

Islam and World History: Towards a New Periodization

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The Western Scheme for the Periodization of History

Among the greatest problems met with in historical work generally is the frequent inability of the historian to liberate himself/herself from his/her own immediate background and environment and to cultivate a sense of detachment. Yet such detachment is necessary, for even if it will not lead to true objectivity, it will at least help produce more accurate results. Unfortunately, this detachment is the most difficult to achieve in precisely those areas of the biggest, most familiar, and hence most important assumptions. When these are skewed from the beginning, the entire thought process becomes skewed as well, with the result that all subsequent work is affected.

This lack of detachment is outstandingly demonstrated by the ubiquitous Western loyalty to a Eurocentric categorization and subdivision of world history that informs virtually all Western historical thought. Dividing all of human history into ancient, medieval, and modern periods revolving around Western Europe, this schematization is promoted as if it were the final, fair, and objective system for explaining all of history. It is then applied with the thoroughness one associates with state ideologies. All American students are taught the tripartite ancient—medieval—modern scheme in high school. It is also the basis for most history courses at the university level. Professorial appointments depend on it and thus do not encourage their holders to rebel against it. Textbook companies resist changing it because books holding to this scheme are demanded by schools, colleges, and universities. Even the ultraconservative American secretary of education, William Bennett, in 1988 promoted this Western historical scheme and bemoaned its supposed decline. The Western schematization of world history is, in short, a hallowed tradition which it is difficult to ignore and still harder to break away from.

That the Western scheme of history has proven itself so durable should hardly be surprising in view of its long history. In fact, its underlying concept goes back in an unbroken chain to Saint Augustine (354-430 CE), the major Christian thinker and philosopher of history who, in *The City of God*, combined the parochial historical traditions of the Greeks, Romans, and Jews, along with a few references to other traditions,¹ into a single ideological scheme claiming universal validity.² Already implicit in Augustine's scheme was a division of history into "ancient" and "medieval" at the watershed of the appearance of Christianity. Later, the division of the ancient from the medieval period was often made at the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine (306-37 CE), precisely because Christianity became the established religion of the state at that time.³ More recently, the idea of separating the medieval Christian world from the modern post-Christian world was tacked on to the existing scheme in order to emphasize the supersession of Christianity by modern materialist philosophy. Therefore, in its basic essentials, the ancient-medieval-modern schematization of history may be said to represent the successive dominance of Graeco-Roman and Judaic thought, then Christian thought, and then materialist ideology in the minds of Westerners.

Even a cursory examination of Western works used in teaching history will reveal the extent to which the Eurocentric scheme is used in courses

¹For example, his references to the Assyrians are not derived only from the Hebrew or Greek traditions. Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 610-4, 627-8. At Augustine's request, his disciple Paulus Orosius (d. after 416 CE) compiled an edifying universal history which contained more material on Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Carthage, most of it evidently derived from Greek sources. See Paulus Orosius, *The Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 50 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), passim.

²Augustine's work was preceded by the earlier synthesizing chronological schemes of Apollodorus of Athens (fl. c. 180-140 BCE), Castor of Rhodes (fl. c. 60 BCE), Sextus Julius Africanus (c. 180-c. 250 CE), and Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-c. 340 CE), recording king lists of diverse peoples and setting down their records in juxtaposed tables. See Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 59, 81-2; Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Chronicle of Eusebius and the Greek Chronographic Tradition* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 97-101, 117-8, 130-6, 141, 146-51, 155-6; James T. Shotwell, *The History of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 347-55; *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 23, 83, 213, 423. But it was Augustine whose deep interpretive powers and towering personality really ensured that this historical construction would carry the day. It was also Augustine who tended to deemphasize streams other than the Greek, Roman, Judaic, and Christian, a simplification that definitely influenced modern Western oversimplifications of historical interpretation. On the formation of early Christian historical ideology, see Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of History* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 172-84; Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (New York: New American Library, 1956), 237-40, 275.

³For example, *The Cambridge Ancient History* ends in 324 CE, where *The Cambridge Medieval History* begins.

purporting to teach a universal world history.⁴ This same Eurocentric view is equally pervasive in such allied fields as art history, where the same paradigm is in use.⁵ If any modification at all is made in the scheme, it is usually only to lump medieval together with ancient history, thereby creating a binary before-and-after scheme which highlights the distinctive superiority of modern Western civilization against all else.⁶ This is even true of self-critical Marxist-based histories, for these too inflate Western hubris by showing how much greater—and therefore more relevant—are the problems of modern Western societies. This naturally goes back to Marx's essential belief in progress, which makes the bourgeois Western society superior to its predecessors, in spite of its oppressiveness, specifically because it is farther along the path of development.⁷

Even attempts to break out of the traditional Western explanation usually only result in a reassertion of the Western thesis with some decoration added from outside the Western tradition. Thus in a work like F. Roy Willis's *World Civilizations*, although much non-Western material is included, the concentration on the West is still palpable. Non-Western societies, including Islam, are portrayed as the passive and unwilling victims of Western expansion

⁴For textbooks, this is clearly demonstrated in Robin W. Winks et al.'s two-volume rather presumptuously-titled work *A History of Civilization* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), a work whose normative nature is shown by the many editions it has gone through since it appeared in 1955. As for actual university courses and teaching, a perusal of the University of Washington's course catalog will reveal that its basic undergraduate series, 111, 112, and 113, is precisely ancient, medieval, and modern history, a situation typical of most American institutions, as reference to their catalogs will show.

⁵See, for example, H. W. Janson, *History of Art: A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), reprinted many times, which devotes only eleven pages to Byzantine art and ten pages to Islamic art; Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 8th ed., 2 vols. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), whose new edition devotes all of 108 pages to non-Western art, including the art of India, China, Japan, the American Indians, Africa, and Oceania, while Islamic art, under another section, gets seventeen pages; Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), gives twenty pages to Islamic art, puts African, Oceanic, and Native American art under the "primitive" category, and totally omits India, China, and Japan.

⁶As is found in Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1979), where the division between the two volumes and therefore the two semesters in which the volumes are meant to be taught is placed as late as 1715, implying that all of the former has no more weight than the latter period.

⁷To be sure, Marxist historians do establish some balance among sundry peoples by making them all equally subordinate to mechanistic laws. But nonetheless, the concept of progress implicit in their works tends to devalue anything contributed by non-Westerners outside the world of Western thought. This is even true in Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without a History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), with its welcome emphasis on non-Western peoples and their crucial role in building up the economic dominance of the West.

rather than as actors in their own right.⁸ This is despite the efforts of the author to be more balanced than his predecessors: established assumptions are hard to overcome, it seems. And the same author has to pander directly to the stereotypical Western model of history in his *Western Civilization: An Urban Perspective*, a work likely to have a far wider currency than his *World Civilizations*, as Western civilization, or “world civilization” in the traditional mold, remains a subject in far greater demand at American colleges and universities than any broader examination of the world’s past which would include the Islamic world, India, China, Japan, Africa, and the Native Americans in any but subordinate roles. However, despite this apparent present consensus, the contemporary Western periodization of history centered on Europe is too parochial to be an adequate scheme of world history.

Ancient History: 3500 BCE to c. 500 CE

Of the three fields offered in the Western scheme, it is the ancient one that comes closest to detachment from a Eurocentric bias, no doubt because it is the farthest removed in time. But even in ancient history, the Western effort concentrates only on the Mediterranean and the Near East and then continuously narrows its focus in the direction of Western Europe, thereby giving unwarranted and exaggerated importance to Greece and Rome. Indeed, these latter are given far more prominence than the ancient Near East, as is shown by a perusal of textbooks dealing with ancient history.⁹ This is in spite of the fact that the pre-Hellenic history of the ancient Near East from 3500 BCE down to about 600 BCE, a period of almost three thousand years,

⁸This is also true if we turn to more serious works like William H. McNeill’s *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), where the history of all previous civilization, though dwelt on at length, is merely a prelude to the West’s glorious triumph, which thus seems to provide the meaning of history and all human existence. On this point, see also Breisach, op. cit., 399-401.

⁹Thus, D. Brendan Nagle, *The Ancient World: A Social and Cultural History*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), gives the Near East seventy-five pages, Greece 162 pages, and Rome 179 pages. Michael Cheilik, *Ancient History: From its Beginnings to the Fall of Rome* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), gives the Near East forty-one pages, Greece ninety pages, and Rome ninety-five pages; Thomas W. Africa, *The Ancient World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), gives the Near East eighty-three pages, Greece 189 pages, and Rome 210 pages; Henry C. Boren, *The Ancient World: An Historical Perspective*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), gives the Near East ninety-four pages, Greece 117 pages, and Rome 172 pages; Tom B. Jones, *From the Tigris to the Tiber: An Introduction to Ancient History*, 3d ed., (Homewood, IL.: Dorsey Press, 1983), gives the Near East ninety-three pages, Greece 138 pages, and Rome 112 pages. For a work that puts matters in a broader perspective, compare Colin McEvedy, *The Penguin Atlas of Ancient History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), although India and China are ignored.

in fact covers more than half of the period of literate human civilization. In addition, since the focus of ancient history in the Western view continuously narrows in a westerly direction, the idea of progress is conveyed, implying that the accomplishments of the Greeks and the Romans were superior to those of the Near Eastern peoples.

This progressive narrowing of focus is starkly demonstrated by the watershed of c. 550 BCE, a date which represents the rise of classical Greece. Before this date, a great panoply of cultures are considered, among them Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Anatolia, and Syria, including the Hebrews, though marginal areas like Nubia, Yaman, and the Indus Valley are usually scanted or ignored altogether. But after 550 BCE, the Near East is suddenly considered mainly in terms of its opposition to Greece in the Persian wars. After Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire in 330 BCE, the Near East is almost wholly neglected except where it obtrudes into Greek, and later Roman, civilization. Even the history of the Jews of Hellenistic and Roman times is scanted and marginalized. India only enters into the Western historical consciousness when Alexander the Great is there, just as it does in modern times when the British come to it. After Alexander, it is again forgotten. In addition, the fact that a majority of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire spoke languages other than Greek and Latin is hardly ever alluded to.¹⁰ This also involves the banishment of the Near East from the Western historical consciousness, for the continued existence of literatures in Near Eastern languages is ignored.

Furthermore, one might note the steady shift of attention westward, as if this changing focus indicated the direction of an inevitable progress. With Greece, civilization enters Europe, barely, and is focused on Athens, but the continued existence of civilization in the Near East is acknowledged in its Hellenistic form, as, for example, at Ptolemaic Alexandria.¹¹ With Rome, however, the center of gravity shifts still further west to the city of Rome in Italy, while the eastern border of the Roman Empire on the Euphrates represents the extreme eastern limit of attention. Thus the old center of civilization, Iraq, goes into occultation as if it had ceased to exist, despite the actual continuation of civilization with a dense population there. The Parthian and Sassanid empires are beyond the pale of consideration as a part of civilization; they only appear among the barbarian nemeses that disturbed the tranquility of Rome. This is in spite of the fact that Iran was going through an urbanization and development under these empires similar to that which

¹⁰A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1964; reprinted by Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 92-7.

¹¹Boren, *op. cit.*, 213, 215.

occurred in the western Roman Empire.¹² This alarming narrowing of attention ever westward presages the even worse narrowing that is to follow when we come to consider medieval times.

There is, to be sure, some material justification for this situation. The treatment of ancient history as Graeco-Roman represents a living tradition going back to the ancients themselves. Greeks and Romans felt superior and hence paid hardly any attention to other peoples. The Graeco-Roman tradition was handed down to the modern West in an unbroken literary chain. Even in the darkest of the so-called "Dark Ages," a generation never passed but that some of its members studied Greek and Latin literature, thus keeping alive a continuous tradition of familiarity with it. This tradition of study also helped to ensure that the Graeco-Roman world would never seem completely alien to later generations of Westerners. As a result, as more material has become available, it is naturally the Greeks and the Romans who are seen as the protagonists against all and sundry manner of "barbarians."

In contrast to the considerable literary output of the Greeks and Romans, most other peoples left behind little or no literary legacy. Some peoples had no literary tradition; in other cases, they may have had a literature that perished because it was not Graeco-Roman and therefore aroused no interest in its preservation among later Western people.¹³ As for the vast literature of the ancient Near East in Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite, as well as other less prominent languages, it is also not to be compared to the Graeco-Roman as a continuous, living tradition, for it has been laboriously pieced together and resurrected only in the last century and a half after it had become utterly undecipherable for almost two millennia. Thus, it consists of fragments that do not convey the same coherent picture of development enjoyed by Greek and Latin literature. Furthermore, as a recovered literature, it is largely used for purposes envisioned by modern scholars, which may place a skewed emphasis on certain pieces to the detriment of others.¹⁴ Some languages still remain undeciphered, such as that of the Indus Valley civilization. Therefore, the ancient Near Eastern tradition does not have the same immediacy and familiarity as does the Graeco-Roman tradition, though this does not excuse us from giving it less than its due.

This is also true of the one ancient Near Eastern tradition which has

¹²For some references, see Ihsan Yarshater, ed., *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 713-27, 747-77.

¹³Examples would be the literature of the Carthaginians and Etruscans. On the former, see B. H. Warmington, *Carthage* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), 162-3, 256, who believes that a large Carthaginian literature must have existed in the Punic tongue.

¹⁴In particular, it is used to throw light on the development of Judaism and Christianity by Christian and Jewish scholars. This is exemplified by the widely-used James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (ANET)*, 2d ed. (Princeton: University Press, 1955).

continued unbroken to the present; the Judaic, with its largely Hebrew and Aramaic literature. There is no doubt that the Judaic heritage has found a place in the Western scheme of history, indeed from the time of Saint Augustine, as we have already seen. But nevertheless, as the Western Christian component of history has over time become more important to Westerners, while the Judaic element has proportionately diminished, the ancient Judaic tradition has also found itself increasingly marginalized. This is exemplified by the frequency with which Greek and Roman historians like Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Tacitus, and Suetonius are read, approached, and taught today in comparison with Josephus, even though the latter wrote in Greek, just as the Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria is hardly even mentioned in Western histories of philosophy, let alone read, in contrast with the familiar Plato and Aristotle. At the present day, the ancient Judaic tradition is even less attractive to Westerners because of its religious nature, in contrast to the materialistic Greek thinkers who seem more in tune with modern materialist ideology. This turning away from the Judaic element in the heritage of humanity also distorts historical interpretation, for it means that the effect of Judaism in establishing the concept of mass ideology, among other aspects, is hardly ever given full due.

Medieval Europe and the World c. 500 CE to c. 1500 CE

While Western treatment of the ancient world thus reveals considerable ideological distortion, it is in its transition to medieval history where the bias of the Western view is most prominently displayed. This is due to the fact that the broad stage of the Mediterranean world where history was being enacted is suddenly and inexplicably narrowed in scope to Western Europe alone. The favorite date for this sudden change is the supposed fall of the Roman Empire in the West in 476 CE,¹⁵ as if the end of the supposedly universal dominion of Rome and its transformation into parochial Germanic kingdoms justifies a similar parochialism in the scope of medieval history. Such a parochialism might be more acceptable if it were admitted that only Western Europe was being talked about, but such is not the case, for it continues to be maintained that it is world civilization that is being considered. To effect this universalism, Islamic civilization, Byzantium, and Russia are forced

¹⁵The use of this date as a divide has been widely attacked, but it still remains prominent. In the textbooks we have reviewed, it finds prominence in Kagan et al., op. cit., 223-4; Boren, op. cit., 389; Nagle, op. cit., 383; Africa, op. cit., 480. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), 342-3, early drew attention to this date, though his successors have defended it with more vehemence. It is even found in the title of the work *The Roman Empire 27 B.C.—A.D. 476: A Study in Survival*, by the prominent ancient historian Chester G. Starr.

into the Western scheme of history and dealt with cursorily in a few pages.¹⁶ Once more, the Western heritage is made to seem the more important. And, of course, it is medieval Western civilization that students normally study in the medieval component of their civilization courses.

There are many faults with this Western limitation of medieval history. Many written traditions that extend down to the present other than the Greek and Latin begin to come into prominence in late ancient or early medieval times. These include Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, and the now-extinct Avestan and Coptic, not to mention the various Indian vernaculars that have survived to this day as well as the languages of the Far East. Thus, at the very time when the horizons of civilization open wider, the Western scheme of history narrows the focus to its own area and cuts off the new contributors from attention.

Not only the new contributors are cut off, however. The Western scheme of history reveals its Latin Christian and therefore Roman Catholic bias in its broad disregard for Eastern Christianity and its Greek language after the fourth century CE. Whereas for the ancient period both Greek and Latin literature are considered, now the continuing Greek tradition, still the greater part of the Graeco-Latin effort,¹⁷ is suddenly and almost wholly cut off as emphasis is placed on the Latin fathers of the church such as Jerome and Augustine. As a result, many of the outstanding fathers of the Eastern church are ignored, as are the vitally important religious controversies in the Eastern Roman Empire that so direly affected the course of Christianity.

Seen in the broader view, this restriction of the consideration of civilization to Western Europe seems particularly absurd, as the area of civilized and literate cultures with organized political units stretches in an unbroken continuum from the Atlantic to Bengal by 400 CE. The successive concentration of Western historians on ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, then Greece, then Rome, and now a Western Europe centered around France shows a deliberate interest only in a civilized heritage that they can trace directly backward from their own homelands. This is in spite of the fact that the early medieval civilization of their own lands in Western Europe was by no means the most important in the civilized continuum of the *oikoumene*. On the contrary, it was one of the least important, at least in terms of literary production and urbanization. As early medieval European civilization seemed so insignificant in comparison with what had gone before, the Eurocentric

¹⁶Thus, Winks et al. devote some 135 pages to the Middle Ages, while they devote only fifty-four pages Eastern Europe and the Near East, including the Ottoman Empire. Fourteen of these are devoted to the Western enterprise of the Crusades, and many of the rest are given over to the relations of these areas with the West.

¹⁷Indeed, much the greater. While production of new works in Latin fell off abysmally, Greek literary production continued with little impairment until after 600 CE. See Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 3.

historical school created the debilitating and antireligious concept of the “Dark Ages” of c. 500 to 1000 CE, into which they would stuff the best years of Islamic civilization, much of Byzantium’s best periods, the T’ang Dynasty of China, the formative period of Japanese civilization, and much else besides. This same Eurocentric school of thought also falsifies the historical record when it insists on the “decline” of the Roman Empire into the “Dark Ages,” for most of the darkness results only from the narrowing of the focus to Western Europe, which always constituted the most backward and least populous part of the Roman Empire and therefore did not have far to decline.¹⁸

With regard to the ancient period, we have seen that the nature of the living Graeco-Roman literary tradition, contrasted with the fragmentary, discontinuous, and random nature of survivals of other ancient literary traditions, mitigates, though it does not excuse, the fault of seeing the ancient world mainly through Graeco-Roman spectacles. This same argument does not obtain with regard to medieval history, however, where there is a plenitude of other living literary traditions. Rather, it simply represents the narrow parochial origins of the Western vision of history that goes back to the idea that only Western European civilization is truly worthy of study.

Modern History: c. 1500 CE to the Present

In contrast to the conventional medieval period with its overwhelming concentration on Western Europe, the modern period after about 1500 CE seems at first glance to represent a more reasonable division, for its concerns become truly global as the whole world becomes inexorably more and more linked by communications and economic, not to mention political, ties. However, a careful examination shows that this division is merely another part of the ideological programming of world history from a Western viewpoint, for it is not a modern world history but rather a history of the extension of European dominance throughout the modern world. Since it is the last in the historical sequence, the modern period following on the medieval and ancient goes to show that the ultimate goal of humanity’s existence is none other than “progress” to modern European material civilization.¹⁹ Religion

¹⁸It is generally conceded that in the Latin-speaking Roman West, only Italy, North Africa, and Southern Spain were densely populated, while the rest of Spain, Gaul (now roughly an area covering modern-day France, Belgium, and the west bank of the Rhine in Germany), and Britain were thinly-inhabited backwaters. See A. H. M. Jones, *op. cit.*, 1064-5, and also map V between pages 1069-70. While it is true that Italy greatly and spectacularly declined for many centuries, the same does not apply to the rest of Western Europe, which had much less far to fall.

¹⁹See the comments of Breisach, *op. cit.*, 399-401.

is scorned as the modern Western individual emerges from his/her confining Christian shell. So pervasive is this idea of material progress and the backwardness of religion that the Westerner typically reacts to any manifestations of religion which he/she does not like by branding them "medieval."

Today, Muslims often bear the brunt of such obloquy whenever they become too prominent, as was the case with the Iranian revolution. Whatever else one may think of him, it is absurd to brand Ayatollah Khomeini as a medieval throwback just because he offered an alternative to Western standards and goals.²⁰ Khomeini was an expression of the twentieth century in which he lived just as much as Albert Einstein or George Bush. The class of Shi'i or religious leaders to which he belonged has constantly changed its role; his very title of Ayatollah is not medieval,²¹ nor did any individual ever arrogate to himself before the title of *nā'ib al imām* that Khomeini allowed to be printed on some of his pictures.²² Khomeini's main doctrine, *wilāyat al faqīh*, or the sovereignty of the religious scholar, was entirely new,²³ as was his widespread use of cassette tapes to disseminate his ideas and the mass demonstrations that brought him to power. In their use of the term "medieval" to describe him and the regime he established, Khomeini's Western opponents are revealing that the nature of their scheme of history is fundamentally ideological and not academic, for they are merely trying to monopolize the term "progress," which they themselves have made popular, and to deny others the right to use it.

Likewise, in their study of the modern period of world history, Western historians normally dwell on the role of Europe and its creativity, allowing only passive roles to non-Western peoples in their interaction with Westerners.²⁴ Non-Westerners are normally portrayed either as inert obstacles to Western expansion and progress or else as pathetic victims of European colonialism. In both cases, active and dynamic roles are allotted only to Europeans. By this means, the lives of non-Europeans are emptied of value and meaning.

²⁰This negative assessment of Khomeini is not only the view of much of the Western popular and journalistic press, but is also a view that pervades relevant scholarly works, such as Michael M. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), especially pages 10, 12, 32-58.

²¹In fact, it dates from the twentieth century CE. See Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 205.

²²*Ibid.*, 289.

²³*Ibid.*, 195-6.

²⁴For example, the pretentiously-named work of R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 3d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), and reprinted thereafter, concentrates almost wholly on European history.

Attempts at Reforming the Parochial Western Historical Scheme

As the world continued to grow smaller owing to improved transportation and communications, more and better information made Western educational institutions realize that non-Western peoples, their cultures, and their histories required a fairer treatment than they had previously received. The need for such a treatment was strongly emphasized as early as 1918 by Oswald Spengler in his scathing attack on the Western schematization of history, which he quite properly charged with being parochial and ethnocentric.²⁵ Shortly afterward, the work of Arnold Toynbee also clearly emphasized more equality among sundry cultures and therefore a much-reduced role for Western Europe in history.²⁶ A third writer who tended to emphasize a more equitable and less Western European-centered interpretation of world history was the German writer Karl Jaspers.²⁷ Others have also continued to point out the parochialism and inapplicability of the Western schema of history.²⁸

The early efforts aimed at reforming the ancient–medieval–modern scheme were followed in the period after the Second World War by the foundation of various area studies programs in American universities as well as by the addition of professors and courses specializing in non-Western history. Unfortunately, these efforts did not succeed in achieving a total revamping of the Western historical model along the lines suggested by Spengler and Toynbee or along other lines, for the traditional Western bias proved to be too deeply ingrained. Rather, they led only to the non-Western histories and their specialists being subordinately appended to the Western historical scheme. This is best represented in diagrammatic form in figures 1 through 3. If we take the top of each diagram to represent the sources of civilization and follow the strands downward like streams flowing to the sea, we can see how the traditional Western view of figure 1 was altered very little by the reform implicit

²⁵Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926-8), 16-8.

²⁶Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 1 (Oxford: University Press, 1934-61, reprint New York: Oxford University Press [Galaxy], 1962), 1-181. On both Spengler and Toynbee, see Breisach, op. cit. 396-9. For an unfavorable opinion from a progress-oriented materialist, see Bruce Mazlish, *The Riddle of History: The Great Speculators from Vico to Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 307-80.

²⁷However, his interpretation is still progressivist and continues to allot Europe a special role, even though he tries to account for all history in a single system. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1-77.

²⁸Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, new ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 48.

in figure 2. Figure 3 shows what a true reformation of the traditional Western historical view would really imply.²⁹

Figure 1: The Traditional Western Scheme of History

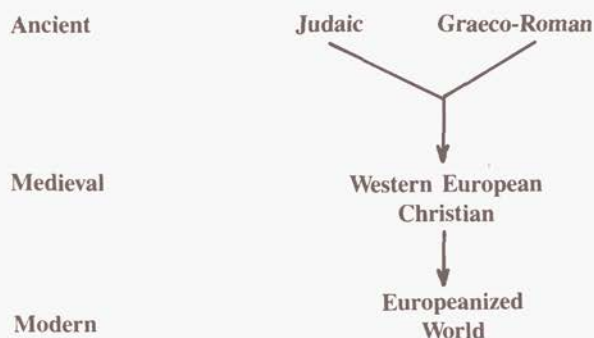
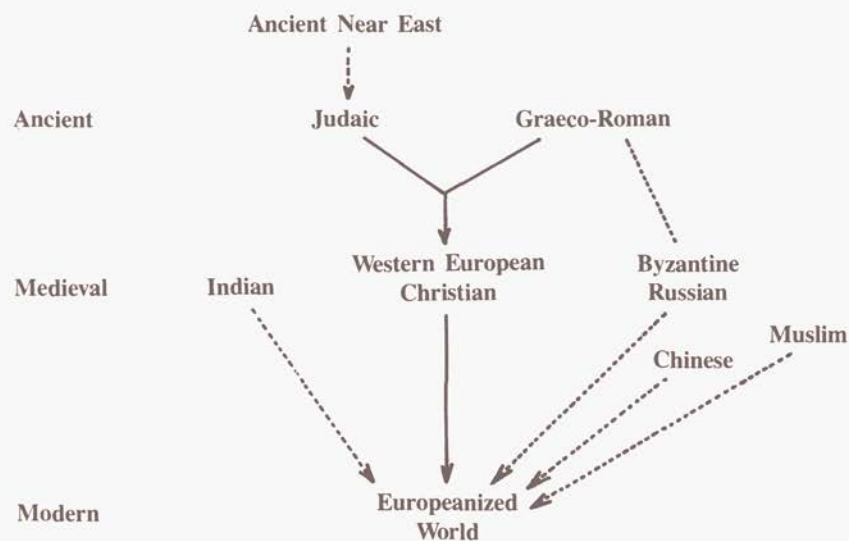


Figure 2: The Reformed Western Scheme



²⁹Figure 3 may be profitably compared with the diagram in Jaspers, *op. cit.*, 27, from which, however, it is not derived.

Figure 3: A More Thoroughly Reformed Scheme

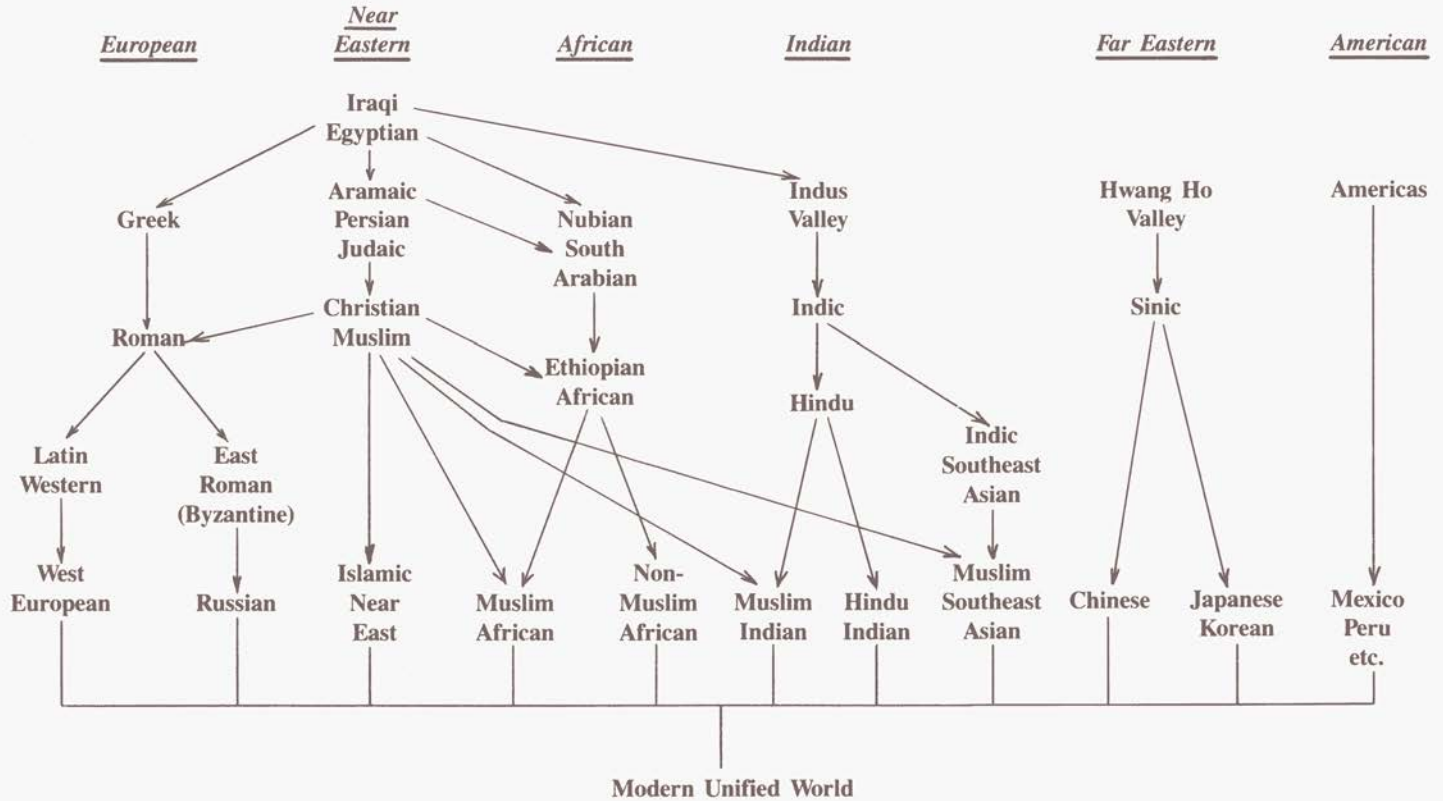
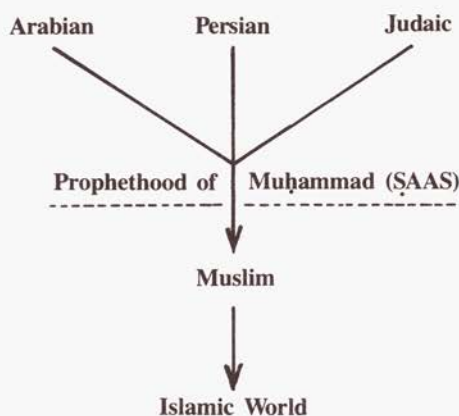


Figure 4: The Traditional Muslim Scheme of History

Nor is this all. By shunting non-Western studies into area studies programs, scholars of the Western school of thought are able at once to isolate, sanitize, and control them, thus deflecting their threat. Few students will ever specialize in these fields, thus isolating them from the mass of students and people. Sometimes the enrollments are too small to even keep the departments going, as at the University of Washington, where the Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations Department is constantly threatened with closure. Contrast this with the basic world history course taken as a requirement by so many non-history majors; this series of three courses divided into ancient, medieval, and modern components follows the traditional Western division exactly and is one of the most popular courses in the same university. The ancient history component, which has as many as 550 (!) students in a single lecture class, is taught by a well-liked professor who devotes one day to the ancient Near East and spends the rest of the course entirely on Greece and Rome. Thus, despite area studies, the traditional, parochial Western scheme of history rolls on almost unadulterated.

History among the Modern Muslims

While Western historians have been struggling with the problem of integrating non-Western traditions into their own, if only to pay them lip-service, Muslim historians have continued their traditional historiography while at the same time assimilating certain aspects of the Western scheme. Just as Western historical traditionalism has only been modified and never fundamentally altered from the time of Saint Augustine, so the traditional

Muslim view has survived almost down to the present with only slight modifications. That this should be so is not surprising, considering the conservatism of humanity.

Like the Christian view of history adumbrated by Saint Augustine, the classical Muslim view elaborated by medieval Muslim historians such as Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) reached back to pre-Islamic sources in trying to create a vision of history that was universal and all-encompassing.³⁰ But à la Augustine, certain elements were emphasized at the expense of others. Curiously, the result forms an odd mirror image (figure 4) of the traditional Western view shown in figure 1. While Augustine's synthesis brings in Greek, Roman, and Judaic streams that culminate in Christianity al Ṭabarī's work combines Arabian,³¹ Persian,³² and Judaic³³ streams that culminate in Islam. What is most remarkable, is the absence of any major shared elements other than the Judaic, a choice that must have been conscious in both cases. The Roman Empire in the time of Augustine was hardly unaware of the existence of the Persian nemesis next door, but almost invariably chose to ignore it, making the history of Sassanid Persia rather obscure. Likewise, the Muslims long contended with the East Roman Empire but hardly ever introduced it into their historical schemes. Thus, while al Ṭabarī spends a great deal of time discussing Persia and the Jews, the Greeks and Romans are dismissed with the sole mention of a list of their rulers,³⁴ much like Augustine's treatment of Assyria. This bias is understandable in the context of the thousand-year-long struggle of the Near Eastern peoples against the Graeco-Roman intruders, but it nevertheless robs the scheme being presented of its detachment and objectivity to a considerable degree. Christian history, perhaps drawn from the Syriac tradition of Iraq, is equally thin.³⁵ Thus, universal history in the classical Islamic period was not only limited by the

³⁰For a non-Muslim overview of Muslim universal history, see Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: E. J. Brill. 1952), 114-8, 122-30.

³¹Al Ṭabarī, *Tā'rikh al Rusul wa al Mulūk*, series 1, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879-1901), 231-51, 274-318, 440-2, 516, 671-5, 682-7, 744-75, 845-6, 850-60, 880-2, 899-966, 1009-45. The later historian 'Izz al Dīn ibn al Athīr in *al Kāmil fī al Ta'rikh* greatly reinforces the Arab element in the tradition.

³²Al Ṭabarī, op. cit., 147-8, 154-5, 170-2, 201-11, 225-30, 430-40, 529-35, 597-619, 675-82, 687-90, 692-700, 702, 704-11, 744, 813-45, 846-50, 860-80, 882-99, 981-1009, 1045-68.

³³Ibid., 137-47, 148-54, 155-70, 172-201, 211-25, 252-74, 319-429, 442-516, 517-28, 535-97, 619-71, 691-2, 714-23, 782-9, 794-5.

³⁴Ibid., 700-1, 702-4, 741-4, only a few pages, derived from the Syriac if not the Persian tradition. Interestingly, the list is only complete down to Heraclius, the emperor contemporary with the Prophet Muhammad, emphasizing the early Muslims' almost total lack of interest in their East Roman contemporaries. Rosenthal, op. cit., 66-72, suggests that the annalistic form used by al Ṭabarī and other Muslim historians must have come from the Greek or the Syrian Christian historical tradition, but the evidence for this is thin.

³⁵Ibid., 711-4, 723-41, 775-82, 789-93, 795-812.

information available to the Muslims of the time, but was not even as comprehensive as it could have been.

In the case of many modern Muslims, though, the traditional Islamic view has been reinforced by the perceived subordinate position of Muslims in the world, especially in the realms of intellectual thought. Thus, some historians and a good deal of the reading public in the Muslim world seek refuge in the study of Islam alone, without reference to any non-Muslims other than the *Kuffār Quraysh* or the Jews of Madinah, both of whom were quickly defeated and controlled. In this situation, even the pre-Islamic Persians and Jews are dropped. Modern Muslim historians of the early period evince as little interest in that nemesis of early Islam, the East Roman or Byzantine Empire, as did the earliest classical Muslim writers themselves. Yet early Islamic history cannot be understood, even in a cursory way, without reference to the East Romans. The tendency to ignore them not only characterizes popular works like the widely-read *Abqariyāt 'Umar* of 'Abbās Maḥmūd al 'Aqqād, but also more scholarly histories, such as Ḥasan Ibrāhīm Ḥasan's *Ta'riḫ al Islām al Siyāsī*.³⁶ Generally, such works show an unwillingness to use early non-Muslim sources as well as a lack of interest in the history of non-Muslims, even those inside *dār al Islām*. Muslim histories of the East Roman or Byzantine Empire remain lamentably few.³⁷ Thus, there is a complete failure to elucidate the pre-Islamic background of the modern Muslim Near East, and especially to understand the importance of the Christian religious controversies in the Roman Empire and their role in facilitating the early Muslim conquests. As a result, the Muslims' treatment of early Islamic and other history remains direly incomplete.

However, the Western onslaught has made Muslims aware of certain shortcomings in their own historiography, because they, and especially the more secularist among them, can see that the world contains wider horizons than a self-contained Islamic world. Thus, they have taken up the seemingly broader Western scheme of ancient—medieval—modern history for the rest of the world and imposed it on their countries' own institutions, while making "Islamic history," meaning the history of the core Muslim countries from the time of the Prophet to the present, a marginalized, parochial field. Thus, at Cairo University, one of the premier institutions in the Arab and Islamic worlds, the history department is divided somewhat incongruously into ancient,

³⁶For example, Ḥasan devotes only two pages to the pre-Islamic background of Egypt, although the ease with which the Muslims took control of it can only be understood in the context of its previous history. See Ḥasan Ibrāhīm Ḥasan, *Ta'riḫ al Islām al Siyāsī wa al Dinī wa al Thiqāfi wa al Ijtimā'i*, vol. 1, 6h ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al Nahḍah al Miṣriyah), 232-4.

³⁷For example, see al Sayyid al Bāz al 'Uraynī, *al Dawlah al Bizantiyyah* (Cairo: Maktabat al Nahḍah al Miṣriyah, 1960, reprinted in 1965), is a massive volume entirely culled from modern Western secondary sources and evincing no use of the original Greek or Latin sources.

medieval, modern, and Islamic components, the latter obviously tacked on and therefore subordinated to what is palpably a Western schematization of history. Perhaps the Western scheme even prevails in the very Islamic universities themselves; it would be difficult to avoid it, given its all-pervasiveness in the present-day world.

Not only are modern Muslims institutions dominated by Western concepts in the historical field, but the writings of modern Muslim historians also betray their Western training. As they are trying to view things from the standpoint of a tradition not their own, they often fail to make new contributions to the field of history, and their works frequently seem imitative, superficial, and without direction. This is not only true of their efforts in the imported ancient—medieval—modern fields, but is also the case in the field of “Islamic” history itself, where Muslims could be expected to excel. Since they are not able to see “Islamic” history as a part of world history, but rather perceive it as something separate and existing on its own, they do not have the comprehensive sweep of some Western scholars and are unable to answer the latter’s arguments except with uninformed invective. On the whole, whether self-isolating traditionalists or assimilating modernizers, Muslims seem to have accepted the subordination of their history and ideas by surrendering to materialistic Western viewpoints.

The Necessity of a Universal Islamic Historical Vision

Although the present-day Muslim vision of Islamic history is parochial, the tradition it is based on is universalist.³⁸ If Islam is to be taken seriously as a universal religion, as it most certainly claims to be, then its historiography must reform itself in line with its universal claims. Isolationism, disclosed in the tendency to try to separate Islam from the mainstream of world history and to see it as a phenomenon *sui generis*, is self-defeating, for the world today is one. Islam must therefore explain *all* history, even that of the Chinese, Japanese, and Native Americans, just as any modern historical system must do in order to maintain its credibility. Examples of the universality of the message of Islam are found repeatedly in the Qur’an,³⁹ which perhaps has more allusions to pre-Islamic history than it does to the “Islamic” history

³⁸The universalism of the Islamic message is not only axiomatically accepted by modern Muslims but is even readily admitted by non-Muslim critics, such as S. D. Goitein, “The Concept of Mankind in Islam,” in *History and the Idea of Mankind*, ed. W. Warren Wagar (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 72–91.

³⁹Relevant Qur’anic verses stressing the unity of humanity and the universality of the Islamic message include 2:62, 213; 5:69; 7:26–36; 30:22; 31:25; 1:28; 34:28; 49:13; 74:31.

of the Prophet's own message.⁴⁰ Thus from its very inception, Islam has called for a universal historical explanation that accounts for *all* the facts in the human record.⁴¹

Such a global Islamic explanation of world history may be based on several main principles, from which more detailed viewpoints may be elaborated. First of all, in place of the materialistic Western concepts of humanity and progress, Muslims may put forth as their starting point the idea of *tawḥīd* (monotheism) and the struggle of humanity to find God as the underlying theme of human existence.⁴² Hitherto, Muslims have usually ignored all history besides that of the classical Muslim ummah originating after 600 CE. Thus they have not only ignored what went before, but also what has been happening at the same time beyond the boundaries of the perceived *dār al Islām*. This lack of interest has even extended to non-Muslim minorities in Muslim majority areas.

Presumably, this lack of interest in people who did not identify themselves as Muslims, whether they had heard of Islam or not, indicates a belief that such people are going to hell anyway. This still did not, however, remove from the Muslims the need to take a position towards these people. In particular, what of those who lived before Islam and could never hear its message? What of those who lived after it but were too remote to be reached by any Muslims, as, for example, Japan until the last century? What of those who only heard of Islam through hostile propaganda? To consign all such people to hell would seem presumptuous, irrational, unfair, and therefore contradictory to Islamic principles.

To answer these questions, one must clearly look beyond the traditional world of Islam, just as the Qur'an itself insists in its many verses referring to pre-Islamic peoples. For God did not send only the Prophet Muhammad to give guidance to humanity; rather he sent many prophets, starting with Adam,⁴³ one (or more) to each people with a message in its own tongue.⁴⁴

⁴⁰That is to say, the Qur'anic verses dealing with other prophets before the Prophet Muhammad and their nations add up to far more than the verses specifically mentioning the Prophet Muhammad and his early Muslim followers.

⁴¹As we have pointed out, traditional Muslim historians have not elaborated so universal a view, though it is adumbrated by Ibn Khaldūn in his *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 57, and elsewhere.

⁴²The centrality of *tawḥīd* to Islamic civilization is forcefully represented in Ismā'īl R. al Fārūqī, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan* (Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1402/1382), 57; Ismā'īl R. al Fārūqī and Lois Lamyā al Fārūqī, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 73-91.

⁴³For Adam as the first prophet, see Muḥammad bin Sa'd, *al Tabaqāt al Kubrā*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār Sādir, n.d.), 32, 34; al Ṭabarī, op. cit., 151-2, where he is not only designated a *nabī* (prophet) but also a *rasūl* (messenger), a higher status.

⁴⁴Qur'an 10:47; 13:7; 14:4; 16:36; 35:24.

By this means they could be judged, and their lives and acts acquired a meaning they could not have had otherwise. Thus, people who lived before the revelation of Islam to the Prophet Muhammad and believed in their prophets also achieved salvation. Besides this, the Qur'an mentions by name several pre-Islamic religions originally founded by authentic prophets and states that members of these groups, if they were sincere in their faith and acts, would escape punishment.⁴⁵ By extension, one would have to understand this dispensation to include those people who were never reached by Islam even after it had been revealed.⁴⁶

But what about those many people who appear to have lived and died without the benefit of any visible true revelation in accord with Islam? Are they to be abandoned and said to have lived uselessly? Once again, we go back to the idea that every people received a prophet who brought them a message in their own tongue, however much that might be now obscured or have been superseded by Islam. If a true revelation were not visible at a certain time and place, then we must assume that righteous behavior for that time and place would be in accord with that of the Prophet as a (*ḥanīf*) before the first revelation had come to him. This notion accords with Qur'an 30: 30, where God says: "Lift up your face to the faith (*dīn*) as a man by nature upright (*ḥanīf*), the natural inspiration (*fiṭrah*) of God with which He has inspired mankind. There is no changing God's creation. That is the worthwhile faith, but most men know not." Thus, Islamic doctrine must deal with *all* times and places.

From this discussion, we can conclude that not only was the specific revelation given to the Prophet meant for all humanity, but that each previous people had also received a revelation which continued to exist in some form, however attenuated, and if not, that the natural inspiration of God with which He inspired humanity was still available to aid humanity in its search for God. This means that the concept of *tawḥīd* along with its associated ideas of God's revelation of Himself to humanity, and the individual's need to find God and to worship Him, was present all times and places, from the first man (Adam) down to our time.⁴⁷ And in this most important underlying principle of *tawḥīd* we can discern the one unique thread that runs through all history, and not only the parochial history of the Muslims since the Prophet. Rather, this *tawḥīd* is a universal principle underlying all human history. It follows from this that the essential dynamic, the essential action, the essential struggle of all human history has been the struggle of humanity to find God

⁴⁵Qur'an 2:62; 5:69.

⁴⁶This view is presented in Ismā'īl Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al Qur'ān al 'Azīm*, vol. 1 (Cairo: 'Isā al Bābī al Ḥalabī, n.d.), 103-4.

⁴⁷This is perhaps best summed up in Qur'an 16:36: "We have most certainly sent to every people a messenger to (proclaim), "Worship Allah and shun false idols (*tāghūt*):"

and, in doing so, to achieve righteousness on the earth. Therefore, from a true Muslim point of view, the study of history should properly encompass the complete histories of all peoples, however irrelevant they may appear on the surface, for all contain the seeds of *tawhīd* and righteousness according to Islamic criteria.

Since the history of all peoples becomes relevant in the light of the universality of *tawhīd*, it follows that all human traditions contain elements that are more or less close to Islam and therefore worthy of study. If those elements that are closer to Islam in other civilizations, such as the divinely-revealed law code of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, the judgment scene from the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, or the tentative monotheism of the Pharaoh Akhnaton are abandoned to the materialistic assumptions and interpretations of Westerners, they will be lost in a welter of counterargument that will merely go to reinforce the promaterialist and anti-Islamic polemic. Muslims will then lose the battle over the interpretation of ancient history by default and through lack of effort, even though much of what exists there will be found to be substantially in accord with Islam or at least suggestive of the presence of faith in God.

Next, when it is seen that all societies have some monotheistic history, more or less, it will be seen that no tradition is to be despised, no sources to be avoided. On the contrary, Muslims should eschew all racial, ethnic, national, and linguistic prejudices, for history is the universal property of everyone. If Muslims fail in this respect, they will only produce a parochial history which is not superior to the prevailing Western history they profess to criticize.

A New Periodization of History More in Accord with Historical Reality

In order to view history from a more universal point of view, the Eurocentric scheme of ancient—medieval—modern divisions of history should be dropped in favor of a new periodization. Instead of the existing and flawed tripartite scheme, let us consider a binary division around the year 600 CE. According to this scheme, all history before 600 CE would be considered ancient; all that after 600 CE would be modern. Such a division has much to recommend it, not only in making the prophethood of Muhammad the watershed event in world history, but also in periodizing and explaining the histories of the East Roman Empire, the Persians, the Indians, the Chinese, the Japanese, and even the Western Europeans themselves. In every case, the year 600 CE or thereabouts can be shown to have been a watershed period with respect to each group. Furthermore, the approximate date of 600 CE

provides a generally accurate date for the emergence of most modern nations, just as it closes the book on the Roman Empire, the last great ancient empire not to leave a single, recognizable modern successor in some form.

For Muslims, the necessity of dividing history around the watershed of about 600 CE is obvious. Such a division, indeed, accords with the traditional Muslim explanation which in effect begins its detailed, narrative account of history with the mission of the Prophet Muhammad. Traditionally, Muslims have viewed the prophethood of Muhammad as the turning point and central event in all history, because it represents the end of the preceding era of partial revelations given to prophets sent to specific peoples and the beginning of the period of the complete, final, and definitive revelation from God. The revelation of Islam to the Prophet also marks the replacement of partly corrupted revelations with one which is perfect and incorruptible. But the Muslims have not generally related this event to its broader historical context, especially in light of the vast hoard of information now available, and this is a task which needs to be undertaken.

In fact, the revelation of Islam was neither a marginal event in world history, as the Christian historiography of former days would have it, nor simply one important happening among many others; rather, it was a pivotal occurrence in human history. The literate civilization of the Old World island, consisting of Asia, Africa, and Europe, may be mostly represented by four core areas, each of which had its own thought universe which radiated outward to surrounding areas: China, India, the "Near East," and Europe.⁴⁸ Interestingly, each of these areas has its own name except the Near East, which is only designated in relation to Europe.⁴⁹ To those four core areas should be added other highly-developed cultures which left fewer written records, such as Africa, the Americas, and Austronesia. These merit respect and demand study no less than the literate civilizations.⁵⁰ They must also be integrated into any historical worldview in order for that view to be as universal and complete as possible.

⁴⁸The importance of these four areas as centers of separate traditions has been clearly recognized by many scholars. See Hodgson, *op. cit.*, 49-50, 60-1, 139; Jaspers, *op. cit.*, 23, who somewhat demotes the Near East by making it a subcategory of the West. The same four areas are also emphasized in William MacNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

⁴⁹This problem exercised Hodgson, *op. cit.*, 60-1, but he did not succeed in providing a satisfactory alternative.

⁵⁰Although this paper is mainly concerned with the literate civilizations of the Old World which had appeared by 600 CE, the thought universes of what we can call "primal cultures," that is, those without cities or literacy or both, are not to be devalued. However, urban literate civilization has always tended to spread and to supplant primal cultures. While this has often been a lamentable process (witness the fate of the Native Americans), it has also proven inevitable. But the spread of the literate urban civilizations, while eventually dominating the earth, in no way negates the creativity or accomplishments of primal peoples.

The four civilized areas of the Old World had interacted with each other considerably by 600 CE, each tending to develop in certain respects more than in others. Thus while ancient India and the Near East concentrated on religion, China and Europe developed materialistic philosophy, which reached its highest development perhaps in the overwhelmingly materialist system of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who hardly paid lip service to religion, although he maintained a vague belief in God. On the other hand, while philosophy flourished, religion atrophied in China and Europe. In the former, ancestor worship, a holdover from primal society, remained dominant until modern times. In Europe, the old gods of the primal myths (i.e., Zeus, Jupiter, and Woden) underwent little visible development as spiritual concepts. Owing to the backwardness of religion, the educated abandoned it for philosophy, which culminated in the pessimistic Stoicism of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-80 CE) which permeates his *Meditations*. At the same time, India continuously spewed forth new manifestations of the same old primal beliefs of a naturalistic and ultimately parochial paganism, which were eventually known as Hinduism. However, one of its educated expressions, that of Buddha, was a nontheistic philosophy like that of China. Both China and Europe as civilizations created no new large-scale spiritual religions, but rather imported their civilized spiritual beliefs from outside, from India and the Near East respectively, in the form of Mahayana Buddhism and Christianity.

It was only in the Near East, the cradle of humanity's oldest civilizations, where theism was steadily elaborated in a bewildering array of forms: Atonism, Osirian worship, the cult of Amūn-Rā', Judaism, Samaritanism, Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, Mazdakism, Primitive Christianity, Nestorian Christianity, Monophysite Christianity, and Islam, among others. All of these tended toward monotheism, the logical conclusion of any theistic interest, but One God was only fully and unequivocally proclaimed by Judaism (along with its Samaritan variation) and Islam. The former's appeal was limited by its parochialism caused by its association with a particular people; only in Islam was the appeal made truly universal.

The revelation of Islam, seen its proper context, therefore occupies a central position in the course of world history. Originating in the Near East, the crucible of humanity's civilized spiritual religions, it was the inheritor of five thousand years of development of religious concepts, mostly in the Semitic languages. At the same time, it was a new development, for it was a universal message as simple and as austere as possible, as befitted a revelation for all people. It was revealed only a short time after "the closure of the *oikoumene*," that is, the point at which all of the Old World civilizations had become linked to one another through a network of economic and cultural relationships based on trade, a development which took place in the first

centuries CE with the opening of the Silk Route to China.⁵¹ Islam fit into this situation quite well, for its message had universal appeal and it could now spread east and west, north and south, from its central position on the Old World island, as indeed it has not ceased doing until now.

Although Islam was the last in the series of revelations arising in the Near Eastern cradle of civilization and religion, it did not appear in an already-civilized area of the Near East, but rather emerged in the marginal land of Arabia. This area had been on the fringe of Near Eastern civilization since its inception but, because of its harsh environment, had never been a major participant in that civilization.⁵² As a result of Arabia's isolation, none of the civilized religions of the Near East had come to prevail there by 600 CE, which gave the opportunity for a new faith to arise and flourish without becoming simply a branch or a heresy of the earlier civilized traditions. This was necessary because none of the older revelations had either the requisite universality or simplicity.

At another level, the revelation of Islam represented yet another turn in the long struggle between spiritual belief and materialistic philosophy for ideological dominance in the world. Originally, the ideologies of the ancient Near East had been based on religious concepts connected with priesthoods and kingship in both Iraq and Egypt.⁵³ The outlying Greek civilization, remote from these influences, conceived a materialistic philosophy centered around the city. Though the Greek civilization failed to develop much in religion, it did produce a technology superior to that of the Near East, which enabled it to conquer the Near East under Alexander the Great (356-23 BCE). The intrusive Greeks not only ruled and exploited the Near Eastern peoples, but also scoffed at their religiousness. In response, the Near Eastern peoples put their religions on a more organized and rationalized basis in order to face the onslaught of Greek thought based on philosophy. The most visible manifestation of this resistance was the crystallization of Judaism as an ideological religion and thus a means of mass resistance and opposition.

⁵¹On the opening of the Silk Route, see Bai Shouyi, ed., *An Outline History of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1982), 141-2, 155; F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records* (Shanghai and Hong Kong, 1885, reprint New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966), passim. Although the route between China and Iran began to be explored from the late second century BCE, it took a long time for it to develop its full importance.

⁵²An exception is Yaman (present-day Yemen), with its ancient South Arabian civilization and a written language going back as far as 1300 BCE. On this, see H. W. F. Saggs, *Civilization before Greece and Rome* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1989), 84.

⁵³On this, see Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, reprinted 1978). The entire book shows how pagan ideology was used by the kings to uphold the existing order of society.

However, Judaism's efforts were hamstrung by its particularism and complexity, despite the valiant efforts of many groups, especially the Pharisees, to spread the faith and to put it on a more universal basis. Part of the trouble was that the Jews were bound to sacred books having a heavy proportion of parochial and tribal content which was difficult to supplant or to alter to a more universalizing explanation. Nevertheless, in response to Greek oppression, the Jews were able to create a sweeping social ideology unlike anything the Greeks had in their rather individualistic philosophy.

While the struggle of the Jews against the Hellenistic intrusion continued, their ideology was adapted in a much simplified form by the Christians for universal dissemination in the body of the Roman Empire, which had achieved a wide dominance but did not enjoy sufficient ideological underpinnings with mass appeal to give it legitimacy in the eyes of the ruled. As a result, when the empire suffered an almost interminable series of coups and countercoups in the third century CE, the Christian message became dominant, achieving the status of the state ideology under Constantine (ruled 306-37 CE). Christianity, however, partly because of its emphasis on the worship of a god-man, a concept difficult to define and grasp, was riven by controversies that prevented its use as a vehicle of mass mobilization, especially after it had achieved official status.⁵⁴ It did succeed, however, in providing a legitimating ideology to the Roman Empire, for the empire suffered no further successful coups from Constantine's acceptance of Christianity as the state religion in 312 CE until the revolution that overthrew Emperor Maurice in 602 CE, almost three centuries later.

It was at this point that Islam spectacularly burst forth from Arabia in a way unique to history. First, Islam represented a reassertion of independence on the part of the Near East after a thousand years of Graeco-Roman rule and dominance.⁵⁵ The fact that the Near Eastern peoples embraced Islam, often enthusiastically, even if over a period of some centuries, showed the efficacy of the new ideological religion and the relative weakness of its competitors, for no ideology prevails by force alone.⁵⁶ But Islam was more than a statement of independence, for it also created a universal mass mobilization unexampled in history that led the Muslim armies to the gates of France in the west and China in the east. This mobilization was only possible owing to its ideological appeal. From the Battle of Badr in the year 2 AH/624 CE until the Umayyad military collapse in 122 AH/740 CE for a period of

⁵⁴On the division of the Christians into mutually hostile sects, see Qur'an 19:37; 21:93; 23:53; 43:65. This is eloquent contemporary testimony to a major weakness in the Christian ideology at the beginning of the seventh century CE.

⁵⁵Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 77-8, etc.

⁵⁶Qur'an 2:256.

over a century,⁵⁷ the Muslims fought a continuous campaign on *all* fronts at once to claim the whole earth for God's rule. No series of campaigns in history was ever like this one; even the Romans always campaigned only against selected foes, never against all other states at once. But then the Romans did not have to bear the ideological demands that motivated the Muslims.

Indeed, the unfolding of the Muslim conquests can be seen as marking the definitive appearance of mass ideology in history. Of course, as we have pointed out, ideology had gone through a considerable development and elaboration already. The Jewish effort, however, had been curtailed by parochialism, a factor which also contributed to the Jewish political and military defeats of the first and second centuries CE. Christian ideology had been heavily articulated in the mutually-anathematizing polemics of divergent sects, but had served mostly to reinforce the existing political structure of the Roman Empire as well as those of other kingdoms. Islam, on the other hand, with its egalitarian mass ideology, menaced all existing states and put an end to several.⁵⁸ Shorn of all but its Greek-speaking territories, the East Roman Empire barely survived, and then only after cleaning up its ideology by prohibiting icon veneration and concentrating on the simple ideological symbol of the cross as a reply to the simplicity of the Islamic creed.

Thus, the impact of Islam was enormous and felt far beyond the boundaries of *dār al Islām*. In effect, the appearance of Islam coincided with the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the modern. The religion of Islam, with its urban-based appeal, not only flourished in the great metropolises of Islam such as Baghdad, but also foreshadowed the religious and philosophical concerns of urban dwellers down to the present. Indeed, it is only this modern appeal of Islam which has enabled it to hold its own against all odds in the urbanizing world of the present. So much for Islam's alleged archaism. On the other hand, it replaced the naturalistic, rural beliefs of primal peoples which had continued to flourish in the ancient pagan civilizations. This also signalled the closing of the ancient world. Even Hinduism was affected and sought to put its beliefs on a more organized ideological basis, a process which has not ceased.

Finally, from a regional standpoint, the introduction of Islam marked the most important watershed in the history of the Near East. Previously, Near Eastern society had been riven by various national and sectarian particularisms that greatly hampered its efforts to resist Hellenism. These particularisms for the most part had continued in an unbroken succession

⁵⁷With only three interruptions, 35-40/656-61, 64-73/683-92, and 99-101/718-20, the first two for the two *fitnahs*, and the last owing to the retrenchment policy of the caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al 'Azīz.

⁵⁸These included the Sassanid Persian Empire, Visigothic Spain, and the Sind of the Brahman Chach dynasty.

right down to 600 CE. None of the religions which had attempted to unite the Near East had succeeded in establishing anything like a universal dominion. Thus, Zoroastrianism, despite an ever-greater ideological articulation, remained associated with the Sassanid Persian state, while Christianity, despite its widespread presence, was broken into mutually-anathematizing sects and stayed tied to the Roman Empire. Meanwhile, pagan beliefs as well as other less successful religions with universal claims continued to flourish. Local regionalism still prevailed both in belief and in language. Thus Egypt, with its Coptic language and peculiar sect of Christianity, remained considerably detached from the rest of the Near East. It was Islam that brought a new unity to the whole Near East, even if not overnight. Thus, about 600 CE is a suitable date for separating the ancient Near East from its modern Islamic successor.

How Other Historical Traditions Fit into a Periodization Based on 600 CE

Quite aside from the direct role of Islam in ushering in the modern age, the appearance of Islam also coincided with a large number of world developments which signalled a fundamental change in human history. In all civilized areas of the Old World, significant developments were occurring which suggest that about 600 CE is a suitable point at which to posit a division separating ancient from modern history. In most areas west of China, it was a time of new beginnings indicated by a great dearth of literacy and literary production. Thus it was a formative period and a virtual "heroic age." To borrow the terminology of Karl Jaspers, it was a virtual "Second Axial Age." Although the period 600-800 CE witnessed the height of the early Islamic state, there was relatively little literary production in it, aside from poetry, until after 800 CE. The society of the Umayyads was an oral one, as indicated by the poetic contests of al Akhtal, Jarīr, and al Farazdaq. This is not surprising, since an Arabic literature had yet to be created.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the surviving Near Eastern classical traditions slowly disappeared, as in the case of Coptic, Syriac, and Avestan, or became marginalized.

The same process occurred at the same time in Western Europe, where it is well documented. With the death of Gregory of Tours (d. 594 CE), a historian who wrote in classical Latin, literary production became sparse for about two hundred years. When a literate culture reemerges after 800

⁵⁹For the Arabic literature of this early period, see A. F. L. Beeston et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). The various articles emphasize the Qur'an, apart from which oral literature prevailed, although some written compositions had gradually begun to appear.

CE, it is really proto-French rather than Latin, even though a now medieval Latin remained the literary language. This was the period in which the Romance vernaculars began to coalesce into recognizable varieties of speech which became the separate national Romance languages.⁶⁰ Even in Britain, a backwater at the time, the reintroduction of Christianity in 597 CE signalled the beginning of a recognizable civilized Anglo-Saxon culture that would culminate after the passage of a couple of centuries in a literature and identity. This is the place to begin the modern history of France and England, not 330, 476, 987, or 1066 CE.

Even more spectacularly, about 600 CE is a convenient point to end the ancient history of the Roman Empire, for the revolution that overthrew Emperor Maurice in 602 CE definitely signalled the end of the multinational Roman state and the beginning of a parochial state covering the Greek-speaking provinces only.⁶¹ Indeed, it was just after this time that the use of Latin was ended on the coins and replaced by Greek, a process which also affected most other areas of life.⁶² At the same time, the last of the classical Greek historians, the florid and bombastic Theophylact Simocatta, who was appropriately the historian of Maurice's disastrous reign, flourished at this time.⁶³ Theophylact had no successors, as the East Roman world also suffered

⁶⁰On the transition from the classical Roman world to medieval France and Germany under the Merovingian Franks, see Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 221-31 and passim; Edward James, *The Franks* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 3, 16, and passim; Ferdinand Lot, *Naissance de la France*, ed. Jacques Boussard (Paris: Fayard, 1970), 113-23; Rosamund McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751-987* (London: Longman, 1983), 140-66; Walter Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship* (London: Methuen, 1969), 1-20. The very idea of the "Carolingian Renaissance" suggests an emergence from a formative, epic, and nonliterate "Dark Age," so the idea of the period of 600-800 CE for the transition from ancient to modern is already current among scholars in this area. Note that James, *op. cit.*, 3, asserts that the Franks became French after the eighth century CE, i.e., after 800. On the literature of the period, see Lot, *op. cit.*, 224-39, 615-66.

⁶¹On this transformation, see J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 37-40, 91.

⁶²See George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 106.

⁶³On Theophylact, see Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). The Whitbys recently have also translated the *Chronicon Paschale 284-628 AD* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), after which there are no East Roman chronicles for almost two hundred years.

a dearth of literary production from 600 to 800 CE; when history reemerges, it is in a different Greek and a different world.⁶⁴

The same situation also applies to northern India. First, the empire of the Gangetic plain, built by the Mauryas and later reconstituted by the Guptas and Harsha (d. 647 CE), was now gone forever, only to be resurrected after 1200 CE in a completely different form by the Muslims.⁶⁵ The highly ideological content of Islam meant that the Muslim sultanate created an entirely new situation in the subcontinent and thus was not a continuation of the preceding northern Indian empire. Rather, the disunity of the five and one half centuries between Harsha's demise and the creation of the Delhi sultanate gave an opportunity for a new phase of Indian civilization to emerge. Most significantly, it was in this period that Hinduism coalesced as the primary religion on the subcontinent, while Buddhism faded, especially with the death of its last great champion, Harsha.⁶⁶ Thus, this was also a period of religious transformation. The formative period of modern Indian civilization from 600 to 800 CE is signalled by a dearth of literary records that renders its historical reconstruction difficult. This is parallel to the Merovingian Frankish period in Western Europe, which constitutes a heroic period out of which modern Europe emerged. It also parallels the East Roman Dark Age, in which a parochial Greek empire replaces the multinational empire of Rome.

In China, however, the reverse was true, for China had reunited under the Sui Dynasty in 581 after almost four centuries of disunion. This was

⁶⁴Haldon, op. cit., 425-35; A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), 230-3, 291-9.

⁶⁵According to Vincent A. Smith: "The partial unity of Indian history vanishes with Harsha and is not restored in any considerable measure until the closing years of the twelfth century." See his *The Oxford History of India*, 4th ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 183-4. The title of Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, *Early History of North India from the Fall of the Mauryas to the Death of Harsha, c. 200 B.C.-A.D. 650*, 2d ed. (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1968), suggests a similar view. See also Hermann Kulje and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India* (London: Routledge, 1986), 109-11. D. P. Singhal, *The History of the Indian People* (London: Methuen, 1983), 74, places the end of the classical era of Indian culture at the death of Harsha in 647. Very interestingly, Singhal notes that China reemerged at the same period, while the Indo-European world was in general decline. Other works give importance to the fall of the imperial Guptas around 550 CE as marking the end of an epoch of North Indian history. Thus, R. C. Majumdar et al., eds., *The History and Culture of the Indian People, The Classical Age*, vol. 3 (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1954), regards Harsha's importance as overrated, but in the forward K. M. Munshi (p. xvii) emphasizes the importance of the fall of the Guptas as signalling the end of India's classical "Golden Age." On the Guptas, see also Ashvini Agrawal, *Rise and Fall of the Imperial Guptas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Ltd., 1989), 264-9. While northern India declined, southern India rose to greater prominence, especially when dominated by the Pallavas after 600 CE. Thus, 600 marked an epoch in that region as well. See Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 99; Majumdar et al., op. cit., xviii.

⁶⁶Wolpert, op. cit., 95; Majumdar et al., op. cit., xvii.

followed by the vigorous T'ang Dynasty (618-907 CE), whose period of rule represented a high point for China both politically and culturally. Indeed, the T'ang period later came to be regarded by the Chinese as their classical age, the to which they looked for standards of taste in art and poetry.⁶⁷ This was perhaps because China never again lost its unity for any significant amount of time; therefore the Sui and the T'ang best represent the founding of the modern Chinese state. Additionally, the religious synthesis of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism that continued to characterize China until modern times was established under the T'ang, even though Buddhism had been originally introduced many centuries earlier.⁶⁸ Thus, the dates of 581 or 618 CE also are sensible places to break the continuum of Chinese history into ancient and modern halves.⁶⁹

Still farther to the east, Buddhism was introduced to Japan in 552 CE, an event associated with the transition there from a society of primal myth to a literate civilization, one with political unity in a unitary empire and, above all, with a national identity.⁷⁰ This brings us to another important point; as far as the modern world is concerned, 600 CE is a suitable place to begin modern history, for that time or shortly thereafter finds the principal nationalities and languages in their homelands and beginning, gradually, to be identified as entities, even if not with the nationalism that one associates with modern times. This contrasts sharply with the ancient world of before 600 CE, when many languages and national groups had not yet appeared or were not yet in their latter-day lands, which often contained groups which would later disappear. This is not to concede too much to the essentially racist concept of nationality, but rather to describe an important aspect of the modern world, which is far from spent, as shown by recent events in the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

No doubt, it will be objected that it is too simplistic to fit all of history into a certain pattern. After all, history is to a large extent the construct of the historian, especially when it comes to periodization. It therefore may

⁶⁷Witold Rodzinski, *A History of China*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), 135.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 113, 116; Dun J. Li, *The Ageless Chinese* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 158.

⁶⁹Toynbee, *op. cit.*, 88-90, favors a slightly earlier break between his "Sinic" and "Far Eastern Chinese" civilizations, but it is still in the interregnum between the fall of the Han and the rise of the Sui, that is, between 221 and 581 CE. See also Li, *op. cit.*, 162-87.

⁷⁰Malcolm D. Kennedy, *A Short History of Japan* (Toronto: The New American Library of Canada. Ltd., 1964), 15, 19, 22-3, 31-4.

seem unfair to make everyone's history revolve around the Prophet of Islam. However, our effort here has not been to scientifically define the only correct periodization of history. Rather, it has been to show that the prophethood of Muhammad is more deserving than any other event of serving as the crucial divide in world history between its ancient and modern periods, coinciding as it does with epoch-making transformations in other civilized areas. While other schemes of historical periodization may be proposed, the Muslims need feel no hesitation at all in putting their scheme before the others, as it provides the best answers to the question "What is the meaning of existence?" for the Muslim. Finally, the Muslim periodization of world history is certainly no less deserving of consideration than any other and is more deserving than many, including the traditional Western view.

It may also be objected that, in dealing with so many civilizations and such long epochs of history with so broad a brush, I have oversimplified a complex field or fields. Such an objection is especially likely to be made by specialists on whose turf I have trodden. But, first of all, it must be noted that I am not claiming comprehensive coverage. This paper is simply an exploration and a suggestion for further research. On the other hand, it is useful to look at the broad sweep of history in order to get some idea of its possible overall significance. Overspecialization in modern academic fields, including history, tends to make the bigger picture both murky and inaccessible.

Muslims must stand up for their own view of history, including the centrality of the message of the Prophet Muhammad, an event which is crucial for all monotheistically oriented people. However, this is not enough. In order to make a case for their view at all, Muslims must study the *complete* history of humanity in depth. They must not study it merely to find in it points which confirm their own beliefs or support their ideology; rather, they must examine it for its own value, for the light it sheds on the riddle of human existence. If Muslims are sincere and strong in their belief, they will find nothing disturbing about the study of all history instead of the limited, parochial history of their own peoples and lands. Knowledge is strength, and such study will give them the intellectual equipment necessary to compete for existence in the pluralistic modern world.