

Orientalism and the Historical Development of Islamic Studies in the West: An Interview with Christopher Melchert

Oryantalizm ve Batı’da İslam Araştırmalarının Tarihî Seyri Üzerine Christopher Melchert ile Söyleşi

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Christopher Melchert’s Academic Career and Contributions to Islamic Studies

Christopher Melchert worked as a professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Oxford University Oriental Institute and as a lecturer of Arabic at the University of Oxford, and he has also been a fellow at Pembroke College, Oxford. He retired from the University of Oxford at the beginning of October 2023. The academic career of Melchert, a prolific writer, focuses on the Islamic movements in the ninth and tenth centuries AD, and he publishes in many areas such as Islamic law, hadith, adab, and theology.

Christopher Melchert was born in Sendai, Japan, in 1955. Melchert’s bachelor’s degree was from the University of California at Santa Cruz, Department of History in 1977. Between 1978 and 1980, he studied Arabic at the American University in Cairo, and in 1983, he completed his master’s degree studies at Princeton University in the Department of History. In 1984, he moved from Princeton to the University of Pennsylvania. It was at U. Penn. that he saw students and marked essays as a Teaching Assistant. He wrote his dissertation on “The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law, 9th-10th Centuries C.E.,” under the supervision of Prof. George Makdisi.

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In 1987-9, he spent some time in Turkey reading manuscripts at various libraries and books at the Islamic Research Center, then in Yıldız Sarayı. Between 1993 and 1995, he was an Assistant Professor at Southwest Missouri State University (Springfield, USA). He conducted research again in Syria at the French Institute in 1998-9, supported by a Social Science Research Council grant. The next academic year at the School of Historical Studies, which is part of the special research institute called The Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton, New Jersey), was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

In his doctoral thesis, while addressing the formation of fiqh schools, Melchert also touches upon different tendencies, approaches, and numerous disciplines (kalām, hadīth, tafsīr/qirāʾāt, Sufism) forming Ahl al-Sunnah, and in his later studies, he addresses and analyses each one of these subjects on their own. From this perspective, it can be stated that he tried to base on and develop the thesis by Montgomery Watt about the formation of Ahl al-Sunnah structure, and that he aimed to illuminate the points identified as the main elements of this structure by Watt. Among the research fields of Melchert, whose specialty is Islamic movements and institutions in the ninth and tenth centuries, are Sufism and other apostate movements as well as the life and works of Ahmad b. Hanbal.

It attracts considerable attention that Melchert, who produced independent studies on the formation periods of each of these aforementioned fields following his doctoral thesis on the formation of fiqh schools, is especially interested in hadith, rijāl criticism, and ṭabaqāt literature. Some of it has been simply to establish facts about some major scholars and their works, mainly Bukhārī, Abū Dāwūd, and Nasāʾī. He has also continually drawn attention to discussions among eighth- and ninth-century Muslims that are to be documented mainly from hadith collections rather than Qurʾan commentaries, where people have tended to look hitherto. Finally, his work titled *Hadith, Piety, and Law: Selected Studies on eighth-century piety* made unusual use of hadith collections. However, he mentioned that the word “unusual” might not be that significant, because even spending a great deal of time on eighth-century piety is, in itself, unusual—at least in Europe and North America.

George Makdisi is well-known for his studies on the emergence of Islamic scholarship and educational institutions and especially on the madrasah as it developed in 11th-century Baghdad and for his work called *The Rise of Colleges*, which is regarded as a classic in its field. George Makdisi’s example was the most important shaper of his students’ scholarship. Melchert states that he learned from him the importance of being thorough and exact. He also mentions in the interview that apart from the tradition of Islamic Studies, the main influences on him were Marxist historians and Max Weber.

Melchert presently has 44 articles in refereed journals and 32 in edited collections. Half a dozen more of these are “forthcoming.” They have been accepted by editors but have not yet been published. His most recent publications will be included in a collection of essays including his work titled ‘Transfer of knowledge and women in the early Islamic tradition’,

edited by Almut-Barbara Renger, &al., as well as in another collection edited by Hagit Amirav, which will include his essay ‘Form, function and early history of Qur’anic commentary as a literary genre’.¹

Melchert may be regarded as one of the final exponents of the classical tradition in modern Islamic studies. Renowned for his rigorous critiques of Islamic intellectual heritage, Melchert’s engagement with ḥadīth literature departs from the exegetical sources that began to emerge in the eighth and ninth centuries. Instead, he privileges debates that can be more directly substantiated through canonical ḥadīth compilations.² His scholarly attention centres particularly on the works of major collectors such as Abū Dāwūd, Bukhārī, and Nasā’ī.

In terms of methodology, Melchert’s approach broadly aligns with the Schachtian tradition. Drawing on Eerik Dickinson’s observations, he highlights what he considers the key epistemological fault line between modern sceptics (e.g., Schacht) and classical critics such as Bukhārī and Muslim: the underlying assumption regarding the possibility of recovering authentic reports attributable to the Prophet.

Melchert is critical of the increasingly popular view—especially among Muslim scholars—that moderate Orientalists such as Harald Motzki have refuted Schacht’s thesis and thereby rehabilitated Bukhārī as a reliable transmitter of Prophetic sayings. He considers such conclusions to be methodologically premature and reflective of an uncritical apologetic impulse. While acknowledging the methodological sophistication achieved by Western scholars in the application of historical-critical analysis to ḥadīth, Melchert argues that Muslim scholarship has yet to engage in this mode of inquiry with comparable depth or rigour. Nonetheless, he speculates that such an engagement is likely to emerge in time, leading eventually to a form of methodological convergence.

That said, Melchert’s position may also reflect a broader tendency toward generalisation, in which the specific methodological and epistemological critiques articulated by Muslim scholars in response to Western historical-critical paradigms may not be fully engaged. While his optimism regarding a possible convergence between Western and Muslim scholarly approaches suggests a constructive outlook, it may underappreciate the complexity of the intellectual and hermeneutical differences that continue to characterise these respective traditions.

Interview with Christopher Melchert on Islamic Studies and Hadith

Hafize Yazıcı: I’m curious about what motivated you to study Islam, particularly fiqh, theology, and hadith. Why did you choose to pursue a career in Islamic Studies?

Christopher Melchert: Well, I initially wanted to study the history of some part of the world besides the United States and Europe. And by accident, I took a class on the modern

1 For a detailed discussion of Melchert’s work, see Christopher Melchert, *Hadith, Piety and Law: Selected Studies, Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies 3* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2015).

2 He cites, as examples, the debates concerning whether Adam was created in the image of God and whether the Prophet saw God during his lifetime.

Middle East, enjoyed it, and I thought, okay, I'll study the history of the Middle East. But I soon discovered that if one studies the modern Middle East, one ends up spending a lot of time arguing about Arabs and Israelis, which I didn't want to do. The field is full of people who are there primarily for political reasons and only secondarily interested in scholarship. So, I pushed my studies back in time. Unfortunately, the field of Middle Eastern or Islamic studies is still politicised, but it's somewhat better because the linguistic demands are very high. Learning Arabic is difficult, so that kind of strains out a lot of dilettantes.

So why Islamic studies in particular? Mostly, because I should say for two reasons. First, I was in Egypt studying Arabic, and many Muslims there tried to convert me to Islam. I didn't convert to Islam, but I certainly became interested in the religion. Secondly, for a historian working on the Middle Ages, most sources deal with politics, administration, and taxes, with very few dealing with agriculture or industry. However, there are plenty of sources on Islam. I mean, that was their culture. That was the aristocratic culture. So, I followed where the sources were, as there was plenty to read. It's very easy to find a text that hasn't been written about before. I wrote an article on Bukhārī—it wasn't the first treatment of Bukhārī, but it was one of the first. Someone as important as Bukhārī should have had a hundred articles written about him, but in European languages, there were not nearly that many. There was Jonathan A. C. Brown's *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim* and a book by Ghassan Abdul-Jabbar called *Bukhārī* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), but not much else. There is a discussion by John Burton of a few pages, but very little compared with his importance. So it's a field where it's very easy to be original and to blaze a path. The disadvantage is that you have to do everything yourself. If I were working on medieval French history and needed to know who the Count of Toulouse was in 1315, I'm sure there's some reference book from a hundred years ago that would tell me. But if I need to know who the governor of Basra was in AH 240, I have to go to a primary source like Khalīfah ibn Khayyāt. There's no reference work that tells me who the governors of Basra were, so you have to do everything yourself in this field. That's the drawback.

Hafize Yazıcı: What do you think is the current state of Islamic studies in the West?

Christopher Melchert: It's a very underpopulated field. Here at Oxford, for example, there are about three times as many people studying the Byzantine Empire as there are studying the Middle East from 600 to 1500. So, there are three times as many people studying the Byzantine Empire, and of course, Byzantinists feel much neglected and ignored, not properly respected compared with the Latinists. It is the Latin West that receives most of the attention here. So, Islamic studies are in third place, definitely behind Western European studies. The advantage for someone like me who does have a job in this field is that everywhere I look, there are new things to explore. But the disadvantage is that there aren't enough people. There also aren't enough people working on the same topics for a good equilibrium to be easily established. Compare this with Biblical studies, for example. Biblical studies might be similar to Qur'anic

studies in Turkey, with lots of people working on it despite the relatively small text. Likewise, in Biblical studies, a large number of people are engaged in the field, so when a new idea is introduced, many people read it. And very quickly, the field decides this is a good idea, and it becomes part of common wisdom, or people say this is not a good idea, and it gets rejected. In our field, someone might publish an article, and it could take twenty, fifty, or even a hundred years before someone reads it and says, What a good idea, and it spreads because there just aren't enough of us. So, that's the main issue -there simply aren't enough of us.

Hafize Yazıcı: Which topics are gaining more prominence in Islamic studies: hadith, fiqh, or kalām and tafsīr?

Christopher Melchert: There are two specialist journals on the Qur'an, so you could say that this field comes first. There is one specialist journal on Islamic law, so you could say that this comes second. However, there is no special journal on hadith, nor is there one for theology. What receives a lot of attention is philosophy, as it is very important in Western Europe. It makes sense to Europeans to study philosophy, and thus, philosophers writing in Arabic receive some attention because they can be compared with Western European philosophers. In contrast, fields like fiqh, Islamic law, are very different from studies in Western Europe. So the European specialists don't understand what it's about. It looks very strange to them, and so there's not much support. Whereas philosophy, they understand philosophy and they respect and support its study.

Hafize Yazıcı: In your opinion, how would you summarize the development of Islamic studies from Goldziher to the present day? Before Goldziher, there was d'Herbelot, although he is not very well known. Do you have a perspective on the evolution of Islamic studies that you could classify as periods of rise and pause, or has the field in the West always developed at a steady pace? At what stage do you think hadith studies are in the West currently? Could you share your thoughts on this topic?

Christopher Melchert: Okay, I think the field is very uneven, partly because there aren't enough of us. So I would say that the greatest scholar of Islam, and the greatest Orientalist of the twentieth century, was Goldziher. And especially I'd say he had an uncanny eye for problems that would still be interesting 100 years later. I don't know of anyone from his time who is still so interesting to read. Joseph Schacht was also a very significant scholar, and we were/ are still arguing about his ideas. Regarding the larger field of Islamic studies, theology was the first area explored in the West, largely because it has Christian analogues, and Christian theology is central. Scholars thought that to understand Islam, one needed to study its theology. Thus, theology was explored early on, and the Qur'an was explored as well. However, Qur'anic studies stagnated after World War II, and for 40 years, there was not much progress. Josef van Ess noted that the idea emerged that one should not make statements about another's religion that they themselves would not accept. As a result, it became difficult to discuss the Qur'an without offending Muslims, leading to stagnation in Qur'anic studies for about forty years.

It wasn't until the mid-1980s, with scholars like Angelika Neuwirth exploring the structures of Qur'anic sūrahs, that the field was revitalised. Now, there are two journals dedicated to Qur'anic studies, making it relatively well-developed. Islamic law was explored after that.

Another challenge is that, in theology, you read this many books (gestures with hands) and cover most of the significant literature. With Islamic law, however, the volume is vast. You can't read this many books (gestures, hands apart as before); even one book can be enormous. Islamic law began with the study of *usūl al-fiqh*, which was explored more extensively than *fiqh*, especially in the early twentieth century. Ghazālī's *Mustasfā*, for example, is a very sophisticated work. It's also quite lengthy, making it a substantial read. But consider his legal Works -they are three times as large. If you want to read Mawardi, it's enormous (gestures with hands about half a meter apart). Similarly, al-'Aynī's *al-Bināyah* is a substantial text. If you want to read al-'Aynī, *al-Bināyah* is a large-volume book. As a result, people initially focused on *usūl al-fiqh*, which was studied and mapped out earlier. It wasn't until the 1990s and into the 21st century that scholars began to turn their attention more toward *fiqh*. Starting mostly in the 1990s and continuing into the 21st century, scholars began to focus on *fiqh* as well.

Finally, *hadith* is the last area of focus. I think this is partly because these books are so extensive and numerous. Additionally, it is difficult to determine where the boundaries lie. What is necessary to read and what is not remains very unclear. So they tended to start with the things they understood, which are philosophy, theology, and the Qur'an, because it's sort of comparable to the Bible. Then, in the field of law, they began with *usūl al-fiqh* because it seemed easier. And then they get into *fiqh* later. *Hadith* is the last focus because, in some ways, it is the most challenging.

Hafize Yazıcı: Starting with Goldziher and continuing with Schacht and Juynboll, there are several issues that need to be addressed when examining the development from the classical to the postmodern period. These include the forms of discourse and labels related to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (for example, the use of the name Mahomet). How has the style of discourse changed from the classical period to the postmodern period? What factors have influenced this change? Why did the discourse of scholars like Goldziher and Hungronje shift in the postmodern period, and why is the term 'Muhammadism' no longer used, at least in academic studies?

Christopher Melchert: It has never been prevalent in academic studies. There is a well-known book by H.A.R. Gibb (d. 1971) titled *Mohammadanism* from 1950. In the introduction, he apologizes for using that term, acknowledging that 'Islam' is the accurate name of the religion. Gibb wrote this book to replace David Samuel Margoliouth's (d. 1940) 1920s work, also called *Mohammedanism*. Gibb would have preferred to call it Islam, but the publisher insisted on *Mohammedanism*. He accepted the publication under that title, though it was not a scholarly decision. The term *Mohammedanism* was likely used because, just as Buddhism is named after Buddha and Christianity after Jesus Christ, it seemed logical to name Islam

after Muhammad. So why not call it ‘Mohammedanism’? I don’t think it’s an insulting name. Late Sufis referred to al-Nur al-Muhammadi (the Muhammadan light), which shows that they certainly did not disrespect Muhammad. Buddhists worship Buddha, though he is not considered a god. However, that terminology is outdated. Today, no one uses the term Mohammedanism anymore because it does not reflect how Muslims refer to their religion.

Hafize Yazıcı: Looking back at Goldziher, do you think there has been a paradigm shift, particularly in terms of hadith studies? Are Goldziher’s theories still considered valid in the West? What paradigms have changed and which have remained the same in Western hadith scholarship?

Christopher Melchert: People today are more careful with their language. For instance, Goldziher was quite forthright about the authenticity of hadith, openly declaring some as false or fraudulent. However, nowadays, scholars are divided between those who trust hadith and those who are more sceptical, with varying degrees of scepticism. But even the most sceptical people will not say that, for the most part, they’re deliberately forged hadith. Instead, they suggest that hadith were gradually adjusted to align with current ideas. Nobody sat there thinking, Let’s see what I can put over on people by making up hadith. No, it would be people’s thinking. This is obviously true. Therefore, the prophet must have said this.

Joseph Schacht published *An Introduction to Islamic Law* and *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. I don’t know the history of that title. Of course, that’s about 1950. It could be that the publisher wanted it again. Schacht wrote about the development of Islamic law from a historical point of view. He thought that our evidence for its early development, such as quotations of Companions and Successors, could not go back before the eighth century. According to him, what we read about in the books began to develop mostly in Iraq, mostly in the second century, and mostly without reference to the Prophet; that reference to the Prophet came as a later development. The law became ‘Muhammadan’, and everything had to be ascribed to the Prophet instead of saying as they once had, “Well, we’ve always done it this way”—then they have to say, “Well, we do it this way because Ibrahim Nakha’i did it this way” and then the Basrans say, “But Ibn ‘Umar told us to do this way”, and then the Kufans say, “Well the Prophet told us to do it this way.” This is Schacht’s model of how the citation of the Prophet Hadith came to prevail.

Hafize Yazıcı: What are your thoughts on Schacht’s theory regarding Shaf’i’s views on marfū‘ hadiths?

Christopher Melchert: Well, I find Schacht’s theory quite convincing. His argument is that gradually things got projected backward until they got to the Prophet. Even so, if you read and examine the Umm, I think he doesn’t just cite the Prophet’s hadith. He cites lots of companion hadith. I think the ratio is about 3 to 2: three prophet hadith for every two-companion hadith. So, even he couldn’t get away from the companion hadith. You look at Bukhārī’s collection - I think it’s about 90% prophet and 10% companion. With Nasā’ī, it’s 97% or something of the Prophet’s hadith, and very few of the companions’ hadith.

There's an interesting issue I'd like to ask you about. In tafsir, we predominantly encounter interpretations from companions and followers, with less frequent direct references to the Prophet. Why is tafsir different from fiqh in this regard? That's a question I don't think anybody has answered. I'll have to ask you about your theory on that.

You could say that in Qur'anic studies, they use some tools that premodern exegetes did not use, such as verse length. Nobody talks about verse length; for example, Zamakhshari does not talk about verse length. It seems that if you arrange the sūrahs in order of verse length, it suggests a clear chronology that aligns quite well with Nöldeke's chronology. This is a new and noteworthy development. So that's a new technique. On the other hand, in hadith study, we really don't have any technique that they did not have. Bukhārī had all the same techniques that we have. I think the only real difference between Bukhārī and Schacht or Bukhārī and Juynboll is that Bukhārī was sure that there were some prophetic hadith thought to be found. Bukhārī believed that while two-thirds of the hadith might be unreliable, one-third had to be genuine. In contrast, for Schacht and Juynboll, it is not a primary concern whether we know what the Prophet actually said. That's an assumption. It means Schacht and Juynboll could be much more sceptical because their scepticism has no significant consequences for them. In contrast, Bukhārī, as a Sunni, could not say that they don't know what the Prophet said, as this would undermine the foundation of Sunnism.

We don't have any way of detecting a falsity that Bukhārī didn't have also. It's not unique to hadith studies. It's also a question of difficulty in Biblical studies, which books were written by whom. We've got the letters of Paul. Most scholars would say some of them were probably written by Paul and some of them were probably not. What are our techniques for identifying them? The same techniques that people had 2,000 years ago. Or, in Homeric studies, which parts of the Iliad are by Homer and which are the work of later editors? They are recreations. Again, we have no techniques that they didn't already have 2,000 years ago. And it's the same with hadith studies. We have the same techniques that Bukhārī had. You match up the isnad and see what confirms or what is confirmed and what is not. And you read Herbert Berg. He has a chapter on hadith studies. It's the first part of his book on tafsir. The first half is about hadith, the second part about Ibn 'Abbās. The Ibn 'Abbās part is not very good. Nobody pays attention to it. But the first part is a very good survey of hadith studies. Motzki also has a very good survey of hadith studies in the Meccan book.

Hafize Yazıcı: Did you meet him?

Christopher Melchert: No, I never did. I mean, I corresponded sometimes, but never met him. He didn't go to the conferences I went to. But, Berg says, there are the sanguine and the sceptical. And what separates them are assumptions. Because they're looking at the same evidence. They just have different assumptions and I think that's probably right. Berg made, for the sake of argument, a dichotomy between the sceptical and the sanguine. And he classified Juynboll and Motzki both in the same way. Motzki objected to having just two camps, saying

there's a spectrum; there's a range of opinion. And he thought he was right in the middle. Many Muslims have read Motzki and thought, "Oh great. Schacht has been demolished." But Motzki did not claim to prove that any hadith report can be traced back to the Prophet. He only stated that any hadith report can be traced back to the end of the first century of the Hijra. As Muslims, what they desire is to know what the Prophet said. Therefore, it is a mistake for Muslims to quote Motzki as if he has disproved Schacht and vindicated Bukhārī as a record of the Prophet's sayings. And then, Juynboll, of course, is clearly more sceptical than Motzki. Berg thought he was sanguine because he thought that isnads were still useful in some way.

Hafize Yazıcı: What are your thoughts on Motzki's isnad-cum-matn analysis?

Christopher Melchert: You know, you read Ibn 'Adī al-Qattān, *al-Kāmil fī al-du'afā'*. He does isnad-cum-matn. That's an old technique. It was just revived by Josef van Ess and then Motzki popularized it.

Hafize Yazıcı: Actually, I'm curious: is the method of dating hadith still a significant issue in the West today?

Christopher Melchert: Yes, everybody says the same thing. The further back you go, the less certain it becomes. Some people are still more optimistic than others. Gregor Schoeler, I can't know if you know him. He is very optimistic. Motzki does have one article about the Prophet, which is "The Murder of Ibn Abi l-Huqayq", where he says, well the kernel of this probably does go back to Prophet. I'm very sceptical of that. I think there it makes too many assumptions. Schoeler thinks a lot more than can be confirmed. An American went to Nöldeke and told him, "I want to study the Qur'an. What language should I start with?" Nöldeke told him to start with German. Until recently, German really was the leading language for Islamic studies.

Hafize Yazıcı: It can be said that French was the leading language for Islamic studies in the seventeenth century.

Christopher Melchert: Yes sure. Hadith studies in French? What do you think of? What is there to read about hadith in French?

Hafize Yazıcı: A significant work is d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* from the seventeenth century, which also includes his views on hadith. This work was published by d'Herbelot's student, Antoine Galland, and d'Herbelot drew on Katip Çelebi's *Kashf al-Zunūn*, commonly known in the West as Hagi Khalifa.

Christopher Melchert: True, but Brockelmann prefers Katib Çelebi for his 'urf.

Hafize Yazıcı: It can be said that d'Herbelot's knowledge of hadith was quite advanced for his time. D'Herbelot was one of the first hadith scholars in the West and had significant ideas about the authority, authenticity, and origins of hadith that influenced Western thought. He argued that the term "tradition" is a broad category that includes hadith, sunnah, and narrative. According to him, hadiths are inauthentic historical narratives, whereas sunnah is distinct from hadith and is considered more authentic.

Christopher Melchert: What I thought of first when you said, ‘The sunna is authentic’—I thought of Fazlur Rahman. Fazlur Rahman was a Pakistani who taught in the United States (Chicago, I think). But, it occurs to me, you mentioned the French-Ottoman connection. Yes, and of course, the French Lebanese connection, and probably, French is very important in the study of Kalām. You have these people like Daniel Gimaret/*La doctrine d’al-Ash‘arī* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), for example, and Martin J. McDermott/*The theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufīd* (d. 413/1022) (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1978), it’s a Scottish name, he wrote in English. So, if you want to study Kalām, it’s better to know French as well as English and German. And then Eastern Christianity, if you should be interested in Assyrian Christianity or an opposite church or something like Iraqi Christians, Syrian Christians, it’s in French—the literature is (in French) mainly. So that’s where a lot of the French effort is gone.

Hafize Yazıcı: Additionally, the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* serves as a good example of language changes in Islamic studies. The first edition was written in German, French, and English; the second edition was written in French and English only; and the third edition is written solely in English.

Christopher Melchert: As the Germans have finally admitted, if they want to be read outside Germany, they have to write in English. Claude Gilliot is a French scholar I respect highly. He very much wanted his Arab students to read German scholarship, but they couldn’t. They didn’t want to learn German. They know French, and they want to learn English. German is too much. So he actually translated some things from German just so that Arab students could read them. And the French are the last holdouts—they still like to write in French. And even some of them—Mathieu Tillier is a specialist in judges. He deliberately writes in English so that he can be understood internationally, so that people will not ignore what he says. Oh, and now Turkish, this is a problem for us. Turkish has become a language of scholarship.

Hafize Yazıcı: Did you visit Turkey?

Christopher Melchert: Yes, I actually lived in Istanbul for a while as a graduate student. I was reading manuscripts at the Süleymaniye Library. We had an apartment in Fatih and could see the Fatih Mosque from there. Turkish food was great and we enjoyed it. I never learned so much Turkish—just enough to buy things. “Where’s the book?” you know, “Where’s the manuscript?” But it was relatively easy to live there as a foreigner. I’m sorry I didn’t learn Turkish, but the trouble is of course I was there to read Arabic in manuscripts. And if I spent an hour on Turkish, it was at an hour I was not spending on my Arabic manuscripts. Therefore, I didn’t spend a lot of time on Turkish. And I’ve forgotten most of it. And my wife actually remembers more.

Hafize Yazıcı: Do you follow the studies on fiqh and hadith in Turkey?

Christopher Melchert: Only when it comes out in English or Arabic. So we’re beginning to get editions from there. For example, *Kitāb al-Asl* of al-Shaybānī has finally been edited by Mehmet Boynukalın. So that’s very useful. Also Tahāvī, *Ahkām al-Qur’an*, was edited in

Turkey 20 years ago. We had some money to put together a conference here in Pembroke College about 2017. So, we invited people from different countries to come and give talks on hadith. When we were there in Istanbul people wanted to talk to us in German. There's where they had spent time in Germany and now they were back. My German is fairly weak. So sometimes I have had conversations with Turkish scholars here. But we talked in Arabic.

Hafize Yazıcı: In the West, Sunni studies are generally prominent in Islamic studies. What is the reason for the focus on Sunni Islamic thought in the West rather than Shiites?

Christopher Melchert: It is because 90% of the Muslims are Sunni, 90% of literature is Sunni and scholars will work on the evidence. So we do have a leading student of Shiism here in the UK, that's Robert Gleave at Exeter. If somebody wants to study *usūl al-fiqh*, he's the best person to go to. But he likes *usūl al-fiqh* and he especially knows Shiite *usūl al-fiqh*. There is also Andrew Newman at Edinburgh.

Well, you have all those Alawis in the east, right? And occasionally I'd see them. I remember it was at night, so the shop was closed. There was a shop we saw and there was a stand selling postcards. And one of them was of the 12 imams, in this Shiite shop.

Hafize Yazıcı: Another question, is there the necessary level of co-operation between the East and the West in Islamic studies? Pavel Pavlovitch mentioned in his article on hadith in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, third edition, that there is not enough response from the Islamic world to the arguments about hadith in the Western world. What do you think about this issue, what can be done to ensure the necessary co-operation, or do you believe that there should be co-operation in Islamic studies?

Christopher Melchert: Yes, there should be cooperation. You have some people have got to study in the West, and then they've gone back. Maher Jarrar is a Lebanese guy for example. He studied in Germany and went back to Lebanon. But it is hard to bring many of them back. The first difficulty is language. I went to the University of Damascus, Kulliyat al-Sharia. And I talked to the director and one of the professors. And they would have been happy to study at al-Azhar in Egypt, but they couldn't, so they were sent to Pakistan instead. They would like to be studying in Al-Azhar in Egypt. When they were graduate students, political relations between Egypt and Syria were strained, so they couldn't go there. They can't read European languages, so they can't read what we write.

Secondly, of course the problem is money. I mean, how do people at the University of Damascus get to read European journals? Their library doesn't have the money to subscribe to *Islamic Law and Society* or *The Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association*. It's a little easier now with the internet. But even so, it's difficult for them to access the resources needed to read what we write. And it's not always easy for us to find out what they've written there. But both ways, it would be good if there were more interchange.

In the specific field of hadith, I don't think we're going to agree about the first two centuries. I don't think we're going to agree about the authenticity question. But there are many, many

other things that we can investigate together. For example, I wrote an article about Nasā'ī. And that was because I read somebody's dissertation about Nasā'ī in Arabic, '*Umar Īmān Abū Bakr, al-Imām al-Nasā'ī* (2003). It was good dissertation; he did some good research. We might disagree about whether Nasā'ī quotes the Prophet reliably, but we're talking about where did Nasā'ī collect his information? You know, both of us could work on that and we won't disagree. Well, our results should converge.

There have been some good books on Ahmad b. Hanbal: Bashir 'Alī 'Umar, *Manhaj al Imām Aḥmad fī i'āl al ḥadīth* (2005) and Abu Bakr Laṭīf Kafī, *Manhaj al imām Aḥmad fī al ta'līl* (2005). I have a book myself on Ahmad b. Hanbal. We might not agree about whether the *Musnad* accurately quotes the Prophet. But we can agree about how he went about deciding which of the hadiths were good, how did his criticism work? I am currently reading a book about the qiraat, the variant readings of the Qur'an in Bukhārī and Ṭabarī: Zayd Ibn 'Alī Mahdī Mahārīsh's *Manhaj al-Imām al-Ṭabarī fī al-Qirā'āt* (2012). We don't always agree, he and I. In Ṭabarī's Qur'an commentary, he sometimes refers to qiraat, the varied readings. He has already written a book. I haven't written one yet. His work is very interesting. He doesn't ask quite the same questions as I do, but he is useful to me.

We don't have to agree on whether the Qur'an is the word of God. We can, however, agree on whether the most important readings were finalized by seven or a larger group at the end of the ninth century. But in the tafsir, for example, Ṭabarī refers to 'huccat-min-al-Qara'ah'. And the ḥujjah seems to refer to a group of readers, the qurra. I'm not exactly sure who they are. That's a question an Arab author can investigate, and I can investigate as well. Our results would converge. There is an interesting book about Muzanī, Muḥammad Nabīl Ghanāyīm, *Muzanī* (1998). I've been thinking for some time about writing an article about *al-Muḥtaṣar al-Muzanī*. And it's a book from Egypt. That is very interesting.

Hafize Yazıcı: You study different fields of Islamist studies.

Christopher Melchert: Yes, mostly law and hadith. I taught Qur'an here for 10 years because it's part of the Arabic course, so we read certain passages from the Qur'an with students. On the one hand, it was very good for me, because of course, the people I'm reading like reading books of law. And those guys had all memorized the Qur'an, so they're constantly alluding to the Qur'an. Little phrases will come up that are from the Qur'an, and of course, they knew what they were putting in, and their readers recognized them. And now because I was just teaching the Qur'an, I would recognize them also. And that was good. But I became increasingly uncomfortable teaching the Qur'an because I am very aware that, to Muslims, this is sacred scripture; in fact, it is the word of God. And I'm not a prophet myself. I don't know the word of God. It's not the Word of God to me. Now I can read Ṭabarī's *Tafsir*, his commentary. He's a scholar, and I'm a scholar. I understand what he's doing and that feels very comfortable. However, I'm not a prophet, and I didn't feel comfortable with the Qur'an.

Hafize Yazıcı: George Makdisi was your teacher, wasn't he? What do you think of him?

Christopher Melchert: He was a great man, but of course, he was very interested in Hanbalism. His first book was about Ibn ‘Aqīl. What I gained from him is a good habit of reading Arabic and reading a lot of Arabic texts. Perhaps a bad habit is enjoying reading Arabic texts but not liking to read scholarship. So, I won’t write good articles that summarize the field. My articles will only cover a small part of the field that I am investigating.

Hafize Yazıcı: Makdisi also had some views on the Ash‘arīs, didn’t he?

Christopher Melchert: Yes, he didn’t like the Ash‘arīs. He liked the traditionalists.

Maturidism originated in Central Asia and was especially cultivated by the Hanafīs. Of course, the Turks are predominantly Hanafi. Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī claimed to be Sunni and said he believed in the same things as Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal. However, in fact, Ahmad likely wouldn’t have welcomed him. So, Makdisi thought Ash‘arī was essentially hypocritical. He said they didn’t believe in kalām but still practiced it. He sympathized with those who didn’t like kalām.

Hafize Yazıcı: What are your thoughts on Goldziher and his contributions to Islamic studies?

Christopher Melchert: Goldziher was Jewish. And that was part of why he understood Islam so well. Because, in a way, the fuqahā’ are like rabbis. They’re not priests as in Christianity. At the same time, however, Goldziher didn’t think that, as other Orientalists said, much of Islam comes from Judaism. I think Muslims came to Iraq and they saw what the Jews were doing, and said, “Well we have got to do the same thing. So the Jews are sitting around talking about law. We’ll sit around and talk about law too.” And gradually, they read law. Goldziher resisted that very much. He tends to downplay parallels between Judaism and Islam, even though he was Jewish.

Hafize Yazıcı: It is suggested that Goldziher’s interest in Islamic studies was also influenced by his desire to reform Judaism through the insights he gained from Islam.

Christopher Melchert: That was a European issue. He was a Hungarian period. He wanted to make Judaism modern and fit in with patriotism and nation-states. He had a hard time with the local Jewish community in Budapest. There’s a biography of Goldziher by somebody named Patai. And his grandfather was Goldziher’s enemy in Budapest. So the biography is a little distorted. If you want to study that, I think you probably should read German. One of my fellow graduate students at Princeton was Jewish, Michael Bonner. He told me Islam is Judaism for Gentiles, meaning Judaism is only for those born Jewish, whereas Islam is a religion for everyone. Abraham Geiger started it with his work *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (1833), “What did Muhammad get from Judaism?”

Hafize Yazıcı: I would like to ask you some questions about concepts, especially the terms Orientalism and Orientalist, as well as Islam and the West. Bernard Lewis was quite uncomfortable with the use of these terms, particularly “Orientalism,” which was later removed from official use. In this context, Lewis argues that the concepts of Islam and the West are also somewhat contradictory because Islam refers to a religion, whereas the West refers to a society and culture. What are your thoughts on Orientalism?

Christopher Melchert: The word “Orientalism” became unpopular because of Edward Said. And he is badly misunderstood. He’s a Palestinian nationalist, but a Christian. So as a Christian Palestinian he wanted to push back Islam, because Islam divides the nation, Christian Palestinians opposed to Muslim Palestinians. It did not work. He wanted them to be united as Palestinians. His book *Orientalism* is an argument for dropping religion, dropping Islam as an explanation for anything. He wanted the history of the Middle East to be written without any consideration of religion. At the end of the book, he says there are two good historians. Maxime Rodinson and E. R. J. Owen. Maxime wrote about the prophet, and Owen wrote about the modern period. And they’re both Marxists. Why does he like Marxism? Because the Marxists say religion is epiphenomenal. Religion is part of the superstructure; it’s not part of the base. So if you want to understand history, you don’t write about religion. You write about economics. That’s why they said to get religion out of here. Lots of Muslims read that book and said, “Oh, good, someone is saying that only Muslims can write about Islam.” Said had some good points, but he took it too far. He had an earlier book called *Covering Islam*, which was complaining about journalism in Europe and the United States and the way they talked about Arabs, especially. He had some good points, but he overdid it. He claimed too much, the same as with the *Orientalism* book.

Hafize Yazıcı: The term ‘Orientalism’ is no longer used as much, is it? This is the case at Oxford as well.

Christopher Melchert: When I started here, the faculty was called “Oriental Studies”. However, about two years ago, they allowed the students to vote on it. The vote was two to one in favour of changing the name. It is now “the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies”. At the University of Pennsylvania, I was in the history department, but when I started, they had a department of Oriental Studies, which changed its name to “Asian and Middle Eastern Studies” before I finished.

Hafize Yazıcı: What do you think about the terms “Orientalism” and “Orientalists”? What issues do these terms present?

Christopher Melchert: Well, I don’t think there’s a problem, but critics put it that it was necessarily condescending, necessarily hostile. I don’t think so. They will complain about essentialism. Essentialism is the idea that there is something unchanging; there is something about Islam, so if you know how the Arabs acted at the end of the eighth century, you will know how they’ll act in the twentieth century, because there’s an essence to Islam and Muslims will always do the same thing. He didn’t like that idea. Well, yes, he’s right, things change over time. But you don’t have to believe that to be an orientalist. It was not a central idea; it’s not that when we had the oriental studies, everybody there was committed to an unchanging idea of Islam. You don’t like essentialism, but there are some things essential to Islam, “We believe in one God”-you can’t take that way. “We have always believed in one God, and we still believe in one God.” And that is surely essential.

Hafize Yazıcı: Do you feel uncomfortable being labelled as an Orientalist?

Christopher Melchert: No, I'm not an orientalist. I learnt Arabic very well. I studied Persian, I don't know it well. Turkish, I don't read at all, whereas the old Orientalists knew all three. You know, my predecessor, Alan Jones, he knew all three. So, in that sense, I'm not an orientalist. I'm a historian and I use Arabic sources. During World War II, Joseph Schacht was in Egypt. After the war, he came here and then was hired away by Columbia University in New York. However, he was here when he published *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. In his 1964 book, titled *Introduction to Islamic Law*, the term changed from 'Muhammadan' to 'Islamic Law.' It may have been the publisher's decision, I don't know.

I have a question for you as well: Why is the Prophet so prominent in Islamic law but much less prominent in Tafsir?

Hafize Yazıcı: I have some views on this, of course, but I would also like to hear your thoughts on the matter.

Christopher Melchert: There are two hypotheses that need to be developed. However, these are the types of theories that sceptical historians in the West often propose. One approach would be to try to reconstruct the legal practices of the second century. And it mostly states followers and companions rather than the Prophet himself. Even Motzki says that most of the ideas circulating were not the Prophet's hadith, but rather hadith from companions and followers. In the third century, they began to move away from companion hadith and focus more on the Prophet's hadith. So one thesis might be that Qur'anic exegesis was somehow frozen at an earlier stage and became fixed. And the law continued to develop for another century. So, in the period from 150 to 250, the place of Prophetic hadith shifted significantly, from being a minority to becoming the majority. Meanwhile, tafsir remained at the stage of 150, when it was sufficient to refer to it in its earlier form. That would be one hypothesis.

The other hypothesis, according to Schacht, is that legal material was projected back to the Prophet. Because they were arguing amongst themselves, the Kufans against the Basrans, or the Kufans against the Medinans. The Kufans would say, "We do it because Ibrāhīm al-Naḥa'ī said to do it," while the Medinans would counter, "No, we do it because 'Umar said to do it." In response, the Kufans would argue, "Well, the Prophet himself said it, supporting our position." So, according to him, it was controversy that led to the back projection as to whose norms went back to the prophet. By contrast, it didn't really matter what a particular word meant—whether it referred to a mountain or a river—so they didn't focus on that. There wasn't any point in saying, 'Well, our interpretation goes back to the prophet.' It was enough to say, "Ibn 'Abbās said it was a mountain", and they could leave it at that. They were comfortable with it.

Hafize Yazıcı: Last question: What are your thoughts on specialisation in Islamic studies? Goldziher had a comprehensive knowledge of all Islamic sciences during the classical period, but in postmodern times, specialisation has become more common.

Christopher Melchert: Devon J. Stewart mentions this, noting that even in Qur’anic studies, there is now so much literature that it is becoming difficult for anyone to keep track of all of it. So people will increasingly specialize in one period while focusing less on other periods. But this has also happened in the West; for example, in biblical studies, it has been the same. Here, there are some people working on tafsir. There is somebody here in Oxford, Karen Bauer. She began by writing about tafsir. Her dissertation covers tafsir from Ṭabarī to the twentieth century. She went to Iran and discussed interpretations with mollahs there. So, someone wrote about tafsir from the Middle Ages to the present. Even at the level of a doctoral dissertation, this scope will become increasingly narrow. Increasingly, one will work on Ṭabarī and, before him, one will work on Zamakhsharī and his time. When we write about tafsir in Malaysia, we won’t cover the entire scope. There is too much to do for everything. And the typical studies have been established for a long time. I mean, if someone is interested in Biblical interpretation, they might look at interpretations in early modern France, or Biblical interpretation in twentieth-century France, or Biblical interpretation in the context of Greek literature from the third century. No one covers the entire history of Biblical interpretation—it’s just too much for one person.

Hafize Yazıcı: I sincerely thank Christopher Melchert for his time and valuable insights shared during the interview, which have significantly contributed to this study.