Seeing Islam as a Historian Sees It: A Mediterranean Frame Tale

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Historians of the medieval Mediterranean have handled the category Islam (Ar. *islām*) in ways that weaken our grasp of the past.[1] Some of the reasons for this regrettable situation stem from the difficulty encountered in rendering the richness and complexity of usage across many languages and contexts. Other problems stem from employing modern frames to convey medieval usages. And yet others result from the pervasive unsystematic use of the category in modern historiography. While this situation is not unique to this category or to this subfield of history, the medieval Mediterranean stands out because 'Islam' is constitutive of its mapping of the past and because the very existence of Mediterranean Studies is tied to a critical reassessment of the historiographic positions that excluded, marginalised, or othered Islam in the past and those that continue to do so today.

Since its appearance in early Arabic sources, the category Islam has been the subject of continued and vigorous debate. Medieval authors did not settle on a single meaning or agree to use the category in a consistent manner. Modern historians have not done so either. Rather than proceed by defining the term, situating the active manipulation of the category by medieval and modern intellectuals seems more manageable and suitable, and has the benefit of shifting the focus to the study of the circumstances that illuminate particular usages. Since historians do not customarily state their 'working definitions' clearly or explicitly, doing so also seems sensible.

Mediterraneanists who work with Latin texts know that medieval Latin authors did not use the Arabic word *islām*, unlike their contemporaries who wrote in Arabic. This means that when they use the category 'Islam,' these medievalists are not simply reporting a usage found in their sources. Instead, they are referring to what they consider to be Latin equivalents of the Arabic original—or at least of a selection of Arabic usages they find authoritative, representative, or attractive for some other reason. Oftentimes, the use medieval Latinists make of Islam derives from their application of modern ways of framing the category as a religion, civilisation, polity, world, culture, etc. As it happens, there has

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never been a consensus on what 'religion' or 'civilisation' etc. refers to, or on how to apply these notions when studying premodern societies.[2] As they are not always transparent, such manoeuvres greatly complicate the task of understanding how Islam has been constituted in Mediterranean Studies, and thus that of formulating a systematic and critical approach to the question of its utilisation in historical arguments. That is why, although the historiography of the medieval Mediterranean is the primary 'archive,' the question here is not how historians interpret a particular set of texts, but rather what a young historian might learn about the handling of the category Islam from the modern historiography of the medieval Mediterranean.

Modern scholarship on the medieval Mediterranean does not take its cues from modern historiography in Arabic. If it did, the use of the same Arabic words in medieval texts and modern historiography and their translations into other languages would require examination. Rather, and for historical reasons, English is the dominant language in the field. This means that, in general, English-language studies inflect historiographic debates more than those in other languages. Naturally, considering only a small number of these studies for the purposes of a short essay does not equate to an exhaustive or fair representation of a rich and diverse historiography. However, for the purposes of drawing attention to a set of historiographic phenomena, it makes sense to select from broadly read contributions to the field. And since many Mediterraneanists rely primarily on Latin sources, it seems relevant here to examine how specialists handle the absence of the word Islam in Latin.

To be clear, and although it may frustrate the expectations of some, this essay will not attempt to identify the best scholarly approach to Islam or to the societies, cultures, world(s), or polities dubbed Islamic, and not only because doing so would require a great deal more space than is available here.[3] Its infinitely more modest goal is to show that the historiographic 'status quo' has been too tolerant of formulations that are demonstrably

[2] For why the modern European category 'religion' is not suitable for defining Islam, see SHAHAB AHMED, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 176–245.

[3] This essay builds on critical insights made by scholars across fields and disciplines. For a sense of the diversity of approaches and for historiographic orientation, see TALAL ASAD, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); CEMIL AYDIN, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); ALEXANDER BEVILACQUA, *Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018); HAMID DABASHI, *The End of Two Illusions: Islam after the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); JOSEPH A. MASSAD, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015); TOMOKO MASUZAWA, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); JACK F. MATLOCK JR., 'Can Civilizations Clash?,' *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 143, no. 3 (1999): 428–39; SAMI ZUBAIDA, *Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011). For more specialised explorations, see for example AHMED, *What is Islam?*; MARSHALL G.S. HODGSON, 'The Role of Islam in World History,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 2 (1970): 99–123; JOHN O. VOLL, 'Islam as a Community of Discourse and a World-System,' in *The Sage Handbook of Islamic Studies*, eds AKBAR AHMED and TAMARA SONN (London: Sage, 2010), 3–16.

problematic. To underline its own historicising preferences, it holds that one way around at least some of the difficulties identified here is to focus on those sites that have specialised in the production, reproduction, and dissemination of the category Islam in the past and those that do so today. Doing so may fall short of disentangling all the webs of interconnected issues, but it should be enough to allow young historians to recognise some of the lessons embedded in studies of the medieval Mediterranean, including those inherent in the unsystematic use of the category.

Writing Against History

For too many historians, using the category Islam presents itself as self-evident, straightforward, and unproblematic. Common figures of speech are pervasive; however, as they are not easily associated with identifiable positions, they tend to complicate the task of devising a formal critique. But to the extent that prevailing ways of writing about the past constitute a distinct challenge, examining a few examples should give a better sense of some of the difficulties historians create for themselves.

Representing human actions as personified abstractions is a chronic malady of historical prose, even though most historians acknowledge that it downplays specificity, precision, and accuracy, all *sine quibus non* of historicising. Consider these ostensibly harmless statements about the birth of Islam:

> Islam was born into a world that was already made.[4]
>
> Islam was born amongst the Arabs of early seventh-century Arabia.[5]

Everyone is entitled to the metaphors they find useful, but this one leaves a great deal out. What or who was born? And when? Was Islam born when Muḥammad (ca. 570–622) was born, when he became a prophet to his followers (610), when the caliph ʻUthmān b. ʻAffān (d. 656) ordered the compilation of the Qur'an, or was 'it' born on some other occasion?

The fact that Islam was born is so widely accepted that for some the issue is not whether but where it was born.[6]

> Islam was not born in the Mediterranean, but it interacted from the earliest days with the rival monotheistic religions of the Mediterranean, Judaism and Christianity (it also

[4] JONATHAN E. BROCKOPP, *Muhammad's Heirs: The Rise of Muslim Scholarly Communities, 622–950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 31.
[5] CHASE F. ROBINSON, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), XVI.
[6] For Islam growing up, see for example THOMAS F. X. NOBLE et al., eds, *Western Civilization: To 1715* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 340; MARK WHITTOW, 'Geographical Survey,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, eds ELIZABETH JEFFRIES, JOHN HALDON, and ROBIN CORMACK (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229.

> interacted with paganism, but in a negative way, since the Muslims refused to tolerate religions other than Judaism, Christianity and, in Persia, Zoroastrianism).[7]

For David Abulafia, Islam was not a natural-born Mediterranean but acquired its Mediterraneanness second-hand, by interacting with 'native' Mediterranean religions. And while the notion that Muslims stand out from Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians for being intolerant of followers of other religions is obviously problematic, its presence here illustrates well how certain modern discourses on identity find their way into historical interpretations.[8]

If personifying Islam leads to odd constructions, treating it as a biological entity can be outright mystifying.

> Early Islam lived in symbiosis with the camel. The herded camel supplying milk, wool and meat was the basis of Arab bedouin nomadic pastoralism.[9]

In another vein, reading about Islam being born and growing up, prepares one to read about its economic circumstances.[10]

> Between the densely populated blocks, Europe in the large sense, Black Africa, and the Far East, [Islam] held the key passes and made a living from its profitable function of intermediary. Without its *consent* or *will*, nothing could pass through.[11]

> The scholarly person as a religious ideal was more widely popular in Judaism than in Islam. To be sure, Islam, with its ample economic resources was far more able to realize this ideal, namely, by making learning a salaried profession.[12]

In these instances, Islam obscures the details of economics. In others, it obscures those of politics, as this example from *The Corrupting Sea* illustrates:

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[7] DAVID ABULAFIA, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 244. Cf. 'Islam decided early not to force either Jews or Christians to adopt Islam.' HYAM MACCOBY, *Antisemitism and Modernity: Innovation and Continuity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 150.

[8] See PEREZ ZAGORIN, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[9] SAMUEL A. M. ADSHEAD, *China in World History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 126. Cf. 'Islam was the animal kingdom par excellence, with its deserts both natural and man-made.' FERNAND BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II,* 2 vols., vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 401.

[10] For an example of Islam's interests, see JACOB NEUSNER, TAMARA SONN, and JONATHAN E. BROCKOPP, eds, *Judaism and Islam in Practice: A Sourcebook* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 46: 'Islam takes special interest in what Judaism would term hand-washing.'

[11] BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean*, 187. Italics mine. See also: '[The famous expedition of the Vivaldi brothers in 1291] must be seen as an attempt to deprive Islam of some of the benefits of being the middleman in trade between the Far East and western Europe.' DAVID ABULAFIA, *A Mediterranean Emporium: The Catalan Kingdom of Majorca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 209.

[12] SHELOMO D. GOITEIN, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols., vol. 5, *The Individual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9.

> It was the rise of Islam to naval dominance in the Mediterranean that, indirectly, shaped the northern economy of Charlemagne's empire, and hence the whole of subsequent medieval society.[13]

In addition to rising in power, medievalists sometimes conceive this 'political' Islam as bursting out of Arabia,[14] as conquering,[15] and then expanding its territory.[16] Unfortunately, when Islam gets a 'territory,' it comes with frontiers with abstract entities such as Christianity and even with actual kingdoms.[17]

> Unlike Galicia, [the kingdom of León] had a frontier with Islam and the possibility of expansion southward into the rich grazing lands of Extremadura.[18]

It is unclear whether information about 'Muslim' kingdoms in Iberia is unavailable or the historian does not believe it to be pertinent.[19] Identifying the kingdoms in question would have situated them organically within the politics of the time and reduced the exotic character of information about them. Instead, imagining frontiers with 'Islam' tends to normalise the uneven treatment of medieval kingdoms based on their 'religious identity.'

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[13] PEREGRINE HORDEN and NICHOLAS PURCELL, *The Corrupting Sea*: *A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 32. See also KATHRYN REYERSON, *The Art of the Deal: Intermediaries of Trade in Medieval Montpellier* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 21: 'From the seventh and early eighth centuries, the southern, eastern, and, until the successes of the Spanish *reconquista*, the western shores of the Mediterranean were dominated by Islam.'

[14] JONATHAN P. BERKEY, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 57; TARIF KHALIDI, *Classical Arab Islam: The Culture and Heritage of the Golden Age* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1985), 29.

[15] 'The thoroughness with which conquering Islam denied the use of bells to its Christian subjects is a token of the importance of this often-neglected aspect of the religious landscape.' HORDEN and PURCELL, *The Corrupting Sea*, 422.

[16] HORDEN and PURCELL, *The Corrupting Sea*, 17.

[17] For frontiers with 'Christianity' see HENRI PIRENNE, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1939), 163. The territorialisation of the rule of medieval 'Islamic' dynasties involves both conceptual and empirical problems. See valuable observations in DOMINIQUE VALÉRIAN, *Bougie: Port Maghrébin 1067–1510* (Rome: École française de Rome: 2006), 103–73; DOMINIQUE IOGNA-PRAT, 'The Meaning and Usages of Medieval Territory,' *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 72, no. 1 (2017): 91–100. For an examination of the notion of borderland, see LINDA T. DARLING, 'The Mediterranean as a Borderland,' *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (2012): 54–63.

[18] TEÓFILO F. RUIZ, *From Heaven to Earth: The Reordering of Castilian Society, 1150–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 105. See also DAVID ABULAFIA, *The Western Mediterranean Kingdoms, 1200–1500: The Struggle for Dominion* (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 41; SIMON BARTON, *The Aristocracy in Twelfth-Century León and Castile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25; PAUL FREEDMAN, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27; WALTER KAEGI, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 252; MARÍA ROSA MENOCAL, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002), 5.

[19] Some imagine Islam as a ruler, while others think that it was ruled. OLEG GRABAR, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, (1973; 2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 35. The rulers of Islam were not all men. See FATIMA MERNISSI, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

In a different register, historians often attribute a political character to Islam by referring to processes taking places under its rule or more simply under it.[20]

> The end of Byzantine North Africa was categorically not the end of North Africa, which instead, together with its inhabitants, would flourish culturally, economically, and politically under Islam. [21]

> Sorghum was known in Coptic Egypt and spread rather slowly in the Maghreb under Islam.[22]

Of course, historians are entitled to apply the periodisation that best serves their purposes. But it is not at all clear that those who use 'Islam' (or 'under Islam') as a marker of time do so for a given reason—like a reasoned rejection of dynastic periodisation, for example. We are just asked to imagine a period when Islam ruled and to call that the Islamic period.[23] Interestingly, this brings modern historians in line with the theologically imbued medieval vision in which 'the coming of Islam' put an end to the Age of Ignorance (*al-jāhiliya*), a way of ordering time that undoubtedly lives in symbiosis with ideology.[24]

Periodisation is not the only way the manipulation of Islam leads to a loss of neutrality. In his classic *The Formation of Islamic Art*, Oleg Grabar opined that

> Had Islam continued to be ruled from the secluded oases of central Arabia or from a poor and inaccessible region like the central Maghrib, it might have preserved a certain religious purity, but it would never have become the lasting cultural force it did become.[25]

Setting aside the assertion that Islam itself was ruled from an identifiable place, Grabar's ostensibly gratuitous negative assessment of the cultural potential of both Arabia and the central Maghrib is not accidental. For one thing, it reflects the ideology that prevailed at

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[20] Islam is not always on top. ROBERT I. BURNS, *Islam under the Crusaders: Colonial Survival in the Thirteenth-Century Kingdom of Valencia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). For 'in the orbit of Islam,' see ROSS BRANN, *Power in the Portrayal: Representations of Jews and Muslims in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4; BARBARA KREUTZ, *Before the Normans: Southern Italy in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 18.

[21] WALTER KAEGI, *Muslim Expansion and Byzantine Collapse in North Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 297, 67.

[22] HORDEN and PURCELL, *The Corrupting Sea*, 208.

[23] On periodisation, see the special issue of *Der Islam* (91, no. 1, 2014) edited by ANTOINE BORRUT.

[24] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, *Second Edition*, eds P. J. BEARMAN et. al., 12 vols., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), s.v. 'Djāhiliyya,' 383–84. For orientation, see PETER WEBB, 'Al-Jāhiliyya: Uncertain Times of Uncertain Meanings,' *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014): 69–94. Used by archaeologists, the Islamic label often refers to a period of unspecified length. For example, see 'In the Islamic assemblage, sorghum and pearl millet are definitely not associated with fodder, while the brassicas, safflower and black mustard may have been utilized for both purposes (one seed each of black mustard and safflower was found in the Islamic camel droppings).' MARIJKE VAN DER VEEN, *Consumption, Trade and Innovation: Exploring the Botanical Remains from Roman and Islamic Ports at Quseir al-Qadim in Egypt* (Frankfurt am Main: Africa Magna Verlag, 2011), 176.

[25] GRABAR, *The Formation*, 35.

the Abbasid court in which Baghdad was the centre of the world.[26] But then again, the dynastic ideology Grabar might have been endorsing here could be an Iberian one, which favoured an urbanised Andalus to a 'Bedouin' Maghrib.[27] By acknowledging the tendency of courtly discourses on 'civilisation' to discount 'uncivilised' regions and, by extension, their place in Islam, the Mediterranean, or other worlds, we can contextualise them and those modern arguments that echo them.

There are many more instances and contexts than can be discussed here. Even if brief, this survey does however show that, too often, references to Islam tend to occult what lies behind the manipulation of the category, and thus limit our ability to ascertain the relation between the agendas of medieval authors and those of modern historians. An examination of how specialists have handled the absence of the word Islam in Latin may offer a touchable illustration of the challenges the handling of the category present historians.

Islam in Medieval Latin

For years, Norman Daniel's path-breaking *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image* (1960) and Richard Southern's *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (1962) were the main reference works on medieval representations of Islam in Latin.[28] More recently, the subject has received renewed attention by John Tolan whose *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (2002) has become a standard reference in the field.[29] While these studies differ in many respects, they all make Islam their main object of focus. This is remarkable because, as Tolan makes clear, until the sixteenth century, the terms Islam and Muslim were largely unknown in Western languages.

> 'Islam' in Arabic means submission, submission to God's will; a 'Muslim' is one who has submitted to God's will. Yet medieval Christian writers did not speak of 'Islam' or 'Muslims,' words unknown (with very few exceptions) in Western languages before the sixteenth century. Instead, Christian writers referred to Muslims by using ethnic terms: Arabs, Turks, Moors, Saracens. Often they call them 'Ishmaelites,' descendants of the

[26] AL-YAʿQŪBĪ, *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Yaʿqūbi. An English Translation*, eds MATTHEW GORDON et al., 3 vols., vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 66; AL-YAʿQŪBĪ, *Kitāb al-buldān*, ed. ABRAHAM W. T. JUYNBOLL (Leiden: Brill, 1860), 4.

[27] For a critical perspective and historiographic help, see ERIC CALDERWOOD, *Colonial Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018). See also DAVID A. WACKS, *Medieval Iberian Crusade Fiction and the Mediterranean World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 3–13.

[28] NORMAN DANIEL, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960); RICHARD SOUTHERN, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). Famously, Southern lamented the 'extremely slow penetration of Islam as an intellectually identifiable fact in Western minds.' SOUTHERN, *Western Views*, 13.

[29] JOHN TOLAN, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), XVI. Below, I will use other works by Tolan too, if only to suggest that the issues are in some way persistent.

> biblical Ishmael, or Hagarenes (from Hagar, Ishmael's mother). Their religion is referred to as the 'law of Muhammad' or the 'law of the Saracens.'[30]

In the accompanying note, Tolan explains that two exceptions confirm the rule against referring to Islam and Muslims in Latin texts:

> Two exceptions are William of Tripoli, *Notitia de Machometo*, in Wilhelm von Tripolis, *Notitia de Machometo*; *De statu Sarracenorum*, ed. Peter Engels (Würzburg: Corpus Islamo-Christianum, 1992), §6, p. 216; Petrus Alfonsi, *Dialogi contra Iudaeos (Diálogo contra los Judíos)*, Latin edition by Klaus-Peter Mieth with Spanish translation by Esperanza Ducay (Zaragoza: Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 1996), §5, p. 94. In English, *Moslim* is first attested in 1615; *Islam*, in 1613 (*Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 and 1985], 1:1856, 1489). In French, *Mussulman* is used for the first time in the sixteenth century; Islam, in 1697 (according to Alain Rey, *Le Robert: Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* [Paris: Dictionnaires le Robert, 1992 and 1998], 1886, 2328).[31]

Although Tolan's wording leaves some doubt about this, in both these exceptions the reference is not to Islam but only to the adjective 'Muslim.' In fact, medieval Latin authors did not use the word 'Islam' at all and hardly ever used the adjective 'Muslim' because, as the Dominican William of Tripoli (d. 1273) explained, they preferred referring to Saracens.[32] Tolan offers a compelling explanation of the circumstances that led to the original depiction of Islam as the Law of the Saracens: Christian authors drew on a pre-existing discourse on Saracens and later Latin authors continued this practice because of its outstanding pedigree.[33] But writing about Islam in the abstract is not the same as writing about the law of Muslims or Saracens. Irrespective of one's stance on the difference between the two operations or their significance, few would argue that the two are the same. Yet, passing off medieval Latin representations of Saracens (Muslims) as representations of Islam has been the most common way modern historians have obscured the intriguing fact of the absence of 'Islam' in medieval Latin.[34]

In his discussion of Robert of Ketton (fl. 1136–1157), his work, and environment, Thomas Burman notes that the *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* 'was the standard version of

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[30] TOLAN, *Saracens,* XV. See also 'Medieval Christians, with very few exceptions, did not use the words "Muslim" or "Islam"; instead they used ethnic terms such as "Arab," "Saracen," "Ishmaelite." Information about these peoples could be found in the venerable books of old.' TOLAN, *Saracens*, 4.

[31] TOLAN, *Saracens*, 284n1.

[32] 'Meslemin quod latine dicitur Sarracenos.' WILHELM VON TRIPOLIS, *Notitia de Machometo; De statu Sarracenorum*, ed. PETER ENGELS (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1992), 216. Tolan found one other instance of 'Muslim' in PETRUS ALFONSI, *Dialogi contra Iudaeos (Diálogo contra los Judíos)*, ed. KLAUS-PETER MIETH, Sp. trans. ESPERANZA DUCAY (Zaragoza: Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 1996), 94.

[33] TOLAN, *Saracens*, XIX.

[34] See also 'This book is an exploration of how various Christian European authors from the ninth to the fourteenth century direct their pens against Islam.' JOHN TOLAN, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainsville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2008), XI. 'Muhammad has always been at the center of the European discourse on Islam.' JOHN TOLAN, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Views of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

the Qur'ān for European readers from the time of its translation down to the eighteenth century.'[35] But as Burman explains 'Robert's Latin Qur'ān eventually became very widely criticised as well, for from the fifteenth century to the present, scholarly opinion has condemned it as a loose, misleading paraphrase.'[36] Indeed, Robert changed the structure of the original text, altered the meaning of many Qur'anic terms, and ultimately produced a new text well adapted to the polemical designs the translation was meant to serve.

Here is a modern English rendering of a Qur'anic verse in which God's (true) religion (*dīn*) is Islam:

> The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will): nor did the People of the Book dissent therefrom except through envy of each other after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account (Q. 3:19).[37]

By focusing on what he believed was the essential meaning of the verse, Robert of Ketton dispenses with the word Islam.

> Sin autem, tuum est mea praecepta gentibus solummodo patefacere. Increduli, et propheticidae, et iustorum quorumlibet interfectores, in hoc seculo contemptibiles, et in alio perpetue damnandi, poenam grauissimam tortoris atque uindicis expertes subibunt.[38]

Robert of Ketton gave a general sense of the meaning of the verse but did not use the word Islam.[39] He did likewise when translating these two other verses:

> Say: 'We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ismā'īl, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes. And in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets, from their lord: We make no distinction between one and another among them, and to Allah do we bow our will (in Islam).' If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (All spiritual good) (Q. 3:84-5).
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> Dicite uos credentes in Deum, praeceptisque tibi, et Abrahae et Ismaëli, et Isaac atque Iacob duodecimque tribubus, similiter et Moysi et Cristo prophetisque caeteris, quos discernere nimis est, desuper a deo fide nostra missa, fidem et testimonium adhibemus. Quis aliud per

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35 THOMAS E. BURMAN, '*Tafsīr* and Translation: Traditional Arabic Qur'ān Exegesis and the Latin Qur'āns of Robert of Ketton and Mark of Toledo,' *Speculum* 73, no. 3 (1998): 703–732 (705).
36 BURMAN, *Tafsīr*, 705.
37 'ABDULLĀH YŪSUF 'ALĪ, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 10th ed. (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2001), 131.
38 THÉODORE BIBLIANDER, *Le Coran en latin et autres textes sur l'islam*, eds TRISTAN VIGLIANO and HENRI LAMARQUE, 22. https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01306446.
39 For a valuable examination of the medieval Arabic notion of '*dīn*,' the specificity of its origins and evolution in Arabic, and how it relates to the modern invention of 'religion,' see RUSHAIN ABBASI, 'Islam and the Invention of Religion: A Study of Medieval Muslim Discourses on *Dīn*,' *Studia Islamica* 116, no. 1 (2021): 1–106.

> fidem quam legem assequi studet ? Omnis quidem incredulus saeculo futuro damnandis annumerabitur.[40]

Responding to criticism of Robert's translation, and more specifically the unfavourable treatment his Qur'an received compared to that of the second oldest translation prepared by Mark of Toledo (fl. 1193–1216), Burman opined that the *Lex Mahumet* was not necessarily a worse translation.

> [Historian] Norman Daniel may well be correct in concluding that Mark's translation communicates, in its literalism, more of the feel and shape of the Qur'ān but this very concern to produce a word-for-word translation caused Mark to misrepresent the Qur'ān badly from time to time.[41]

There is naturally much wisdom in Burman's observation, and it is difficult to disagree with him on this point. Yet Mark of Toledo's so-called 'word-for-word' translation managed to avoid the word Islam too.[42] In another verse in which Islam is described as a religion (*dīn*), Mark renders it as 'the Law of the Ishmaelites.'

> Hodie uobis uestram compleui legem adimpleuique uobis beneficium meum. Et acceptaui uobis Yshmahelitarum legem.[43]

Here is an English interpretation of the same:

> This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion (Q. 5:3).[44]

Elsewhere, Mark's 'word-for-word' translation made him replace the word Muslim with what he believed was its meaning, the root of the word having something to do with obedience or submission.[45] By translating the meaning of the word, Mark avoided using it as the name of the 'religion.'

The last translation of the Qur'an considered here is the one prepared for Egidio da Viterbo (1469–1532), an Augustinian friar and eventually cardinal, whose keen interest in

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[40] YŪSŪF 'ALĪ, *The Meaning*, 150. BIBLIANDER, *Le Coran*, 24. Interestingly, the word 'religion' does not occur as a translation of the Arabic '*din*.'

[41] BURMAN, 'Tafsīr,' 731.

[42] Here is how Mark renders the two Qur'anic passages cited above: 'Lex enim non est apud Deum nisi Saracenorum. Et non dissenserunt illi quibus datus est Liber nisi postquam uenit ad eos sciencia inter seducti inuidia. Et qui blasphemat in miracula Dei, Deus quippe uelociter iudicat' and 'Dic: "Credimus in Deum, et in id quod destinatum est nobis et quod destinatum est Abrahe et Yshmaeli et Ysaac et tribubus; et quod datum est Moysi et Ihesu prophetis a creatore suo: non distingo inter aliquem eorum, nos ei obedimus". Et qui, preter legem Yshmahelitarum, aliam apetit non recipiatur ab illo, ipse enim in futuro seculo dampnabitur.' MARCUS TOLETANUS, *Alchoranus latinus quem transtulit Marcus canonicus Toletanus: estudio y edición crítica*, ed. NÀDIA PETRUS PONS (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2016), 43, 48.

[43] TOLETANUS, *Alchoranus*, 72.

[44] YŪSUF 'ALĪ, *The Meaning*, 245.

[45] Mark's translation of 'naḥnu lahu muslimūn' as 'nos ei obedimus' makes this clear.

scriptures led him to Hebrew and eventually to Arabic.[46] In his youth, Egidio famously met Erasmus (1509) and Martin Luther during the latter's visit to Rome in 1510/1511. It was during his time in Spain as an agent of the Medici Pope Leo X (r. 1513–1521) at the court of Charles I of Spain (1516–1556) that Egidio pursued his interests in the Qur'an. In 1518, he commissioned a Muslim convert by the name of Juan Gabriel of Teruel (Alí Alayzar) to prepare a new translation of the Qur'an.[47] Upon his return to Italy, Egidio had his godson and Arabic teacher Leo Africanus (d. c. 1554) review Juan Gabriel's text and make corrections and improvements. The final draft was completed in 1525.

Egidio's attitude towards Islam and Muslims reflected the political concerns and realities of his time. The struggle against the Ottomans around the Mediterranean focused all attention. During the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517), Egidio made a memorable speech in defence of mendicant brethren, in which he laid out a theologically suffused vision of the world.

> So we ourselves have seen, when religion has exchanged the weapons of prayer for those of steel, the Church has been driven, ejected, and expelled from almost the entire rim of the Mediterranean. Muhammed has grown into a behemoth. Unless we abandon steel and return in the bosom of piety to the altars and worship of God, he will increase day by day, will subject everything to his authority, and will occupy the whole Mediterranean basin as the most impious avenger of our impiety.[48]

The idea that the growth of Muḥammad, but not Islam, was a form of divine punishment must have roused at least some in the audience, since Egidio became Cardinal very soon after the conclusion of the Council. Unsurprisingly, Juan Gabriel, who had contributed to anti-Muslim polemics in Aragon, shared Egidio's general animus towards 'Muḥammad.'

There is no Islam in Egidio's Latin text. In the passages discussed above, Egidio prefers to talk of the Law of the Moors and the Law of the Ishmaelites.[49] The same applies to the remaining four occurrences of the word in the Arabic text. Yet, what is noteworthy about this late translation is a category switch and the introduction of the Moors (*Mauri*), which is consistent with what both Iberians and Italians called those Muslims they dealt with most frequently, 'the Turk' gradually gaining currency thereafter.[50]

Ultimately, Latin translators eschewed the word Islam and used Arabic texts in their possession to achieve maximum polemical effect.

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[46] For a helpful introduction to his biography, the text, and to the scholarship, see KATARZYNA K. STARCZEWSKA, *Latin Translation of the Qur'ān (1518/1621): Commissioned by Egidio da Viterbo. Critical Edition and Case Study* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), XIII–CXXI.

[47] Charles I of Spain (Aragon and Castile) became the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1519–1556).

[48] STARCZEWSKA, *Latin Translation*, XIV.

[49] STARCZEWSKA, *Latin Translation*, 69, 80, 140.

[50] 'Et Deus aperit cor illius, quem uult dirigere in legem maurorum.' STARCZEWSKA, *Latin Translation*, 184. See also STARCZEWSKA, *Latin Translation*, 230, 488–89, 574, 642.

> Polemicists appeared to be almost incapable of believing what Muslims said about their own religion, preferring at every turn the tendentious, misleading interpretations of other Christians. 'The favorite technique,' as Daniel put it, 'was to decide what a [Qur'ānic] text must mean without consultation of those most concerned,' that is, Muslims themselves.[51]

Daniel, Burman, and Tolan are undoubtedly correct in linking the 'Islam' of medieval Latin to specifiable ideological agendas, although it is not immediately clear whether anti-Muslim rhetoric and the absence of Islam in Latin are distinct phenomena or facets of the same one. What a historian would still need to do, however, is determine who speaks for 'Muslims themselves.' Even then, setting up an equivalency between medieval Arabic Islam and the Latin 'Law of the Saracens' is not without its challenges.

From Religion to Civilisation and Back

In spite of there being no consensus around the handling of the category Islam, it is still possible to identify some of the ways historians have enabled the equivalency between the Arabic Islam and the Latin 'Law of Saracens.' In this regard, Tolan's work, which uses the modern notion of religion to achieve this effect, is a convenient example and reference point.

For Tolan, 'their religion is referred to as the "law of Muhammad" or the "law of the Saracens."'[52] While some might think that the Latin 'law' refers to something like the Arabic *sharīʿa* or the Hebrew *Halakha*, the prevailing practice is to use *lex* to make Islam a religion. This is not necessarily a problem. Still, the medieval Latin authors' non-application of the etymon *religio* raises questions about the difference between *religio* and *lex* and the ways modern 'religion' has come to absorb both. Moreover, the difference between the Latin *religio* and *lex* may not have been the same as that between the Arabic *dīn* and *sharīʿa*, and thus the application of the modern 'religion' may be guilty of begging the question. And since not everyone agrees that the medieval organisation of knowledge reflected in Latin and Arabic texts included such a 'thing' as religion in the modern sense, a great deal is left out.

Then again, for Tolan, Islam is not always the name of a religion.

> Damascus was the capital of an emerging Islamic civilization. More and more Christians were converting to Islam; Arabic was being increasingly used.[53]

The difficulties inherent in using 'religion' to set up an equivalency between the Arabic Islam and the Latin 'Law of the Saracens' multiply because the notion of Islam as a religion

[51] BURMAN, *Tafsīr*, 732.
[52] TOLAN, *Saracens*, XV. 'This book is an attempt to fill this gap: to examine how and why medieval Christians portrayed Islam—or rather, portrayed what they preferred to call the "law of the Saracens."' TOLAN, Saracens, XVI.
[53] TOLAN, *Saracens*, 39.

coexists with that of a Muslim or Islamic civilisation and that of a Muslim world and culture.

> The first issue is to understand, in context, the development and expression of a variety of European images (most of them hostile) of the Muslim world, a civilization seen as a rival and a threat through the Middle Ages and beyond. The second issue involves how cultures define themselves over and against outside groups depicted as 'enemies.'[54]

And since modern historians treat Islam as a political entity too, difficulties abound.[55]

> Nothing in Isidore's *Etymologies* or his historical works could, of course, predict or account for the meteoric rise of Islam and *its* rapid conquest of an empire stretching from the Indus to the Atlantic. From the perspective of the twentieth-first-century historian, the rise of Islam and the Muslim conquests comprise one of history's great watersheds.[56]

A detour that historians have usually invited their readers to take around these and other issues has been to point to the existence of notions such as the Abode or House of Islam (*dār al-islām*) in Arabic sources.

> Muslims came to see the world as divided in two: the *dâr al-Islam*, the world of Islam, and *dar al-harb*, the domain of war. It is a licit—indeed holy—part of the Muslim's spiritual struggle (jihad) to expand the domain of Islam by war.[57]

> What about the 'Islamic world'? It can be assimilated to the term *dār al-islām*, widespread among the Arab authors, which literally means 'house of Islam' […] Clearly, the *dār al-islām* is no more stable a geographical entity than is Europe: it expanded rapidly throughout the Middle Ages. It came into being with a wave of lightning conquests that, over the century following Muhammad's death in 632, gave the Muslims control of an empire extending from the Indus and the Hindu Kush to the Atlantic coasts of Morocco and Portugal.[58]

In spite of the assertion that the House of Islam came into being with a wave of conquests in the seventh century, it took Arabic authors centuries before they began to map the world that way.[59] And it is not because it is like Europe that it is geographically unstable. Here is what the jurist al-Sarakhsī (d. ca. 1090) thought:

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[54] TOLAN, *Saracens,* XXIII. For the 'world of Islam' see TOLAN, *Saracens*, XVIII.

[55] 'Within a century from this revelation, Islam became the dominant religious and political force in much of the former Roman and Persian empires.' TOLAN, *Saracens,* 21.

[56] TOLAN, *Saracens*, 19. Italics mine. For an 'Islamic dominion,' see TOLAN, *Saracens*, 21.

[57] TOLAN, *Saracens*, 35.

[58] JOHN TOLAN, HENRY LAURENS, and GILLES VEINSTEIN, eds, *Europe and the Islamic World: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

[59] MUḤAMMAD MUSHTAQ AHMAD, 'The Notions of Dār al-Islām and Dār al-Ḥarb in Islamic Jurisprudence with Special Reference to the Ḥanafī School,' *Islamic Studies* 47, no. 1 (2008), 5–37 (7). See also SARAH ALBRECHT, *Dār al-Islām Revisited: Territoriality in Contemporary Islamic Legal Discourse on Muslims in the West* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); GIOVANNA CALASSO, 'Alla ricerca di Dār al-Islām. Una ricognizione nei testi di giuristi e tradizionisti, lessicografi, geografi e viaggiatori,' *Rivista degli studi orientali* n.s. 83, no. 1 (2010), 271–96; GIOVANNA CALASSO and GIULIANO LANCIONI, eds, *Dār al-islām/dār al-ḥarb: Territories, People, Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

> Minor children of non-Muslims are considered legally to be non-Muslims. The same holds true for children captured in war along with any of their non-Muslim parents. This is because while the child is in *Dār al-Islām*, he does not belong to it. He belongs to his parents.[60]

Likening the House of Islam to Europe is thus a mistake. That notwithstanding, the notion is not the only way Arabic authors contributed to the reification of the category Islam. One encounters references to the Kingdoms of Islam (*mamālik al-islām*) and to the history of Islam (*tārīkh al-islām*), both emerging when or because the 'Islamic world' was divided among competing political authorities, all claiming the Islamic label. The relative late date of these developments is worth keeping in mind too, if only because it took centuries to build the house, found the kingdoms, and conceive of an all-encompassing Islamic history.

Anachronism is not the only issue here. The House of Islam included populations that historians tend to leave out from their analyses of the making of the Islamic world. In fact, these populations, many of which were Muslim, receive far less scholarly attention than non-Muslims who lived 'under Islam' (*ahl al-dhimma*).

> In official Islam, the existence of the *djinn* was completely accepted, as it is to this day, and the full consequences implied by their existence were worked out. Their legal status in all respects was discussed and fixed, and the possible relations between them and mankind, especially in questions of marriage and property, were examined. Stories of the loves of *djinn* and human beings were evidently of perennial interest.[61]

The unstated and unexamined scholarly consensus behind the exclusion of the *jinn* from historical analysis shows that historians are selective in their treatment of representations of the world found in medieval texts. The Abode of Islam is *in* but the *jinn* who inhabited it are *out*. Questions abound.

When medieval intellectuals referred to the 'Abode of Islam,' they did so under specific intellectual, political, and social conditions. By itself, the existence of this notion is not sufficient evidence of the objective existence of a world in the singular, let alone of the probity of using the notion to interpret and explain historical processes. Indeed, the historical record does not show one Muslim world integrated politically, economically, or intellectually, but a series of independent polities, all claiming to represent or speak for the one true Islam. That is not the same thing.

Ultimately, the 'House of Islam' is much like the 'Free World' of the Cold War. It is important because it was useful to ruling elites and to intellectuals articulating a political

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[60] AL-SARAKHSĪ, *al-Mabsūṭ*, 30 vols., (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2001), vol. 10, 71 and vol. 9, 136, cited by AHMAD, 'The Notions,' 21–22.

[61] DUNCAN B. MACDONALD et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, *Second Edition*, eds P. J. BEARMAN et. al., 12 vols., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), s.v. 'Djinn,' 547; AMIRA EL-ZEIN, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

vision of the world. But as the proponents of the Free World tend to insist on liberty and de-emphasise Jim Crow, napalm bombings, and union busting, medieval authors downplayed the social contests behind the 'House of Islam.' Yet, because medieval authors imagined politics as being the purview of elites, historians must take their representations of their societies with a grain of salt.

The Law of Islam

References to the Abode of Islam are often tied to arguments that employ Islamic law as a shorthand or stand-in for Islam. A few points should suffice to explain why that is not a satisfactory option. First, when systematic legal thinking (*fiqh*) began to develop, more than a century after 'the birth of Islam,' it took the form of competing formulations, which eventually became 'schools' (*madhāhib*, sing. *madhhab*).[62] Naturally, selecting one, two, or even six schools as 'representative,' let alone 'orthodox,' as many still do, involves taking sides with some against others—in the past and the present. Doing so might also be anachronistic and teleological, since it would project later assumptions, values, and social arrangements onto a pre-*madhāhib* period and cast the development of *madhāhib* as somehow necessary. Plus, if the law is to be the measure of Islam, then Islam was born no earlier than the second 'Islamic' century.

Moreover, 'Islamic law' was not applied uniformly across all those areas historians have thought of as 'Islam' or 'Islamdom.' And this is not only because there were non-Muslims living 'under Islam' or that there were rebels fighting imperial Islamdom under the banner of a 'truer' Islam. In the period of imperial conquests, military commanders (*amīr*, pl. *umarā'*) signed peace treaties with a host of cities and tribes that acquiesced to surrendering and paying a tribute.[63] Resistance to imperial armies and refusal to submit led to defeat, enslavement, and the imposition of even heavier 'Islamic' tributes. These arrangements, which lasted for decades in some areas, did not follow a single Islamic rule, or law, and were often the reflection of a military leader's judgement and his ability to enforce them. Long after the conquests had ended, a process of homogenisation of fiscal practices at a regional level spearheaded by local Muslim elites created a new map onto which 'schools of law' charted the reach of their influence.

Severing the ties between the law and politics undermines our ability to appreciate the mobilisation of Islam in the course of struggles between particular groups and its utilisation for administering peace. For example, in 698, the Byzantine elite that had ruled Africa boarded ships and left Carthage forever. They left behind a complex agricultural

[62] See for example WAEL HALLAQ, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); BROCKOPP, *Muhammad's Heirs*.
[63] DONALD R. HILL, *The Termination of Hostilities in the Early Arab Conquests, A.D. 634–656* (London: Luzac, 1971).

slave society subject to serious social upheavals.[64] In important ways, the leaders of the new Umayyad province of Ifrīqiya replaced the class of runaway slave owners. The new elite maintained the system of agricultural production that had prevailed, although the surplus found its way to their own coffers, which explains the emergence of a number of very wealthy 'patrician' families like the Fihrīs tied to the imperial conquests.[65] But whatever usage was made of Islam in the early period, it did not lead to the elimination of slavery. Like the runaway Byzantine elite and the local Christian elites, 'Saracens' maintained slavery in that corner of Africa. One technical problem they faced was that 'Islam' did not allow Muslims to enslave other Muslims. Some Berbers who had converted were still treated as if they were non-Muslims, their conversion declared insincere or superficial.[66] But when the rebellions against the exactions of 'Arab' families like the Fihrīs ended, the ostensibly anti-imperial dynasties that emerged in the region did not abjure slavery, but only limited its application to those that they considered to be non-Muslim. Not only did 'Islam' not put an end to social inequalities, Islamic law was one of the mechanisms that maintained and reproduced them, slaves not being the only ones on the receiving end of the ruling elites' Islam. For Muslim elites ruled over all members of their societies, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.[67] They coerced lower sectors of society into providing their labour by force, threat of force, or by ideological means, including the manipulation of the category Islam.

Consulting the Muslims themselves is thus not without its challenges. Muslim elites deployed Islam to secure their domination over 'their' societies. They built mosques, erected minarets, taught their fellow Muslims to accept their fate, and, with the wealth they accumulated from everyone else, they built aqueducts, canals, and schools for all Muslims. They patronised outstanding intellectuals who articulated ideas about theology, law, and politics. On the other hand, their opponents, whether they belonged to the elite or not, also used Islam and ideas associated with it to resist them. That is why the record shows that Islam served the justification and naturalisation of social inequalities and resistance to them. Unsurprisingly, the same applies to modern representations of the Muslims themselves.

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64 See KAEGI, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*; JONATHAN CONANT, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439–700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); CORISANDE FENWICK, *Early Islamic North Africa: A New Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

65 The descendants of the conqueror 'Uqba b. Nāfi' al-Fihrī tried to establish an autonomous polity in Ifrīqiya. For other regions, see RICHARD W. BULLIET, *The Patricians of Nishapur* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); MICHAEL MORONY, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

66 NICOLA CLARKE, "'They Are the Most Treacherous of People": Religious Difference in Arabic Accounts of Three Early Medieval Berber Revolts,' *eHumanista* 24 (2013): 510–25, https://www.ehumanista.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.span.d7_eh/files/sitefiles/ehumanista/volume24/ehum24.clarke.pdf.

67 See LOUISE MARLOW, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

An Islam for History

There is an obvious need to historicise the term Islam and address the ways Mediterraneanists use the category. In this regard, retiring commonplaces that are obviously de-historicising seems like a reasonable, if transitional, goal. The absence of Islam from medieval Latin texts can help establish a historically sensitive 'minimal position' that eschews teleology, anachronism, Eurocentrism, and other sins against history.

Likewise, acknowledging that medieval Arabic authors mobilised the category Islam in the course of specific social contests can better situate the usages found in the sources. Putting social contests at the centre of a historicising approach to an ongoing making and remaking of Islam renders visible the production of those lenses that colour both historical sources and modern interpretations. Doing so also sheds light on operations designed to obfuscate and conceal these very processes. Historians already know this to be true, although, as seen, obstacles to the realisation of this knowledge abound.

The discourse on Islam in Mediterranean Studies is not uniform, homogeneous, or simple. It has a long and complicated history, draws on a variety of discourses, and finds sustenance in prevailing ways of representing the world. Although largely limited in scope, this article invites greater, or just better, stocktaking and discussion of the multiple layers of determination that weigh on our collective ability to conceive of the Mediterranean in historical terms.

When historians represent a variety of medieval societies as 'Muslim,' or worse as 'Islam,' they imply that once a society 'has Islam,' everything else about it is secondary to its being Islamic. They also give the impression that 'Islamic' societies resemble each other in some fundamental sense, and that their histories make sense when lumped together. An examination of such commonplace assertions and the assumptions on which they rest could help historicise Islam and more securely guard against the intrusion of ideological and other ahistorical matter into historical research.

Finally, an investigation of how the issues raised here are entangled would far exceed what a traditional historiographic essay does. The organisation of academic fields, the institutional basis of historical research, the implication of educational institutions in furthering governmental and nongovernmental ideological agendas, and the politicisation of Islam in public discourse come to mind as considerations that would be worth exploring. Incorporating these concerns into our thinking can help us gauge the extent to which prevailing usages of the category Islam are responsible for undermining the efforts to constitute a critical historical field.