

Introduction

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.

—TERENCE, *HEAUTON TIMORUMENOS* 1.1

Scholars committed to the idea that the history made by Muslims is comparable to that made by non-Muslims can recognize that, *taken as a whole*, the reliable evidence suggests that Qur'anic texts must have remained at least partially fluid through the late seventh and early eighth century.

—CHASE F. ROBINSON¹

The Qur'an's origins are a mystery. The genesis of this new sacred text remains one of the most abiding and baffling puzzles from the religious world of late antiquity. So it is, at least, for those who are willing to approach the Qur'an on its own terms and in its immediate context, rather than allowing its history and significance to be defined and controlled by the collective memory of the (much) later Islamic tradition. The truth is that we know precious little about the context or conditions in which the Qur'an first came to be: in many respects it seems to appear out of thin air into a world already saturated with Abrahamic monotheisms. Of course, the Islamic tradition stands at the ready to tell us everything we might want to know (and more) about the text and its origins. Perhaps understandably, then, modern scholarship on the Qur'an, with some notable exceptions, has been largely governed by traditional Islamic views of the Qur'an. Even many studies that seek deliberately to undertake historical-critical study of this text remain under the powerful influence of the Islamic tradition's gravitational pull, at times without even fully realizing it. So engrained have certain patterns from the Islamic

collective memory become in the discourse of Qur'anic studies that they can be hard to escape. The result, as Angelika Neuwirth on one occasion rightly observes, is "that Qur'anic studies is not informed by the methods of religious studies as currently practiced internationally, but still follows a limited and selective set of methods which tend to be essentialist in their attitude towards the Qur'an." Such obeisance to the Islamic tradition, rather than to the methods and perspectives of religious and biblical studies, she notes, reflects a "failure of Qur'anic studies to locate the Qur'an at eye level with the other Semitic scriptures."² Such is also Robinson's point in the epigraph above: we must not study the origins of the Qur'an according to the convictions of the later Islamic tradition, but instead using the standard tools of historical criticism that scholars have long applied to the study of other sacred writings.

Nevertheless, when this document is approached from the perspective of the history of religion in late antiquity, rather than the discipline of Qur'anic studies, various widely acknowledged givens about the Qur'an drawn from the later Islamic tradition seem much less obvious and authoritative. From such a vantage point, the Qur'an appears instead as an enigmatic product of late ancient religious culture that demands investigation within this milieu in its own right, without allowing the Islamic tradition to dictate the terms of its study. Not only will such an approach bring better understanding of the Qur'an itself, illuminating the historical circumstances of its origin, formation, and canonization, but it will also allow the Qur'an to speak directly to our understanding of the diversity and creativity of religious culture in the late ancient Near East. The Qur'an, after all, bears witness to a peculiar new religious movement arising from this matrix, one that is clearly modelled on the other Abrahamic monotheisms of this era, and yet it rearticulates many of their traditions in new ways and in different contexts.

For many potential readers, the very notion of approaching the Qur'an as a historical artifact from the religious cultures of late antiquity without allowing the Islamic tradition to define the text and control its interpretation may be controversial or even unwelcome. This is a particularly problematic issue in the study of early Islam, much more so, it would seem, than in most other areas of religious studies. Many scholars, including many non-Muslims, reject any departures from insider perspectives regarding the Qur'an and early Islam as being tantamount to an act of intellectual colonialism and even as anti-Islamic. Such opposition comes partly as a consequence, I suspect, of the fact that the study of early Islam developed for most of its history outside religious studies and instead in departments of Middle Eastern studies, where philology and understanding of modern Middle Eastern cultures, rather than the critical historical study of religious traditions, were the primary focuses.³ Of course, there are other contemporary cultural and political issues at play as well. Many contemporary Muslims object to non-Muslims taking their sacred text and subjecting it to independent critical analysis based in another intellectual tradition that is markedly different from their own faith

perspective. It strikes some as offensive, perhaps understandably, that an outsider would come along and tell them what their sacred text “really” is and how it should be understood.

Let me be quite clear from the outset, however, that I have no intention of proposing any sort of final “truth” about the Qur’an and its significance in this book. What I offer is merely a perspective on the Qur’an as viewed by a historian of religion, rather than by a faithful Muslim, or a philologist for that matter. In contrast to the philologist, who seeks to understand the words of the text, the historian of religion seeks to understand the world behind the text and how the text came to be in the first place. Perhaps more importantly, my interest in the Qur’an is not, as it would be for a Muslim, to discern what God has revealed in its pages, but instead I seek to understand the text as a product of human history that can enable us to better understand the religious history of western Asia at the end of antiquity. These are simply different approaches, and one does not negate the other: they arise from very different interests and are aimed at very different audiences. Each, I would submit, is entirely appropriate in its proper context; and likewise it is inappropriate when introduced into the wrong sort of interpretive and intentional setting. Moreover, while Muslims certainly have a particular claim on the Qur’an, it is also a text that addresses and belongs to all humankind, as one of the most important and influential writings in all human history.⁴ Accordingly, it is entirely legitimate, I maintain, for non-Muslims to form and express their own opinions about the text and also for specialists in the academic study of religion to address the text’s history from this perspective as well. I make no pretense in this book of explaining the Qur’an in a manner that reflects either what modern Muslims believe or should believe about it. Instead, this book offers a view of the Qur’an as it appears from outside its use in contemporary Islam, not as a sacred book revered by a living religious community but as a product of the religious cultures of late antiquity in western Asia. In order to investigate the Qur’an’s formation within this milieu, we will approach the text very differently from modern believers, using the full toolkit of critical methods available to the scholar of religious studies, rather than having recourse to the Islamic tradition’s interpretation of the text, which seeks to understand it as God’s revealed message for humanity.

There is, of course, a long-standing tendency within religious studies itself that would insist on privileging insider perspectives and would refrain from any sort of explanation that could be considered reductive or that believers would find objectionable. As Bruce Lincoln wryly observes, it is often the case that “with the possible exception of Economics, ours [religious studies] is the only academic field that is effectively organized to protect its (putative) object of study against critical examination.”⁵ This trajectory has in fact had a particularly notable impact on the study of Islam as it would eventually enter religious studies departments, owing in large part to the outsize influence of Wilfred Cantrell Smith on the study of Islam during the latter half of the twentieth century. According to Smith’s approach to

the study of religion, for any statement about a given religious tradition to be valid, it must be recognized as such and accepted by members of that religious community.⁶ Therefore, in order to come to any valid understanding of the Qur'an, according to Smith, one must approach the text as a believing Muslim would and seek to understand it on this basis.⁷ Smith's tradition of deference to the beliefs of religious adherents and his views regarding the Qur'an in particular have cast a long shadow on the subsequent study of Islam, particularly in North America, where a concern to accommodate the convictions of believers remains widespread.⁸

In 1951, Smith founded the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal, and the subsequent influence of this institution and its graduates on the development of Islamic religious studies in North America is difficult to overestimate. Smith established this center and its doctoral program with the explicit aim of grounding the Western study of Islam by non-Muslims squarely within the perspectives of the Islamic tradition itself. Indeed, the degree requirements for the Institute explicitly required that students earning the Ph.D. must "produce work that would maintain continuity with the Islamic tradition" and must be relevant, significant, and cogent to members of this faith community.⁹ In 1964, Smith left McGill, with his designs for the Institute of Islamic Studies firmly ensconced, and took up a position at Harvard University, where he served as director of the Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions. Between these two prestigious appointments, Smith was able to direct the training and influence the methodological approach of "many, if not the majority, of Islamicists who held (and continue to hold) positions in religious studies departments in North America."¹⁰ Consequently, as the study of Islam entered North American religious studies departments, it was frequently colored by a deference to the religious views of (certain) contemporary Muslims, views that were allowed to control and direct the academic study of this religious tradition. Such broad acquiescence to the theological positions of a particular religious community is highly unusual and generally unwelcome in the academic study of religion, and the resulting tension between specialists on Islam and those who study just about any and every other religious tradition abides in many departments of religious studies.¹¹ This issue can be particularly acute for those, like myself, who teach religious studies at a state (public) university.

Nevertheless, despite the decisive influence that Smith in particular had in establishing the field of Islamic religious studies, in many regards his perspective reflects a broader trend within the field of religious studies in the mid-twentieth century, a trend that surely also played a role in steering the study of Islam in this direction. In this era, a move was in place to define religion as a phenomenon that is *sui generis*—that is, unique and in a class all to itself alongside the other topics studied in the modern academy. The claim was in part strategic, and it aimed to stake out a domain for religious studies within the secular university by maintaining that, given its distinctive nature, religion demanded a particular set

of approaches to be properly studied and understood that other academic departments could not supply. Roughly contemporary with Smith was Mircea Eliade, who famously led a vibrant program of comparative religion at the University of Chicago that was grounded in similar assumptions about religion, identified at Chicago as the study of “the history of religions.” It was an unfortunate moniker, in my opinion, since what Eliade and his students were engaged in bears little resemblance to the actual practice of *Religionsgeschichte* as it emerged at the University of Göttingen during the last years of the nineteenth century.

The German scholars who developed this pioneering approach turned deliberately away from the dogmatic interests that guided most scholars of the Bible at that time. In their place they advocated a radical historicism that made every effort to understand the New Testament and early Christian literature in direct relation to the broader religious cultures in which they were formed. The present work stands resolutely in the same spirit and tradition as this Göttingen Religionsgeschichtliche Schule in seeking to understand the Qurʾan from a similar, radically historicized perspective. What Eliade was advancing at Chicago, and Smith at McGill and Harvard for that matter, is strikingly different from the paramount concern of the history of religions for understanding religious phenomena in their immediate historical context. There is indeed little overlap between the two, other than the fact that the *religionsgeschichtliche* study of early Christianity created, for the first time, an interest in studying and understanding other religious traditions of the ancient world, primarily in order to better understand early Christianity.¹²

Eliade and Smith certainly shared the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule’s concern for the study of non-Christian religions, although they developed this interest into an enterprise that is perhaps more properly named “comparative religion” than the history of religions. In sharp contrast to the radically historical orientation of the tradition established in Göttingen, Eliade and Smith advocated a deliberately ahistorical approach to the study of religion that privileged above all else individual personal experience. Anything else having to do with religious belief and practice—anything historically circumscribed or socially embedded and contingent—was not in fact real religion and needed to be bracketed and overcome, in effect, in order to understand the true experience of the individual’s encounter with the sacred. It is a tradition of understanding religion with roots in Rudolf Otto’s influential *The Idea of the Holy* and even further back in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, which sought to rescue religion from the critiques of modern science and historical criticism by locating its true reality in private experiences of intuition and feeling.¹³ Ultimately, however, this view of religion amounts to little more than an expression of Protestant Pietism in academic garb: in true Pietist fashion, it denigrates externals such as ritual and practice, or even theological expression, in order to validate instead the interior experience of the believer and focus on the importance of religion as a foundation of ethics.¹⁴ In other ways, the difference in approach can be seen to reflect an older

Platonist/Aristotelian divide as to whether truth should be sought in the inner workings of the human mind or in the external realities of the physical universe, a tension later manifest in many respects in the idealist/empiricist divide of the Enlightenment.

For Eliade, true religion, and thus the object of the scholar's interest, was to be found in the individual's experience of encountering the sacred, an experience that was irreducible and insusceptible to any sort of external analysis.¹⁵ The sacred, for Eliade, is a deep spiritual reality experienced by all human beings, that

lies behind, or is prior to, and motivates the practices and conceptions of all people and their communities. The dialectics of the sacred, then, designates the ways in which this supposedly unified and ultimately meaningful object constantly moves from the ahistorical to the historical sphere—for example, the fact that the sacred breaks through, and is expressed in, hierophanies that occur in the realm of the profane and that its manifestations provide centers for human existential orientation and motivate ostensibly authentic action.¹⁶

In almost identical fashion, Smith deploys a view of religion that rests on a fundamental distinction, indeed a profound tension, between the individual's private "personal faith in transcendence" and what Smith names the "cumulative tradition." In this way, Smith, like Eliade, elevates "internal, intuitive, and essentially ahistorical categories over interpersonally available and historical categories." Real religion is the individual's encounter with the transcendent; the "cumulative tradition" consists merely of the various external forms that this personal experience has taken over time and space. Such externals are of little interest to the scholar of religion, Smith maintains, since they are "socially determined, heterogeneous, and secondary," in contrast to the indeterminate, homogenous, and primal experience of faith as a response to the "transcendent."¹⁷ Only by focusing on the personal encounter of individual believers with the sacred can one discern the true content of religion, something that is *sui generis* and hence cannot be properly understood using methods from other disciplines in the humanities and social science.¹⁸

The legacy of this tradition of religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon, and the resultant privileging of personal experience and morality remains quite strong among scholars trained during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as those students who have been influenced by them. This conception of religion goes hand in hand, one should note, with yielding authority to the perspectives and the statements of insiders instead of studying religion as it exists historically within its broader social and cultural context. These two guiding principles are generally two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, as Aaron Hughes rightly notes, particularly with regard to the study of Islam, it is very often a matter of exactly *which* insider perspectives are privileged by those adopting this approach. Indeed, selective validation of certain religious viewpoints at the expense of others is a significant problem on which the comparative projects and the perennial philosophy advocated by Eliade, Smith,

and others founder profoundly. The truth of the matter is that human expressions of religious faith—their responses to “the sacred”—are incredibly diverse, no less within a particular faith tradition than among various independent traditions.

As Hughes rightly explains, Islamic religious studies, as generally practiced, reflects its formation in area studies, and more specifically Middle Eastern studies, during the second half of the twentieth century. A major impetus behind the establishment of departments of Middle or Near Eastern studies in American universities at this time was the pressing need for knowledge about the Middle East, a strategically important region, in the aftermath of the Second World War and during the Cold War. Much of the early funding for these departments was therefore linked to the US Defense Department, as well as powerful corporate interests; indeed, these ties have still not entirely vanished. The goal was to produce information that would be useful for navigating global politics and to advance the policy goals of the United States in this region. In this context, it was especially desirable to produce knowledge about Islam in its contemporary form, so that it would be politically useful; as a result, studies of Islam’s early history became much less valued than they had once been in the age of the European “Orientalists.” Further inspired by the *sui generis* discourse about religion that was in vogue at the time, experts on Middle Eastern studies presented an understanding of Islam that was disembodied from history and was alleged to represent a sort of universal essence of Islamic identity and self-understanding that reached across a wide range of diverse cultures. In other words, a certain version of Islam was privileged at the expense of its other cultural expressions in a flattening that sought to make the information more universally relevant for policy makers and industry.¹⁹

Beginning in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, however, academics grew increasingly distrustful of and even opposed to the actions of the United States and its military around the globe and likewise became more attuned to a need to allow contemporary Muslims themselves to articulate the essentials of their religious faith. Nevertheless, this turn to allow believers to control scholarly discourse about their own religious tradition is one that is ill-suited to the discipline of religious studies. Religious studies, in contrast to Middle Eastern studies, is grounded in the premise that experts trained in the academic study of religion have analytical perspectives to offer on religious culture that are more appropriate for inclusion in the academy than the confessional statements of believers.²⁰ As Robert Orsi rightly reminds us, “religious studies is an outsider’s discipline by definition, aspiring to critical knowledge through a strategy of distance.”²¹ Furthermore, as more and more Muslims entered departments of Middle Eastern studies and began to control the conversations around religion within this discipline, the problems of essentialization and homogenization endured; only now understandings of what Islam “really” is were crescively determined by believers, from the perspective of faith in the tradition. As Hughes notes, the new version of “authentic” Islam that emerged from this context, produced in concert with believing Muslims,

remained, as it had been previously, “a reified Islam no less situated than that produced by Orientalists or practitioners of area studies.” And in this case, the resulting construct is even more problematic for the scholar of religious studies than its predecessors, since it is based almost entirely on “experiential claims that are internal to individuals and that cannot be subject to social-scientific critique.”²²

The believers primarily responsible for this new, authentic discourse about Islam have tended to come, as Hughes notes, from more upper-class, privileged backgrounds in their home countries and also are more highly educated, obviously, than most Muslims. The result is an image of Islam that is largely derived from the Sunni tradition and is reflective of the social and cultural status of those producing it. Speaking from their lofty perches in the ivory towers of academe, these Muslim scholars will frequently insist, for instance, that Islam, in its “true” form, is fully compatible with most of the liberal values of the Western academy on issues such as race, gender, and, especially, violence.²³ Yet, the fact of the matter is that global Islam, beyond the university campuses of North America, is far more diverse on these and other issues, and the truth is that often its adherents do not understand their faith as being at all compatible with these values. No less than its forerunners, this most recent effort to represent the essence of Islam for Western consumption fails entirely to represent the breadth and diversity of this religious tradition. In effect, it intellectually and culturally annihilates these other interpretations and expressions of Islamic faith and practice, denying them any legitimate place in the effort to understand and describe Islam in all of its multiform and often disparate contemporary manifestations. Ultimately, this more recent effort to essentialize Islam seeks, no less than its intellectual antecedents, to advance a political and theological agenda—a noble and optimistic one in most cases to be sure—but its result is to exclude much of the Islamic tradition from view. The goal of the historian of religion, by contrast, is to investigate Islam in all its global and historical diversity on its own terms, without seeking to elevate those elements alone that are deemed “true” Islam or that reflect values amenable to Western liberalism.

On this point, Orsi offers a particularly valuable perspective for scholars of religious studies that brings a much-needed correction to the discipline as it has often been practiced. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Orsi devotes a chapter to explaining why students of religion cannot simply turn away from and ignore forms of religious expression that seem illegitimate or offensive from their own cultural perspective. One must instead recognize the full legitimacy of such beliefs and practices and study them without prejudice, seeking to understand them on their own terms, as perceived from the perspectives of their adherents and within their social and historical contexts. According to Orsi, “The mother of all religious dichotomies—us/them—has regularly been constituted as a moral distinction—good/bad religion,” and it is the mission of the scholar of religious studies to overcome this dichotomy.²⁴ Yet religious studies itself has a long history of

marginalizing beliefs and practices that stand sharply at odds with the values of Western liberalism and liberal Protestantism in particular. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the academic study of religion in America's colleges and universities—to the extent that it was practiced—focused almost entirely on elevating those elements from the history of religion that would provide “morally uplifting undergraduate teaching.”²⁵ It was a strategy, Orsi explains, deployed to find a way around the wide diversity of Christian faith and practice in American society. As a result, ethics were placed at the center of religious studies, a move that mirrored closely the similar emphasis on ethics in the influential (and not entirely unrelated) discourses of Protestant Pietism, liberal Protestantism, and Kantian philosophy that were popular at the time. Accordingly,

The entire curriculum was understood by liberal Christian educational leaders to be morally uplifting, oriented to the shaping of human spiritual and moral development. . . . Outside the walls of the academy, the winds of religious “madness” howled (in the view of those inside)—fire-baptized people, ghost dancers, frenzied preachers and gullible masses, Mormons and Roman Catholics. “Religion” as it took shape in the academy was explicitly imagined in relation to these others and as a prophylactic against them.²⁶

As religious studies expanded its footprint in American universities after the Second World War, the focus on studying and teaching “good” religion persisted and was applied equally to non-Christian traditions as they increasingly became objects of study. It remained the case that “true religion, then, is epistemologically and ethically singular. It is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher forms, mystical (as opposed to ritualistic), unmediated and agreeable to democracy (no hierarchy in gilded robes and fancy hats), monotheistic (no angels, saints, demons, ancestors), emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter.”²⁷ Orsi's own scholarship has continuously challenged us to break this mold, drawing attention to highly popular and fascinating aspects of Roman Catholic piety that do not fit this paradigm. Religion, at its root, Orsi helpfully clarifies, “has nothing to do with morality.” While this may come as a shock to many modern scholars and believers alike, historically it is true. Indeed, “Religion is often enough cruel and dangerous, and the same impulses that result in a special kind of compassion also lead to destruction, often among the same people at the same time. Theories of religion have largely served as a protection against such truths about religion.”²⁸ Therefore, students of religion are not entitled to look down their noses at Christian snake handlers or devout Catholics who fill their cars' radiators with holy water as if their beliefs and practices were somehow not “real” or “true” religion.²⁹ By the same token, scholars of religious studies must refuse to accept essentializations of “true” Islam that would exclude from legitimacy any expressions of Islam, no matter how unsavory they may be to liberal Western tastes. For the historian of religion, violent and hateful

expressions of religion are no less legitimate and deserving of study that those that advance peace and love.³⁰

Of course, the present study is not at all concerned with determining exactly what constitutes “real” or “true” Islam: that is something for faithful Muslims to debate among themselves, not something for specialists in religious studies to decide. I would never dare to pronounce on what true Islam is today, no more than I would for Christianity, particularly for those who practice it. Nevertheless, I do claim warrant to speak on behalf of the religious movement that Muhammad began and that developed over the course of the seventh century to lay the foundations of the faith tradition that we now call Islam. This “Believers” movement that Muhammad founded is simply not to be equated with contemporary Islam, in any of its expressions, any more than one would foolishly profess that Christianity today is identical with the faith of Jesus and his initial followers. Contemporary Muslims may of course believe and insist that their faith is indistinguishable and unchanged from the religious movement that Muhammad established in the seventh century. Yet any such claim, essential though it may be to Islamic self-identity, is theological and ideological and not historical. Therefore, while Muslims speaking within their tradition and in their faith communities are certainly justified in collapsing the two, the historian of religion must instead recognize and bring to light the numerous profound differences in these religious formations. With this in mind, we will approach the Qur’an as a historical artifact independent of the contemporary Islamic tradition and as a product instead of the diverse religious cultures of western Asia in late antiquity. In this regard we follow in the footsteps of Jonathan Z. Smith, who rightly avers that “the historian of religion . . . accepts neither the boundaries of canon nor of community in constituting his intellectual domain.” Likewise, for the historian of religion “there is *no privilege* to myth or other religious materials. They must be understood primarily as texts in context, specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects.”³¹

In contrast to the missteps of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “Orientalists,” our approach decidedly does not seek to paint Islam as an other of the Christian West. Instead, our aim is to compare the beginnings of Islam with the related Near Eastern monotheisms in the Abrahamic tradition that arose from the same context. Our study advocates substantial continuity, rather than difference, between Islam and these traditions. Likewise, in a sharp distinction from the “Orientalist” tendency to cast Islam as something exotic or eccentric, we find early Islam instead to be a movement that is engaged with and similar to the other monotheisms of late antiquity—rather than a new religion that emerged spontaneously from the cultural seclusion of the Hijaz. We also reject the tendency to flatten or homogenize the Islamic tradition, evident equally in “orientalist” scholarship and in more recent works published by scholars of Middle Eastern studies and Islamic religious studies—referring to the latter category particularly

in the sense defined by Hughes.³² To the contrary, we aim to unearth the buried complexity and diversity evidenced in the new religious movement founded by Muhammad and his followers. Accordingly, our presentation of Islam is decidedly not a “static system of essentialism” with little social and historical flux; nor do we expect that its adherents largely agree with one another on most things, with little historical or geographical variation.³³ In each case, then, this study seeks to move the investigation of Islam away from the classic mistakes and misrepresentations of nineteenth-century “orientalism” as identified by Edward Said.³⁴

Our approach to understanding the earliest history of the Qur’an and its composition stands within the methodological tradition of religious studies often known as “naturalism,” a term seemingly first coined by J. Samuel Preus.³⁵ This paradigm views religious culture as a phenomenon that can and should, contra W. C. Smith,

be understood without benefit of clergy—that is, without the magisterial guidance of religious authorities—and, more radically, without “conversion” or confessional and/or metaphysical commitments about its causes *different* from the assumptions one might use to understand and explain other realms of culture. . . . It is not necessary to believe in order to understand—indeed, . . . suspension of belief is probably a condition for understanding.³⁶

The term “naturalism” is admittedly not entirely ideal, since it could imply a claim to reveal “what *is* or *is not* natural, normative, and acceptable” about religion.³⁷ Perhaps, then, it would be better to speak instead of this approach as “mundane” and “immanent,” in contrast to understandings of religion that privilege personal, interior responses to the transcendent and the sacred. Russ McCutcheon further clarifies the “naturalist” approach as being guided by two main principles: “(1) the assumption that scholars carry out their work in the sociohistorical world, and (2) the assumption that the categories and concepts scholars routinely employ to describe and account for the world are equally natural products with not only a history but also material implications.”³⁸ The mundane or immanent approach to religious culture therefore refrains from positing any supernatural phenomena or explanations, and it rejects the idea that religious phenomena are somehow *sui generis* so that they cannot be understood and explained using the same methods regularly employed for studying other aspects of culture and society. From the naturalist perspective, religion exists as an integral part of human social and cultural history and therefore may and must be studied as such, rather than through appeals to personal, private experiences of some sort of ineffable transcendent or “the Holy.”

In studying a modern religious community, a naturalist approach might employ the tools of sociological and economic analysis in order to better understand the phenomena in view. Yet in a case such as ours, which deals with religious culture at a distance of many centuries, an approach using the various tools of historical

criticism seems more appropriate. And so we position ourselves, again, squarely within the larger tradition of *Religionsgeschichte*, the history of religions. We take as a foundation for our study the thirteen essential “theses on method” for the history of religions as laid down by Bruce Lincoln, theses that give particularly clear expression to the underlying principles of this method. Although Lincoln was himself a product of Eliade’s Chicago school and was even his student, Lincoln soon came to rather different conclusions about religion from his mentor, rejecting the approach in which he was trained for both its essentialism and its inability to challenge critically the ideological power of religion in culture and society.³⁹ In order to give readers a better idea of the basis for our approach, we quote below several of the most salient theses posed by Lincoln, particularly since I suspect that both they and the approach to religion that they outline may not be altogether familiar to many scholars trained in Islamic studies.

1. The same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought to be posed of religious discourse. The first of these is “Who speaks here?”, i.e., what person, group, or institution is responsible for a text, whatever its putative or apparent author. Beyond that, “To what audience? In what immediate and broader context? Through what system of mediations? With what interests?” And further, “Of what would the speaker(s) persuade the audience? What are the consequences if this project of persuasion should happen to succeed? Who wins what, and how much? Who, conversely, loses?”
2. Reverence is a religious, and not a scholarly virtue. When good manners and good conscience cannot be reconciled, the demands of the latter ought to prevail.
3. Many who would not think of insulating their own or their parents’ religion against critical inquiry still afford such protection to other people’s faiths, via a stance of cultural relativism. One can appreciate their good intentions, while recognizing a certain displaced defensiveness, as well as the guilty conscience of western imperialism.
4. Beyond the question of motives and intentions, cultural relativism is predicated on the dubious—not to say, fetishistic—construction of “cultures” as if they were stable and discrete groups of people defined by the stable and discrete values, symbols, and practices they share. Insofar as this model stresses the continuity and integration of timeless groups, whose internal tensions and conflicts, turbulence and incoherence, permeability and malleability are largely erased, it risks becoming a religious and not a historic narrative: the story of a transcendent ideal threatened by debasing forces of change.
5. Those who sustain this idealized image of culture do so, *inter alia*, by mistaking the dominant fraction (sex, age group, class, and/or caste) of a given group for the group or “culture” itself. At the same time, they mistake ideological positions favoured and propagated by the dominant fraction for those of the

group as a whole (e.g. when texts authored by Brahmins define “Hinduism”, or when the statements of male elders constitute “Nuer religion”). Scholarly misrecognitions of this sort replicate the misrecognitions and misrepresentations of those the scholars privilege as their informants.⁴⁰

In following this path, this book will make use of a wide range of methods and perspectives with broad currency in the humanities, social sciences, and even the natural sciences, tools that are regularly used to analyze and understand the panoply of human social and cultural phenomena. In the first two chapters, we will investigate the diverse reports concerning the Qur’an’s composition that have come down to us from the earliest written sources, noting especially the confusion and contradictions of these reports. I should note that in speaking of the Qur’an’s “composition,” a term that I will regularly use in this study, I do not mean to suggest the Qur’an’s creation out of thin air at some given point. Nevertheless, I do intend for readers to understand by such language that the production of a new version of the Qur’anic text is in view, and not just a passive collection of already long-established writings.⁴¹ Nor should we have in mind mere cosmetic adjustments to an already fixed text, such as adding textual divisions or diacritical marks, as we think about the process of producing the canonical Qur’an during the middle and later seventh century.⁴² Therefore, I deliberately choose the term “composition” to signal that this process involves more than the mere compilation of textual material that has already been fixed into a certain form, as if one were merely stringing together well-established textual traditions. On the basis of the available historical evidence, we conclude that the Qur’an’s final composition into the canonical form that has come down to us today seems to have taken place around the turn of the eighth century under the direction of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) and his viceroy al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf. This tradition not only holds the most consistency with the range of our available evidence, including the gradual development of the caliphal state, but it is also the most broadly attested account of the Qur’an’s origins across the various sources relevant to this question.

I wish to be clear at the outset, however, that while it does in fact seem that we owe the unvarying and canonical version of the Qur’an to the actions of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj, their ultimate imposition of this imperial standard certainly is not the whole story. On the one hand, then, our focus on the tradition of their decisive intervention in the text of the Qur’an flows from genuine conviction in its historical significance. Yet on the other hand, it is also partly strategic, affording an extremely useful foil for countering the ossified credence in the canonical Sunni narrative of the Qur’an’s composition—particularly as rearticulated by Nöldeke and Schwally—that has stultified progress in the academic study of the Qur’an’s origins for over a century now. In bringing attention to the pivotal roles played by ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj in establishing the canonical Qur’an, I do

not at all propose to close off the possibility and importance of earlier collections or earlier efforts at closure or partial closure of the canonical text. On the contrary, it is hoped that instead the positions argued in this study will open up space for proposing and discussing more complex and nuanced understandings of the Qur'an's formation across the expanse of the seventh century. The primary goal of this study, then, is not so much to provide closure to questions about the Qur'an's origins around 'Abd al-Malik's imperial vulgate, but rather to open up a range of possibilities for thinking about how the Qur'an came to be.

In chapter 3, we turn to the issue of the radiocarbon dating of early Qur'anic manuscripts. Recently, a number of scholars have cited the results of these assays as if they have somehow definitively resolved the question of the Qur'an's creation, locating its composition in the later part of the caliph 'Uthmān's reign (during the early 650s), a position favored by the Islamic tradition generally and the Sunni tradition especially. Nevertheless, a more careful analysis of the data from the radiometric analysis of these manuscripts belies this misplaced certainty, and in fact the early manuscripts and their radiocarbon datings, when properly understood, are most consistent with the canonical Qur'an's origins under 'Abd al-Malik. The fourth chapter considers the social, cultural, and economic conditions of Mecca and Medina in late antiquity, at least, insofar as they can be known: the available evidence for understanding the central Hijaz in this era is in fact strikingly meagre in comparison with other regions. Nevertheless, we can discern that both Mecca and the Yathrib oasis were very small and isolated settlements, of little cultural and economic significance—in short, hardly the sort of place one would expect to produce a complicated religious text like the Qur'an. Chapter 5 investigates the evidence currently available for understanding the Qur'an's linguistic context. Although we now have more inscriptions from the Arabian Peninsula in various forms of Arabic than ever before, it remains the case that during the lifetime of Muhammad, the peoples of the central Hijaz, which includes Mecca and Medina, were effectively nonliterate.

This conclusion means that we must understand the Qur'anic text for much of its early history as a fundamentally oral tradition that was recited from memory and passed along primarily through oral transmission for several decades. Accordingly, the sixth and seventh chapters bring to bear on the Qur'an perspectives from memory science and the anthropological study of oral cultures and oral transmission respectively. The knowledge derived from these two disciplines leads us to conclude with some certainty that, if the Qur'an were indeed circulating orally for decades, as seems to have been the case, then we must understand the Qur'an as a text that remained in a constant state of composition and recomposition as its traditions were told and retold—and modified and amplified—during their transmission by Muhammad's followers in the decades after his death. Chapter 8, then, considers the impact and the process of the transition to a written text. Generally, the conversion of an oral tradition to a written one is not sudden but

gradual, involving numerous stages and multiple editions along the way to a finished product. Nevertheless, even as the tradition shifts to a written medium, the influence of oral tradition on the written remains strong, and written collections themselves remain subject to significant change until a text becomes canonized and its contents are subject to a level of policing by authorities.

In the final chapter we look to the Qur'an itself for clues regarding the circumstances in which it was produced, and there we find abundant evidence that it often addresses a milieu that is simply not compatible with the central Hijaz during the early seventh century. Indeed, the Qur'an itself, as we are left to conclude, affirms the indications of the historical tradition, the social and linguistic history of the Arabian Peninsula, memory science, and the study of oral tradition to reveal a text that was in large part composed—during the process of its oral transmission—outside the Hijaz. Although much of the Qur'an's content was presumably inspired by Muhammad's teachings to his followers in Mecca and Medina—as these teachings were remembered and re-remembered by his followers over decades, its content was also heavily influenced and, in many instances, directly inspired by the formation of its traditions within the sectarian milieu of the late ancient Near East. This recognition should lead to a profound reorientation in how scholars seek to understand the text of the Qur'an within the historical context that gave it birth.