about administrative and economic affairs, [4.] follows a chronological order and [5.] relies on inhabitants of the regions for information. All these aspects "would help to establish uniformity in legal and administrative precedents."[41] According to Khalidi, the practicality of this work basically leaves no room for tales and fantasies. Thus, it is fair to speak of a secular endeavor free from any direct religious intend. These developments should not be suggestive of a completely secular approach to history to become the norm. Although we see the science of history in some instances serving bureaucratic purposes, there were now different strands running parallel to each other. The aforementioned works, as Hodgson pointed out, already included "[s]everal ways of studying history" and al-Balādhurī "studied Muslim history from a more secular viewpoint than his younger contemporary, Ṭabarī."[42]

In al-Ṭabarī's *History of Prophets and Kings* we find, according to Khalidi, a reflection of "a wide range of the century's scholarly concerns"[43] as his methodology echoes different qualities that can be found in the works of his predecessors. Khalidi compares al-Ṭabarī's history with his commentary on the Qur'ān to highlight the different approaches taken by the same scholar in different fields. It shows how the sciences were becoming more distinct from each other and under which parameters they operated. Khalidi points out that al-Ṭabarī was "[e]choing terms that were becoming current in his days for the division of the sciences into '*aqliyya* (rational) and *naqliyya* (transmitted), Tabari sought to place history squarely in the second category". According to Khalidi, al-Ṭabarī also used different methods to argue a position in his commentary and summarizes "the levels of priority used to establish proof (*hujja; shahid*) of correct interpretation" as follows: "[1.] Reports from God or His Prophet through abundant transmission. [2.] Consensus of exegetes on points of law, history or doctrine. [3.] Analogy, e.g. from accepted grammatical usage or poetry."[44] The first two depend on reports which are transmitted. The third level "is called by Ṭabarī analogy (*qiyas*), inference (*istidlal*) or scholarly judgment (*ijtihad*)."[45] After comparing this approach in Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* with his history, Khalidi concludes that in his history he does not resort to interpretative resources or internal criticism to argue for or against a specific historical report. The way Khalidi presents the third level, i.e. analogy, grammar, inference or *ijtihad*, suggests that they would fall under rational approaches. But this is only partly the case. Language is also a transmitted knowledge as it is the science which is based on the conventional use of the language by the Arabs. Sciences of language, therefore, are among the sciences that are transmitted at their core. The other methods (analogy, inference or *ijtihad*) are also

41 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 67-68.
42 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1/455.
43 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 73.
44 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 75.
45 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 75.

not purely rational as they are based on transmitted knowledge from which an analogy will be drawn or inferred from. But the question remains: Why did al-Ṭabarī not resort to these methods in his history? Khalidi gives a good pointer that might lead to an answer by stating that in his history "there is no manifest clarity, no *bayan,* but only *akhbar* (…). Unlike the *Commentary*, where inference and deduction could be employed to wrest meaning out of a text whose ultimate clarity is, as it were, vouched for by the Almighty Himself, in the *History* Tabari is at the mercy of his transmitters."[46] Obviously, the aim of a commentator of the Quran is not the same as that of a historian. The former is dealing first and foremost with what he conceives as revelation and tries to understand the meaning of God's words. As Khalidi stated, it is about extracting meaning from the text. Whereas the historian is trying to find out about events in the past by means of reports. Thus, he is primarily concerned about the truthfulness of any given transmission and not about extracting meaning from any text.

This conclusion is in line with the two principles Khalidi observed in al-Ṭabarī's history. The first is following a "better derivation' (*aṣaḥḥu makhrajan*) which refers to the chain of narration (*isnād*). The second principle is relying on experts of any given civilization. Al-Ṭabarī criticized other historians for not consulting, for example, the experts on Persian genealogy when they wrote about their lineage.[47] This shows that al-Ṭabarī's primary concern was, as mentioned above, a genuine reproduction of historical events. Thus, it seems plausible that he reserved judgment when it came to three centuries of Islamic history and was content with transmitting divergent versions of the same events.[48] If he did not see that any of the versions was stronger than the others and each of them fulfilled the criteria he had in mind, then narrating them all seems academically the most consistent approach.

At this point, we shall return to Hodgson's claim about the various ways of studying history mentioned earlier. By comparing al-Ṭabarī with al-Balādhurī this claim can easily be substantiated. Just by looking at their professions we can make some useful observations about their approaches and aims. Al-Balādhurī, coming from a secretarial class, showed obviously more interest in bureaucratic matters that had practical value to governing a state. Al-Ṭabarī, on the other hand, was first and foremost a scholar of religious sciences which is evident even in his work on history. A good example is al-Ṭabarī's philosophical and theological introduction in which he discusses time and argues the existence of a creator.[49] He uses philosophical and theological terminology which were becoming the norm. Even his decision to apply

46 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 75-76.
47 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 77-78.
48 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 80-81.
49 Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-umam wa al-mulūk* (Beirut: Daru Ibn Ḥazm, 2014), I/19-30.

"the principle of possibility" [50] in accepting narrations, reflects an epistemology discussed in much detail by later philosophers and theologians.

By comparing Ṭabarī's history with his commentary on the Qur'ān the different approaches taken by the same scholar in different fields becomes evident. It shows how the sciences were becoming more distinct from each other and under which parameters they operated. Ṭabarī can be seen as an important transitional point in both *tafsīr* and historical writing. In his encycplopedic commentary he drew from many different sciences, and similarly he brought together different currents in his history.[51] So it is no wonder that, according to Khalidi, Ṭabarī is "one of the earliest of Islam's historians to project a vision of history inspired by the regular rhythms of Qur'anic narrative."[52] Thus, we can consider him a turning point in both sciences.

Secular Elite

Thus far the attempt was to show how the science of history was moving away from a 'sacred' history within the discourse of the ḥadīth scholars. Scholars from the third/ninth century onwards started to tend towards an understanding of history in which one could detect patterns in a secular sense, meaning that certain actions independent of being religiously sanctioned or not would lead to certain worldly consequences. This frame of thought would arise around the third/ninth century which due to its different spirit of learning went into another direction. *Adab* is the key term in this context. According to Khalidi, *adab* "came to mean a special kind of education, a moral and intellectual curriculum aimed at a particular urban class and reflecting the needs and aspirations of that class."[53] At one point he described and translated it as an *Islamic literary humanism*.[54]

Khalidi sees three main reasons for the transition in historical writing from ḥadīth to *adab.* First*,* the chain of transmission (*isnād*), which was the basis of the

50 Al-Ṭabarī says in his introduction: "I rely only very exceptionally upon what is learned through rational arguments and produced by internal thought processes. For no knowledge of the history of men of the past and of recent men and events is attainable by those who were not able to observe them and did not live in their time, except through information and transmission provided by informants and transmitters. This knowledge cannot be brought out by reason or produced by internal thought processes. This book of mine may [be found to] contain some information, mentioned by us on the authority of certain men of the past, which the reader my disapprove of and the listener may find detestable, because he can find nothing sound and no real meaning in it. In such cases, he should know that it is not our fault that such information comes to him, but the fault of someone who transmitted it to us. We have merely reported it as it was reported to us." (Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh,* 1/6-7).

51 Al-Duri's assessment is in line with Khalidi: "He [Ṭabarī] inserted the idea of the integration of all prophetic missions in history, and also the idea of the unity of the *umma*'s experiences (or the *ijmā'*). Al-Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing,* 159.

52 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 78. One could also call it theological in essence: "History for al-Ṭabarī was an expression of divine will and he wrote it accordingly." Al-Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing*, 159.

53 Khalidi, *Historical Thought,* 83.

54 Khalidi, "Islam and Literature", *YouTube* (15.05. 2015), 00:10:15-00:10:16.

ḥadīth scholarship, was not available when it came to other nations. Second, the chains of transmission became excessively long and as they were not needed when it came to a narrative style approach with different purposes, like entertainment. Third, other fields like philosophy and natural sciences were based on reason in which there was no place for chains of transmission.[55]

The sciences subsumed under *adab,* according to Khalidi, were usually linguistics (philology and grammar), poetry, history and the natural sciences.[56] The fact that he includes history shows that he had the same classification in mind that was mentioned in the introduction. Contrasting the sciences of *adab* with the religious sciences, i.e. ḥadīth, *tafsīr* and *fiqh,* it seems reasonable to call the former 'secular knowledge'*.* But Khalidi is hesitant to take that step. This seems to be grounded in the fact that the sciences of language were an essential part of the secular as well as religious knowledge. Nonetheless, he goes on to distinguish between them in spirit, intention and attitude.[57] If Khalidi had used a more detailed classification with more than two distinctions, i.e. secular and religious, or the working definition of 'Islamic secular', there would be no need for any hesitation. In both cases, sciences of *adab* would fall into a secular or non-*sharʿī* realm. In a more detailed classification, the sciences of language would be grouped under the ancillary sciences *(ʿulūm al-āla)* (which were a prerequisite for the religious sciences), thus not a part of of the Sharia sciences insofar as they are not derived from the revelation.[58] But these sciences were to become the meeting point between the *sharʿī* and non-*sharʿī* realm, a prerequisite for scholarship and give the islamic intellectual tradition its very unique form.[59]

Concerning the difference in spirit, intention and attitude, Khalidi observes four major ones between the scholars of ḥadīth and *adab.* The first has to do with the way they dealt with material that reached them. A ḥadith scholar would collect, assess, and arrange the material to incorporate them "into a system of belief and action". The *adīb* (practitioner of *adab*)*,* on the other hand, dealt with the material for its own sake and followed it wherever it led him. Second, for the ḥadith scholar knowledge that was handed down, i.e. in the religious sense, was a circumscribed commodity that had its limits since the revelation of the Quran and the prophetic ḥadīth came to an end. Unlike the *adīb* for whom knowledge, in the general sense, stretched endlessly into the future. Third, the ḥadith scholar would perceive some knowledge as irrelevant, uncouth or harmful, the *adīb* would quite likely allow all knowledge "for its potentially aesthetic appeal."[60] Lastly, a ḥadith scholar "would be

55 Tarif Khalidi, "The Books in My Life: A Memoir (Part 2)", *Jerusalem Quarterly* 74 (Summer, 2018), 37.
56 Khalidi, *Historical Thought,* 85.
57 Khalidi, *Historical Thought,* 85.
58 Jens Bakker, *Normative Grundstrukturen der Theologie des sunnitischen Islam im 12./18. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: EB-Verlag, 2012), 521.
59 Thomas Bauer, "Religion und Klassische-Arabische Literatur", *Poetry's Voice - Society's Norms,* eds. A. Pflitsch and B. Winckle, (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2006), 25-26.
60 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 85.

likely to regard Islam as a complete and completed cultural system" whereas an *adīb* would probably regard it as a "cultural beginning, a constant invitation to examine the world of man and nature."[61]

Centrality of Linguistics

Although there was a relatively clear distinction between the more secular minded *adīb* and the religious minded ḥadīth scholar, important developments would take place which brought them closer until the expertises would largely merge into each other. In order to see this process more clearly it is necessary to show how the Arabic language and its linguistics became essential to the "Islamic world-system"[62]. As Bauer pointed out:

> The emergence of an Arabic empire and eventually an Arabic-Islamic culture would not have been possible as long as they did not get a grip of the problem of language. But the Arabs succeeded in it. In a remarkably short period of time a linguistics developed almost out of nothing and outpaced everything that ever existed (…) and it became the fundamental discipline of the Islamic sciences.[63]

So, besides the sciences of ḥadīth there is another uniqueness to the Islamic scholarly tradition which is linguistics.

The efforts of grammarians and lexicographers were sparked by various factors: The Quran, Hadith, pre-Islamic poetry, and the 'Bedouin vocabulary'. Again, one could speak of two strands running parallel to each other: one concerned with the religious knowledge and the other with the secular heritage of the pre-Islamic Arabs for its own sake. Although independent of each other at first, both of them would synthesize later in works like *al-Tahdhīb* by al-Azharī (380/980).[64] A similar process happened within poetry. After the revelation, the tradition of writing poetry never broke off. In fact, it was probably the only art adopted from the pre-Islamic Arabia.[65] But after the first generation, the art of poetry took mainly place outside of the scholarly circles of ḥadīth. Khalidi observed that in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries the great anthologies of poetry did not contain verses inspired by the Prophet or Islamic ideals. He gives two possible reasons for it. First, that poetry from the time of the revelation and shortly after is "spurious and fabricated to please the pious." Second, the critical taste of the *adīb* scholars searching for the criteria of literary excellence. Al-Asmaʿī for instance said the following about the poetry of Ḥassan ibn Thābit:

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61 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 85.

62 A term introduced by John O. Voll who argues that this system is identified "by a distinctive set of sociomoral symbols for the definition of proper human relationships." See: John O. Voll, "Islam as a Special World-System", *Journal of World History* 5/2 (1994), 220.

63 Bauer, "Literatur", 16.

64 Bauer, "Literatur", 17.

65 Hodgson, *Venture*, I/458.

> If you were to lead poetry into the path of virtue, you would enfeeble it. Do you not see how Hassan ibn Thabit attained eminence in pre-Islamic as well as Islamic times but when his poetry followed the path of virtue, as in the elegies he composed on the Prophet, on Hamza, Ja'far and others, his verse became feeble [*lana*]? The path of poetry is that path of "studs" [*fuhul*], of poets like Imru'l Qays, Zuhayr and al-Nabigha, who sing of encampments and departures, defamation and panegyric, flirtation with women, the wild ass and the horse, war and glory.[66]

So the reluctance of ḥadīth scholars in writing poetry was not only due to their preoccupation with the religious sciences, especially the gathering and writing of ḥadīth, but they most probably did not want to get involved in the worldly pre-Islamic modality of poetry. Furthermore, the Quranic and ḥadīth *ethos* understood by the pietist circles was in a tense relationship with the pre-Islamic manner of poetry. *Adab* scholars, on the other hand, saw it as a "fundamental Arabic cultural achievement." Although there were some praise poems on the Prophet it was not a major theme amongst the poets for about three centuries until it reached its peak around the sixth/ twelfth century.[67]

Even though the new secretary class, the *kuttāb,* were Muslims it seems that within the "world-view and educational ideal of the *kuttāb,* summed up under the term *adab*, religion was only one element amongst many and thus a secular culture blossomed (…).[68]" The development of this culture that absorbed pre-Islamic Arabic, Persian, Greek and Indian traditions, went through different stages and heated debates before it took its shape. Bauer calls its result an "Islamic-secular tradition".[69] This process is central to the self-perception of the Muslims and how they situated Islam in world history.

Khalidi goes into great detail about the controversies that took place between the second-fourth/eighth-tenth centuries whose arena was the *adab* discourse. Two of the most important ones shall be looked at here. The first controversy was between the notions of 'ancients' and 'moderns' and the idea of decline and progress. Champions of the ancients held the idea that only in the *jāhilī* period the pure and less corrupted form of Arabic can be found. This position also entailed the notion that life itself, knowledge, morals and manners were superior then what followed it. Some even used statements from venerable early-Islamic figures to make this point.[70] Later

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66 Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam Across the Centuries* (New York: Crown Publishing Group 2009), 119-120.

67 Bauer, "Literatur", 18.

68 Bauer, "Literatur", 19.

69 Bauer, "Literatur", 19.

70 Khalidi mentions the following narration as an example: "It is said that 'A'isha, God be pleased with her, said, May God be merciful to Labid, how splendid are the verses in which he says: 'Gone are the men in whose shelter one can live and I remain behind, among posterity that resemble a leper's skin. No use are they, nor can any good be hoped from them; and their orator, even if he speaks no wrong, is faulted.' 'A'isha added, How will it be if Labid saw the posterity of our age!

generations challenged this view and introduced a degree of relativity. An intellectual 'optimism' set in as the natural sciences progressed and the idea that each generation had its own virtues became acceptable. So even if the later generations were not superior they were at least equals or should be judged on merit alone irrespective of time.[71] By the sixth/twelfth century we find scholars say: "Mistakes once made will be corrected by later scholars. The gaps in the teachings of ancient scholars will be filled by modern scholars. This applies to all crafts."[72]

The second important controversy was a cultural debate between the Arabs and non-Arabs. With the increasing number of non-Arabs in the courtly circles and their influence upon the Muslim empire they started to limit the role of the old-Arabian tradition by developing the empire culturally. This circle started to resist tendencies from the Arabs who undermined the Persian-based *adab* tradition by using the Quran and Arabic as a mean. But for the non-Arabs there was no room to use Islam as an argument for the superiority of Arabs as the revelation itself was directed against the old pagan Arabian tradition now being honored again. Furthermore, they wrote poetry in Arabic to show the merits of other peoples at the expense of the Arabs themselves and their new awakened tribal pride.[73] In the end, an orientation to a *jāhilī* old-Arabian past was not going to prevail. Yet, the bedouin as a prototype was thrust into an ambiguous role: on the one hand he embodied the "uncivilized nature boy", on the other hand, he was the master linguist and owner of wisdom.[74]

5. Curiosity about the World

Through the influence of the *kuttāb,* their new educational ideal and own style of authorship, a particular kind of worldview emerged. This was of course within the boundaries of what the Quranic teaching entailed, but it was insofar unique as it brought about a peculiar curiosity about the world, cultures and nations. A curiosity coming from the knowledge that everything is part of creation, in the way God wanted it to be.

> (…), [I]t was commonly asserted that the diversity of regions and nations revealed their creator's wisdom since their very diversity insured that they would be interdependent. Each region was granted certain resources denied to others, necessitating commerce, industry, travel and the exchange and

Al-Sha'bi said, How will it be if the Mother of the Faithful saw the posterity of our age!" See Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 97.

71 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 98-99.

72 Franz Rosenthal, *Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947), 69.

73 Hodgson, *Venture*, 1/461; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 103.

74 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 352.

> enjoyment of each other's goods, and demonstrating the just and proper arrangement of the created world.[75]

The idea that plurality is an essential quality of existence was thus seen as a reality. This has then led to the desire of not only knowing about other peoples but also to learn and benefit from them. Al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 284/897) was probably the first Muslim historian to articulate the idea that each nation "made a particular contribution to world culture (…)."[76] And in the spirit of the recently acquired Greek heritage with its Aristotelian urge to classify, the next logical step would be to investigate and discover who contributed what. According to al-Jāḥīẓ, there were three civilizations whose knowledge the Muslims inherited:

> The books of the Indians, the wisdom of Greece and the literature of the Persians have all been translated. Some have gained in charm while others lost nothing … These books were transmitted from nation to nation, from era to era and from language to language until they finally reached us, and we were the last to inherit and examine them … Our practice with our successors ought to resemble the practice of our predecessors with us. But we have attained greater wisdom than they did and those who follow will attain greater wisdom than they did and those who follow will attain greater wisdom than we have.[77]

One could compare this to the Hegelian philosophy of history in which each culture contributes to the progress that passes from one civilization to the next. After making its contribution, according to this philosophy, a culture falls into decline as it is surpassed by the next.[78] The major difference between the Hegelian notion and that of the pre-modern Muslim scholars lies in the way how the other is perceived and how this inherited knowledge was used. The philosophical ideas in Western Europe led to the notion that other civilizations fell into decadence and "lost their right to exist since progress had passed them. It was their fate to remain in faceless space until the West brought them progress again."[79] Bauer argues that no other culture had a "claim to universality" (*Universalitätsehrgeiz*) like the West. Its cause was an "intolerance of ambiguity" (*Ambiguitätsintoleranz*) which could not tolerate but one truth. Now there was, in fact, a curiosity towards other peoples, but it was not based on "open-mindedness and cosmopolitanism". It was rather because "no other culture [but the West] saw itself so easily and so often questioned through the otherness of the other."[80] Only a small minority, usually the artists and poets, possessed the ability to cope with ambiguity and diversity. Unlike the majority who insisted on the

75 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 118.
76 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 124.
77 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 108. Khalidi observes how al-Jāḥiẓ "adopted a style which delighted in opposites", something Bauer would call "the desire to produce ambiguity". So al-Jāḥiẓ foreshadowed a quality that was going to become the norm.
78 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 296.
79 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 296.
80 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 369-370.

universal validity of one's own worldview. And their way to deal with ambiguity and diversity was to eliminate or assimilate the other.[81]

The Muslim expansion and their way of dealing with other nations, on the other hand, was very different. As mentioned before, they saw diversity as an essential quality of existence and as a sign of God's wisdom. So, according to Bauer, their expansion lacked material and mental motives found in the Western imperial expansion. When Muslim sailors, for instance, encountered unknown territory they mapped the coastlines for either practical use like trade or for their love of their craft and the refinement of it. Poets then would use those new and rare informations to embellish their poetry and display of their extensive knowledge.[82] We can find historians as early as the fourth/tenth century who spoke about other nations in a positive light praising them for their achievement. Muslim scholars commonly conceived them as all having a distinctive excellence in a specific area and contributing to world history. In this narrative the Muslims were then the ones inheriting their knowledge.[83]

With the lack of a claim to universality the motivation for a conquest and colonization was missing. This, according to Bauer, must be seen in relation to the way the Muslims perceived others:

> The people of the Arabic-Islamic world (and probably the whole Islamic world) did not experience the otherness of people outside of their own world as a threat and not as a challenge. They did not see their identity through the otherness of the stranger outside of their own space not disturbed and thus had no problem in leaving the other in his otherness. Prerequisite for that is a personality tolerant of ambiguity (…).[84]

He further adds:

> Although, Islam is a world religion with a universal claim to truth it lacks the 'claim to universality of the emerging nation states, which later became a global and probably the most dominant pull of all Modernization.[85]

When Muslim historiography is seen from this perspective it affirms the recent historical cultural studies and findings in intellectual history. The Muslims "sober" way of encountering other peoples and cultures began in the *adab* period motivated by the curiosity about the world on the part of the new secular elite. So just as the Quran on a religious level consummated other religions, the same was

81 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 371.
82 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 368; Khalidi, *Historical Thought,* 124.
83 Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Mas'ūdī,* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1975), 109.
84 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 364. Bauer gives two insightful examples of how Ibn Faḍlān and al-Masʿūdī describe other nations and their practices in a "sober" and "almost ethnographical objectivity". (Id., 361-364).
85 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 365.

happening culturally.[86] The political, cultural and scientific heritage of other peoples was not only received and narrated but transformed, synthesized and assimilated through the medium of Arabic. And looking at history from this rather cultural perspective it explains why history was valued for different reasons like practical value and sometimes even entertainment purposes.[87]

Lessons from History

Common literary genres among scholars of *adab* were the anthology, poetry and counsel for kings (*naṣīḥa al-mulūk*). Anthologies contained a collection of historical narratives, fables, anecdotes, poetry and proverbs commonly divided into chapters.[88] The authors of such works would draw from various kind of sources ranging from the Persian, Indian and Greek tradition as well as pre-Islamic poetry, the Quran and the ḥadīth. Having a "well-defined pedagogical mission" the readership of anthologies was usually the courtly society, although this would change over time. Given the "secular spirit" of *adab* in general, anthologists "were well aware that their activity might be regarded as 'secular' or at least nonreligious."[89] Even though, an *adīb* was educated in the religious sciences and "[k]nowledge of fiqh was practical both for a private individual and for a state clerk"[90] religion was for them a subsystem amongst many, as alluded to earlier. So they had to, at least in its initial phase, justify their endeavors. Ibn Qutayba's (d. 276/889) introduction to his anthology '*Uyūn al-akhbār* (The Choices of Narratives) is a good example to illustrate how such a justification looked like:

> This work, while not be devoted to the Qur'an or Sunnah, the laws of religion or the sciences of the licit and illicit is nevertheless a guide to sublime matters and noble character; it reprimands vileness, proscribes shameful deeds, and inspires proper management of affairs and sound decision making, as well as leniency in governance and earthly welfare. There is not one single path to God, nor does the whole of virtue consist in spending the night in prayer, continuous fasting, and knowing the licit and illicit. Rather, the paths to God are numerous, the gates of virtue are wide open, and the well-being of religion depends on the well-being of temporal matters. The well-being of temporal matters depends on the well-being of the ruler, which in turn depends, following God's grace, upon right counsel and sound advice. I have composed these "Choicest of Narratives" to act as an eye-opener for someone who is ignorant of *Adab*, as a

86 Tarif Khalidi, "Islam and Literature", *YouTube*, (15 May 2015), 00:10:14-00:10:15.

87 As Rosenthal pointed out: "The historiography of any group that does not form part of modern Western civilization is subject to different environmental factors and is conditioned by a very different scale of intellectual values." Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 8. See also 32 and 45.

88 Khalidi, *Images*, 106.

89 Khalidi, *Images*, 106.

90 Hodgson, *Venture,* 1/453.

> reminder to scholars of religion, as an education to him who is in charge of people and as a relaxation to rulers.[91]

With the sober and curious approach to the world "any subject, sacred or profane, was deemed worthy of scrutiny (…)." It was this type of scholarship that challenged the notion of a "golden age" by emphasizing the human frailty present in every era. And "[i]n order to move freely in the present, there was much in *Adab* that desacralized the past."[92]

In line with the more secular approach was poetry and another genre emerging in this period referred to as counsel for kings. This type of literature is significant as "it constitutes a meeting-point for various ethical, philosophical and practical strands" in the unfolding of the early Arabic-Islamic culture.[93] These works were directed to rulers and consisted of practical advice on politics, statecraft, diplomacy, warfare and of course reminders on the responsibility of rulership entrusted by God. Pieces of advice are conveyed through poetry, stories, examples, anecdotes and sayings from different traditions on what constitutes a just government. Besides the stories about Persian emperors, Indian animal fables and Greek philosophical reflections on rulership, Muslim scholars would furthermore add exemplary rulers from the stories in the Quran.[94] According to Bauer, the counsel for kings was only one out of six types of discourses about politics and government. The other five were theology, legal, philosophical, poetry and history. In the modern perception, the "Islamic" discourse in the form of theology and *fiqh* are considered the most important ones. There is no doubt that legal matters were of importance when it came to governance, but, as demonstrated by Bauer, the two of the most important and influential types of discourses were in fact poems of praise and the counsel for kings.[95] And neither of them was predicated upon a religious approach. Quite the opposite.

> The main virtues for which the ruler is praised in this poetry are the same found in the pre-Islamic period. They are generosity and courage. (…) Neither generosity nor courage is derived from a religious normative system. In fact, they not even involve ethically justified virtues, rather qualities a ruler should have in order to rule *efficiently* (…).[96]

The idea here is that generosity motivates the people to follow the ruler voluntarily and courage forces those that do not follow him to do so. Piety was thus not a necessary quality of an efficient ruler. And looking at the key terms used in the

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91 Khalidi, *Images*, 106.
92 Khalidi, *Images*, 105-108.
93 C. E. Bosworth, "Nasīhat Al-Mulūk*", The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, eds. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 7/984.
94 See Louise Marlow, *Counsel for Kings: Wisdom and Politics in Tenth-Century Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 35.
95 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 321-324.
96 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 326.

context of poetry and counsel for kings terms like ʿ*azm* (determination), *himma* (eagerness), *ṭumūḥ* (ambition), *su'dad* (leadership) and *ḥazm* (decisiveness) are central. They are properties that would easily fit into a secular frame of thought. So, as suggested by some researchers, the comparison between a Machiavellian conception of leadership and what is found in pre-Modern Muslim works does not seem to be farfetched.[97]

Khalidi made very similar observations on how later historians perceived rulership. He discusses this matter when speaking about Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima*:

> (…) Ibn Khaldun highlighted a dominant concern of the age: the relationship between power and virtue as exemplified in the reign of Mu'awiya. He argued that power was necessary, that it was, neither good nor bad but a special kind of skill to be used badly or well in the maintenance of states.[98]

The skills necessary for the maintenance of states can, according to Bauer, be found in poems and counsel for kings as they reflected the dominating discourse on this matter.

Considering the above mentioned outlooks, it is reasonable to see in them the basis for the Arabic-Islamic world to absorb what came from other civilizations and to define its relationship to them. This should not suggest a similarity of the secularizing process in Western Europe. Rather, it is as Jackson explained: "The Islamic secular is not forced upon Islam (or Islamic law) from without but emerges as a result of the Sharia's own voluntarily self-imposed jurisdictional limits."[99] And as we can see the active members of this process were not non-Muslims, but scholars who were part and parcel of the the state apparatus and, as will be shown, increasingly more from the religious class as well. The next section will look at how the discourse of the *adab* scholars was transferred over to the religious elite. The important step that paved the way for this process was the establishment of the *madrasa* system as it adopted the literary sophistication central to *adab* in the training of religious scholars. According to Bauer, there was not only a "ʿ*ulamization* of *adab"* but also an "*adabization* of the ʿ*ulamā*."[100]

Piety and Refinement

In the previous chapter we saw how the secular elite of the *kuttāb* was a major factor in shaping the continually growing Muslim empire. They were not only able to establish a link to the pre-Islamic literary models, modify and transcend them[101] but also to engage and integrate other cultures and their achievements. The importance of the *kuttāb* did not decrease as time went by but a new kind of elite was going to

97 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 327; *EI²*, 7/ 985.
98 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 222.
99 Jackson, "Islamic Secular", 3.
100 Bauer, "Literatur", 24.
101 Bauer, "Literatur", 18.

emerge from the fourth/tenth century onwards and become the centerpiece of the intellectual milieu.

A line by the famous poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), which was dedicated to a judge (*qāḍī*), reflects the qualities of this new arising elite:[102]

His contemplation is science and wisdom his speech.	*tafakkuruhu ʿilmun wa-manṭiquhu ḥukmun*
His inward piety, his outward refinement.	*wa bāṭinuhu dīnun wa-ẓahiruhu ẓarfun*

This line basically summarizes the "double ideal" of a religious scholar who possesses the refined qualities of an *adīb*. Bauer captured both ideas accurately with the terms *piety and refinement.*[103] We shall look at how this development took place.

With the growing number of translations, written texts and maturing of the different religious and non-religious sciences, Muslim scholars from the fourth/tenth century onwards inherited a tradition and history from their own tradition besides what came from other cultures. With the closing of the Sunni ranks and establishment of new learning institutions (*madrasah*) a canon of standard works and extensive compendiums were becoming the norm. These were all factors shaping the new emerging elite which brought an end to the previous "independent culture of the *kuttāb* (…)"[104] They were still relevant insofar as they were functioning in the administrative office of the state but they were now being recruited from the *madrasa's* who produced *ʿulamā*. Thus, the new *kuttāb* were in fact *ʿulamā* in administrative positions.[105] This does not mean that the previous qualities found in *adab* became void. Instead they were carried on to the new elite, referred to earlier as the *adabization of ʿulamā.*

Not only piety and religious learning were important for the religious scholarship but also gentlemanly articulateness and literary education.[106] Qualities inherited from *adab*. Ambitious religious scholars did not stop at becoming lettered but also started to actively participate in the literary life. By writing sophisticate and aesthetic letters and poetry they were able to demonstrate their refinement (*ẓarf*). And this had to happen in popular genres, especially love poems. That is why from the fourth/tenth century onwards we find countless number of love poems (as well as other genres) written by religious scholars.[107]

102 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 245.
103 Originally: "*Raffinement und Frömmigkeit*". Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 245.
104 Bauer, "Literatur", 24.
105 Bauer, "Literatur", 24..
106 "weltmännische Gewandtheit und literarische Bildung". Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 246.
107 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 246.

> The poetry of religious scholars about love, wine and nature show how much the ideal of a worldly, secular happiness was accepted in religious circles. As poets of worldly poetry they strive for an educational ideal (*Bildungsideal*) which consists in the refinement of *ẓarf*. (…) Rather, both ideals stand side-by-side (if not with each other) since the time of the *Sunnī revival* up until the nineteenth century this coexistence contributed a lot to the humanity of classical Islam.[108]

This is aptly captured in the following statement: "The ideal man lived in both worlds and thought of the ambiguity as something highly attractive."[109] One could assume that all of this only tells us something about the courtly ideal. But it is in fact, as Bauer argues, an ideal of Islamic scholarship that consciously cultivated ambiguity.[110]

Another major feature of this scholarship was the emphasis put on a scientific approach to every field of study. Even history was, according to Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), "a well-ordered science" (*ʿilm manẓūman*).[111] And besides the earlier mentioned function of history as entertainment or *exempla* another important conception of it was spreading, which was the idea of pattern.

6. From History of Salvation to Worldly Patterns

Scholars of *adab* were reflecting on the human condition and trying to work out all the different factors shaping human existence. Although it might not have been in a scientific manner, nonetheless, their findings and ideas did have an impact and were worked out in a more systematic way by their successors. In the third/ninth century Jāḥīẓ was already reflecting about the influence of climatic factors, city life, economy and certain crafts on human development and behavior.[112] The same ideas presented in a more detailed fashion and more mature state can later be found in Ibn Khaldun's *al-Muqaddima.* This turning towards the present and emphasis on experiential knowledge (*tajriba*) can be seen as a step away from history as cautionary example (*ʿibra*) for the present found in Ṭabarī's work, towards history as a source for empirical data showing successful or unsuccessful conduct.

> (…) Examples are detached from the salvation perspective and provide empirical material for successful or unsuccessful action beyond moral criteria. Now, the assessment of the action is not determined from the outset, since it is not measured according to ethical, legal or religious criteria. Rather, the action

108 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 248. Rosenthal mentions a story told by the famous biographer and geographer Yāqūt al-Hamawī (d. 626) which illustrates "the high appreciation which the wine poetry of Abū Nuwās enjoyed everywhere." Rosenthal, *Technique*, 49.
109 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 249.
110 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 249.
111 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought,* 132.
112 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 125-126.

> is evaluated subsequently by its success or failure. Only its suitability decides if it is advised to imitate it or warned against.[113]

It is important to emphasis that this secular non-*sharʿī* approach did not cancel out the divine from the equation. Rather, all the scientific endeavors can actually be seen as the attempt to uncover the underlying mechanisms put into the world by God, what is referred to as *Sunnatallah*. Whether or not a scholar assumes a God or not in his research of detecting these mechanisms it will not affect his work. The same holds true for the search of reasons and patters in the rise and decline of ancient civilizations. There are enough examples of historians trying to find patterns in history beginning from Masʿūdī in the fourth/tenth century up until Ibn Nubātā and Ibn Khaldūn in the eighth/fourteenth century. Masʿūdī dealt with the question of patterns of rise, decline and fall in works that have not reached us. Khalidi tried to detect his ideas by looking at other surviving works, but pointed out that his findings could be tentative and subject to revision if other works are found.[114] Irrespective of the extent that Khalidi's findings are accurate or not, it seems that the notion of a scientifically discernible pattern detached from a salvational narrative was already present in the fourth/tenth century. Four centuries later the same conception of history was presented in two other theories. According to Ibn Nubātā the course of history relates to the three forces of the human being: discernibility (*al-quwwa al-mumayyiza*), irascibility (*al-quwwa al-ghaḍabīya*) and desire (*al-quwwa al-shahwiyya*). Ibn Khaldūn, on the other hand, saw a cyclical structure driven by *ʿaṣabīya* (social solidarity). All of these obviously non-religious historical concepts could be put forward without any outcry from other scholars. And it should be emphasized that none of the three scholars mentioned were marginal figures. Their works were in fact valued, read and elaborated upon throughout the Muslim world.[115]

To substantiate the claims so far, we shall quote Ibn Khaldun more extensively as he captures the aforementioned processes in his book. In the foreword to the *Muqaddima* he gives an overview of who the readership of historical works, its function, the manners in which it is presented and its subject matter.

> Both the learned and the ignorant are able to understand it [history]. For on the surface history is no more than the information about the political events, dynasties, and occurrences of the remote past, elegantly presented and spiced with proverbs. It serves to entertain large, crowded gatherings and brings to us an understanding of human affairs. It shows how changing conditions affected human affairs, how certain dynasties came to occupy an ever wider

113 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 335. Although Bauer is speaking about Ibn Nubātā (d. 768/1366), an author from a later period, the idea does not seem to be new but a continuation found in the *adab* discourse.

114 Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of Masʿūdī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 108.

115 Bauer, *Ambiguität*, 338.

> space in the world, and how they settled the earth until they heard the call and their time was up.[116]

In this passage the influence of *adab* scholars can be seen in how history is presented "elegantly" and "spiced with proverbs". Besides its entertaining factor there is its practical use of understanding human affairs and what causes them to change. It is an important aspect for the ruling class. Comparing this last part with Ṭabarī's introduction we do not see Ibn Khaldun mentioning how these changes, rise and fall of dynasties is dependent upon human behavior towards God insofar as He punished them for the ungratefulness after receiving from His bounties or their increase for being grateful.[117] In other words, Ibn Khaldūn is looking at the patterns in a broader sense detached from an exclusively religious salvational history.

This becomes clearer when he discusses the "inner meaning of history" which could be understood as history as a scientific inquiry and where it is situated within the branches of knowledge:

> The inner meaning of history, on the other hand, involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events. History, therefore, is firmly rooted in philosophy. It deserves to be accounted a branch of it.[118]

He follows a typical two-folded division of sciences what we called *sharʿī* and non-*sharʿī* or secular and religious.[119] In summary, the philosophical sciences are those that rely upon the ability of thinking and scientific methods independent of revelation. He classified what he termed science of human culture (*ʿilm al-ʿumran al-basharī*) under philosophy and looked at the past as a subject matter from which knowledge could be deduced from, provided that the correct methods are employed.

In his introduction Ibn Khaldūn puts forward the necessity of knowing this science especially when it comes to verifying historical narrations.

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116 Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddima,* trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015), 5.

117 Ṭabarī, *History,* 1/168. Rosenthal also sees in Ibn Khaldūn's concept of history "allowance for progressive evolution. According to Ibn Ḫaldūn, primitive Bedouin life gradually gives way to a more refined sedentary civilization. At this point, however, the development stops, and transition from Bedouin toe sedentary life appears continually to repeat itself. Ibn Ḫaldūn's theory, thus, has a general similarity with certain modern interpretations of history, but it hardly represents the positivist concept of progressive development." Rosenthal, *Technique*, 69.

118 Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddima*, 15.

119 "The sciences (…) are of two kinds: one that is natural to man and to which he is guided by his own ability to think, and a traditional kind that he learns from those who invented it. The first compromises the philosophical sciences. They are the ones with which man can become acquainted through the very nature of his ability to think and to whose objects, problems, arguments, and methods of instruction he is guided by his human perceptions, so that he is made aware of the distinction between what is correct and what is wrong in them by his own speculation and research, inasmuch as he is a thinking human being. The second kind comprises the tradition, conventional sciences. All of them depend upon information based on the authority of the given religious law." Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddima*, 5.

> Historians, Qur'ān commentators and leading transmitters have committed frequent errors in the stories and events they reported. They accepted them in the plain transmitted form, without regard for its value. They did not check them with the principles underlying such historical situations, nor did they compare them with similar material. Also, they did not probe with the yardstick of philosophy, with the help of knowledge of the nature of things, or with the help of speculation and historical insight. Therefore, they strayed from the truth and found themselves lost in the desert of baseless assumptions and errors.[120]

Obviously, he leveled critic first and foremost at commentators of the Quran and ḥadīth scholars working with transmitted material. The methods developed to establish the truthfulness of narrations are all non-*sharʿī* in nature: philosophical inquiry (yardstick of philosophy), empirical inquiry (nature of things), speculation and historical insight.

The pre-modern discourse up until the nineteenth century would follow along the lines of the historians mentioned above. With the encountering of the Western imperial powers and their claim to universality and intolerance towards ambiguity the Muslim discourse started to change, dismiss their earlier approach and adopt the same ideological approach.

Conclusion

The present paper attempted to show how Muslim scholars demarcated a *sharʿī* realm in which the subject matters of the different sciences were in one way or another dealing with the revelation. This self-imposed boundary opened up a space for other discourses with their epistemologies based on reason and empirical knowledge. This was also the case for history. At first, it followed a ḥadīth oriented approach with a salvific theme. With the scientification of all the different branches of knowledge, historians started to deal with the past in different ways. In this context, the role of the *adab* scholars became crucial as they made an immense contribution to the field with their literary finesse, curiosity about the world and generally more secular approach. History started to become a science whose objective ranged from entertaining the reader to practical knowledge for the rulers. Probably the most common assumption amongst historians was the notion of existing patterns in history. So, one of the main efforts became the uncovering of these patterns to inform the reader on the potential consequences of their actions. This outlook remained until the nineteenth century. With the encountering of the Western imperial powers and their claim to universality and intolerance of ambiguity, the mindset of Muslims started to shift towards the same outlook of the world as their conquerors. This led to a break with their intellectual tradition and lack of understanding of it. Muslim academics trained in modern Western institutions started to adopt terminology, concepts and an ideological frame of thought which informed their discourse. This led

120 Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddima,* 11.

to a situation in which Muslims started looking at their history from a Western perspective or at least with an ever-present Western interlocutor.

Recently many contemporary academics, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, started to challenge older notions about Islamic history and its intellectual history. There are now efforts trying to understand Islamic history on its own terms without applying concepts, notions and value judgments coming from a modern Western framework. These studies have come up with new insights that are not only important to understand the past but also the present, especially when it comes to the perspective towards and interaction with foreign cultures as well as the philosophy of science and its development in the Muslim world. It is thus crucial to reconsider some of the long-held assumptions of the past century or two. Most importantly there needs to be a reassessing the categories in which the discourse is taking place. In this context, the work done by academics like Tarif Khalidi and Thomas Bauer is a valuable contribution and could become the basis for further investigation. Although both historians don't reference each other and have written decades apart they come to very similar conclusions. The reasons for that could be their venture to study the Islamic history without commonly held assumptions, categories, and periodizations. Furthermore, they put an emphasis on literary works to show that the relationship between am *Islamic* and *Secular* realm is not as clear cut in the Islamic world as it is often thought to be.

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