

Pathways to the Persianate

Assef Ashraf

The conference that gave rise to this volume began with a series of questions: does the term “Persianate” work as a conceptual framework beyond language and literature, to such areas as habitat, economy and trade routes, and political and material cultures? Are there tangible historical ties in the pre-modern and early modern eras among such diverse regions as Anatolia, the Iranian plateau and the greater Khorasan region, the Caucasus, the southern rim of Central Asia, Western Xinjiang, and the Indian subcontinent? Can these ties create a viable field of study beyond Middle Eastern, Central Asian, South Asian and East Asian studies to underscore subtle interregional connections and *longue durée* commonalities? What circumstances, on the other hand, reoriented these regions and helped break up the Persianate ecumene in modern times?

When Marshall Hodgson wrote of a “Persianate zone” in *The Venture of Islam*, he conceptualized it as a region that stretched from the Euphrates to the Oxus rivers – a region defined primarily along literary and cultural lines. But for a region whose defining feature was supposed to be language, it is curious that there was no Persian-language equivalent for the term “Persianate.” The peoples living in the so-called Persianate zone did not call themselves “Persianate,” even if they may have been dimly aware of a shared cultural space. Thus it has fallen to modern-day scholars to flesh out Hodgson’s conceptualization. In the years since Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam* appeared, the term has seeped into the academic lexicon and established itself as a category of analysis. Following a couple decades during which the term was used infrequently, since the 1990s the term’s use has risen sharply.¹ It appears in job postings, journal names, as a keyword in articles, and in the descriptions of academic programs, centers, and organizations. A consensus has emerged that something called the “Persianate world” did exist.

The essays in this volume attest to the healthy state of the field. Taken as a whole, they are representative of three main topics around which scholarship on the Persianate world has tended to cluster. Broadly defined, these are: the production of culture, literature, and knowledge, and their diffusion in space and time; modes of religious thought and practice, as well as networks of

¹ See the graph in Said Amir Arjomand, “A Decade of Persianate Studies,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 8, no. 2 (2015): 312.

religious authority; and finally, what may be categorized as the limits and ends of the Persianate world. There is considerable overlap between these three categories, but they nevertheless are the poles that serve to orient the lay of the land.

Despite the burgeoning scholarship, there has been less of an effort to reflect on why there has been a turn, in the last two decades, towards the idea of the “Persianate.” This essay attempts to do just that. It is not an attempt to question the term’s validity, nor is it purely an academic exercise in tracing its use; rather, it is intended as a brief introduction to this volume and at the same time an attempt to offer a constructive path forward for what Persianate Studies – the field devoted to studying the Persianate world – can be.

Two main arguments are put forward here. The first is that the turn towards the “Persianate” as an analytic category has not emerged in a vacuum, but has been part of a broader trend in historical writing – namely, the turn toward what has alternatively been called world, global, or transnational histories. The question of what difference, if any, exists between these approaches is important, but for now a definition offered by the editor of the *American Historical Review* in 2006 encapsulates what I mean: “these approaches ... all are characterized by a desire to break out of the nation-state or singular nation-state as the category of analysis, and especially to eschew the ethnocentrism that once characterized the writing of history in the West.”² The contributions in this volume make clear the resonance of the “global turn” upon Persianate Studies.

At the same time, Persianate Studies now sits at a crossroads. As more scholars deploy the term “Persianate” in their work, and as it becomes established in the academic landscape, it only seems appropriate to consider the question of where do we go from here? This essay therefore ends by drawing attention to topics that remain underexplored, and suggesting ways in which the field can move forward.³ Specifically, more explicitly comparative and connected approaches to historical writing offer potentially productive avenues for future research.

2 C.A. Bayly et al., “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441.

3 This essay does not provide a comprehensive review of the scholarship in Persianate Studies, since that is a topic that has received recent attention. See Arjomand, “A Decade of Persianate Studies.”

1 Persianate History as Global History

The synergy between Persianate Studies and a globalized vision of history can be traced back to Marshall Hodgson himself. The subtitle of *The Venture of Islam* was “Conscience and History in a World Civilization,” and even a cursory look at any of the work’s three volumes makes Hodgson’s ambitions evident. As early as 1978, Albert Hourani drew attention to the influence that the University of Chicago, Hodgson’s academic home, and the scholars at the institution must have had on Hodgson and his approach to history:

[I]n a sense this book could have been written nowhere except at the University of Chicago in the 1950’s and 1960’s. There are echoes in it of Nef on industrial civilization, McNeill’s *The Rise of the West*, Eliade’s studies of religion, Adams’s *Land Behind Baghdad*, and the discussions of sociologists and anthropologists.⁴

But Hodgson’s impetus for a new approach to world history actually pre-dated his time at Chicago. In 1944, when he was just nineteen, he wrote an essay in which he criticized what he called the “provincialism” of world history. Why is it, he asked, that “when we read ‘world history’ we read chiefly of Europe?” He provided three possible explanations: “snobbish misunderstanding”; Europe’s greater influence in the world since the Industrial Revolution; and “the heart of the matter: our civilization is European.”⁵ Not surprisingly, he rejected all three. The 1950s and 1960s may have been a time when world history was in vogue at the University of Chicago, but Hodgson may have in fact been ahead of the curve – or, at least, somehow outside it.⁶

Now, however, we live in a post-national age. Modern national boundaries, far from seeming like sensible parameters for historical inquiry, instead appear to distort our understanding of those topics which are not easily contained

4 Albert Hourani, “Review of *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* by Marshall G.S. Hodgson,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (January 1978): 53.

5 The essay was published posthumously with the title “World history and a world outlook” in Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke III (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 35–43.

6 Charles Issawi, for example, described *The Venture of Islam* as “thoroughly idiosyncratic” in an essay that otherwise was a thoughtful, and largely positive, response to the work. See Charles Issawi, “Europe, the Middle East and the Shift in Power: Reflections on a Theme by Marshall Hodgson,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 4 (October 1980): 488.

within those boundaries, including migration, finance, trade, and the environment. The circulation of people, goods, and ideas seems to get easier and faster as each day goes by – notwithstanding the efforts of some to control that movement – and historians have understandably been drawn to exploring the roots of those patterns. Terms like “transnational” and “transregional” abound in the humanities and social sciences, in journal articles and book titles, in academic programs and centers, and even in marketing and consumer-targeted campaigns.⁷ One result of this trend, it has been noted, has been to study imperial projects of the past. Empires, as historical polities that ruled over vast regions and multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious populations, are sometimes viewed as offering possibilities for a post-national order.⁸

The turn to the global and transnational is much more encompassing than imperial history, however. In fact, its breadth is implied in the lack of clarity over what, exactly, the parameters of the field are. Scholars who write in the global and transnational mode tend to use numerous terms, sometimes interchangeably, when referring to their own work. As David Armitage points out, “[h]istorians in all fields have more recently been moving towards studies they describe variously as international, transnational, comparative, and global.”⁹ Do these terms mean the same thing? If not, what are the distinctions in their meaning and scope? It seems clear that by “transnational” scholars suggest that their studies are not limited by national boundaries, but can there be “transnational” frameworks to historical processes and phenomena before the advent of nation-states?¹⁰ How is global history different than its older iteration, world history? By giving primacy to transnational networks and links, do we run the risk of de-emphasizing local events as drivers of historical change, and of writing generalized history?¹¹

7 For just one example, see Ibrahim Sirkeci, *Transnational Marketing and Transnational Consumers* (Berlin and New York: Springer, 2013).

8 On this point, see Alan Mikhail and Christine M. Philliou, “The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (October 2012): 721.

9 David Armitage, “The International Turn in Intellectual History,” in *In Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 232.

10 On this point, see Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?,” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011).

11 This is a critique offered in David A. Bell, “Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 1–24. See also David A. Bell, “This Is What Happens When Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network,” *New Republic*, October 25, 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/114709/world-connecting-reviewed-historians-overuse-network-metaphor>.

Like global historians, scholars of the Persianate world also use a variety of terms to describe the scope of their work. Programs for the biennial Association for the Study of Persianate Studies (ASPS) conferences have included terms like “transnational,” “translocal,” and “comparative” in their abstracts, while a recent book on Persian literature in eighteenth-century Mughal India speaks of “trans-temporal,” “trans-spatial,” and “trans-regional” concepts and processes.¹² The introduction to a guest-edited volume of the *Journal of Persianate Studies* on popular resistance and protest movements in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and British India highlighted the “trans-imperial trade” and “trans-national and inter-regional connections” between West, South, and Central Asia.¹³ The wide range in terms suggests that, like those who work on global history, it may be time to reflect upon what is meant by these terms.

Despite the ambiguity of the terminology, it must be noted that scholars who deploy these terms generally are driven by admirable intentions: to reclaim Persian language and culture out of the confines of Iranian nationalism. Among the most significant results of our post-national moment has been the effort to break out of a form of historical writing within Iranian Studies that emphasized the exceptional features of Iranian history. According to this model, Iran was defined by how it was and continues to be *different* from the countries and regions in its geographic neighborhood: Persian is the primary language (not Arabic), Shi’i Islam is the dominant religious creed (not Sunni Islam), and Iran has existed as an idea and a civilization for thousands of years (it is not a product of nineteenth – and twentieth-century colonial projects). There is, of course, truth in all of these features, but similar differences may be discerned among other nation-states in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Few historians consciously describe Iran in these terms today, but the framework of exception has left an undeniable mark on Iranian Studies. By over-emphasizing Iran’s differences – by swinging the pendulum too far in the direction of exceptionalism – and not actively and vigorously engaging with debates that animate historical scholarship on other regions of the globe, what has resulted is a misperception that Iran is so different as to be beyond the pale of comparison. It is telling, for example, that the Safavid Empire, which ruled Iran from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, is often omitted from scholarship that compares the major empires of the early modern world, and

12 Prashant Keshavmurthy, *Persian Authorship and Canonicity in Late Mughal Delhi: Building an Ark* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 143, 162.

13 Ranin Kazemi, “Popular Resistance in the Persianate World: Subalterns, Outlaws, and Radicals in the Long Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 7, no. 2 (2014): 179–88.

indeed, the question of whether the Safavid polity constituted an “empire” is one that still generates debate.¹⁴ In a groundbreaking book that compares the history of popular protests across the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Middle East, Iran is only discussed in the context of the 1979 Revolution, despite other significant episodes that deserve attention: the Babi movement, the Tobacco Revolt, and the Constitutional Revolution.¹⁵ This is not meant as a criticism against works that omit Iran; any scholar undertaking a comparative project faces difficult choices in determining what to include or exclude in their analysis. Rather, the burden must fall on historians of the Iranian and Persianate worlds to illustrate how and why what they study, and write on, can advance our understanding of big, historical, and methodological questions.

2 The Culture of the Persianate World

Surveying the essays in this volume – as well as Persianate Studies more generally – we can see that historians have begun swinging the pendulum back the other way, by highlighting the links, connections, and points of comparison between Iran and surrounding regions. So far, historians have emphasized what we can call “culture-based” connections: in the form of literature, art, architecture, and religion. Persianate culture was produced, read, absorbed, replicated, imitated, and expanded upon in societies stretching from Anatolia to the Indian Subcontinent – regions that today have been carved up into numerous nation-states. By studying the contours of this culture, historians must cross those national boundaries – a point made explicit upon the launch of a new academic organ for Persianate Studies, the *Journal of Persianate Studies*.¹⁶ The “culture-based” connections that have tended to dominate the field to date also appear prominently in the essays in this volume. As Abbas Amanat argues in the first chapter, the Persianate world can be defined by the four features, or “modalities,” that define it: a shared political culture based upon manuals of statecraft literature, an affinity for antinomian and Sufi tendencies, an appreciation for Persian literature, and a common material culture.

The production and spread of Persian culture and knowledge, in the form of canonical texts, offers perhaps the clearest way to trace the contours of the

14 On this point, see Rudi Matthee, “Was Safavid Iran an Empire?,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53, no. 1/2 (March 2010): 233–65.

15 John T. Chalcraft, *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

16 See Said Amir Arjomand, “Defining Persianate Studies,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 1–4.

Persianate world. By following the circulation these Persian texts, the extent to which they were received and read, and the ways in which they were imitated or adapted to fit local culture, one can begin to delimit a common cultural sphere. As Richard Eaton's essay demonstrates, Persian poetry, dictionaries, and material culture – what he calls an “aesthetic and literary sensibility” – shaped the textual and built environment of South Asia for hundreds of years. For Eaton, this was a Persianate “cosmopolis” in which a social and moral order informed by Persian texts created a shared cultural space, akin to the Sanskrit cosmopolis described by Sheldon Pollock or to the Hellenized cosmopolis of the Mediterranean basin.

The diffusion of Persian literature went beyond canonical texts, however, as Thibaut d'Hubert's essay illustrates. D'Hubert's contribution explores the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cultural centers around the Bay of Bengal, namely, in the Deccan, Bengal, Arakan, and the Malay world, and the ways in which Persian narrative stories were received and adapted by local authors, who nevertheless continued to be influenced by what he describes as a “traditional cosmography” – a cosmography that characterized the region as a “land of marvels.” The literature and culture that emerged as a result could be described as hybrid, or to put it in d'Hubert's own words, a “vibrant and inquisitive vernacular Muslim cultural ethos (*adab*).”

But of course culture is not expressed solely through literature and art; its traces can be detected in other facets of life, including religion. It is in this context that A. Azfar Moin's essay on Sufi saint shrines and Waleed Ziad's contribution on Naqshbandi Sufi networks make their mark. Moin traces the development of the cults of Sufi saints in the post-Mongol Islamic world, and demonstrates that Sufi saint shrines were central to the political cultures of the Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman Empires. In a sense, Moin's essay is a reminder that the case for a so-called “barrier of heterodoxy,” in which Safavid Iran was supposedly “isolated” from the rest of the Islamic world by virtue of its conversion to Shi'ism in the sixteenth century, has been exaggerated in the scholarly literature.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Ziad's essay demonstrates that Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi Sufi networks expanded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as a result of the political vacuum created in Nader Shah's (d. 1747) wake. Dual processes contributed to the expansion of these Sufi networks: on the one hand, local rulers relied on the “intellectual infrastructure” of the Sufi networks to facilitate their own political and state-building

¹⁷ Robert D. McChesney, “Barrier of Heterodoxy?: Rethinking the Ties between Iran and Central Asia during the Seventeenth Century,” in *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society*, ed. Charles P. Melville (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 231–67.

agendas, and on the other, the Naqshbandi represented themselves “as a synthetic tradition, both trans-regional and local.”

The contributions outlined above draw attention to the similarities and links in culture, knowledge, and art across regions. But the final three contributions in this volume provide different lessons, challenging us to reflect upon where the ends of the Persianate world may or may not lie. The two essays by Hirotake Maeda and Joanna de Groot offer what de Groot calls an “exploration of fluid relationships between the [Persianate and non-Persianate] elements.” Maeda, by tracing the family network of the Enikolopians across Russia, Iran, and the Caucasus, and de Groot, by examining the views of the Baluch, in nineteenth-century Iran, challenge the reader to consider whether a “binary opposition” in categories, between “Persianate” and “non-Persianate,” is a helpful way to conceptualize the Persianate world. Nile Green’s essay, for its part, provides one example of where and when the Persianate world falls apart: in this case, in mid-nineteenth-century Hyderabad, when self-styled “progressives” abandoned Persian in favor of Urdu, especially when it came time for them to write about the technological and scientific innovations of Europe. Green’s example demonstrates that the shift to Urdu in South Asia developed as much through an organic and aesthetic process as through any top-down political agenda. Temporally speaking, the three essays point to the nineteenth century as a period of transformation in the Persianate world, an era that of course also witnessed the rise of nationalism.

One additional point should be made. If our present post-national historical moment has contributed to the growth of Persianate Studies, then it must be said that a related influence, also evident in the contributions in this volume, has come from the interest in moving beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. The development of Persianate Studies may also be seen as an overdue corrective to the inadequacy of modern academic disciplines. According to this view, disciplines like “history” and “sociology” developed at a particular moment and in a particular place – nineteenth-century German universities, for the most part – when nationalism was on the rise, and therefore seemed not only suited, but also designed, to study nation-states like Germany, or France, or Iran. The framework of the “Persianate,” therefore, offers an opportunity to break free not just from national boundaries, but also forces scholars to move beyond the strictures of outdated academic disciplines.¹⁸

The turn to interdisciplinary approaches is not new, nor are the parameters to the approaches any clearer or better defined than those of global history. And again, like the influence of a global historical framework on the

18 See Arjomand, “Defining Persianate Studies,” 1.

conceptualization of the “Persianate,” an interdisciplinary approach is evident in Hodgson’s own work. Certainly, in those academic fields that are most closely related to Persianate Studies – Islamic Studies, Middle East Studies, Central Asian Studies, South Asian Studies – an interdisciplinary approach has been evident from the very beginning. In fact, it has been part of their core and founding missions. A measure of the strengths of this volume’s essays is that despite all being “historical,” by virtue of the sources they draw upon and the questions they seek to answer, they defy easy disciplinary categorizations.

3 Comparisons and Connections

The task now is to determine if the framework of the Persianate works “beyond language and literature” – to return to the questions with which the conference at Yale began – and to understand how the Persianate world compares to other supra-national regions. One way to proceed would be to apply, more systematically, the methods of comparative history to Iranian history. This approach offers numerous benefits, but perhaps the most important one is that instead of imposing the framework of a Persianate world, defined by language and literature, upon a certain geographic region and then searching for other shared features after the fact, comparing one region with another and searching for similarities and divergences will lead organically to an appropriate analytic category.

One of the great strengths of the comparative method is in its ability to identify the uniqueness of different societies, but a uniqueness that also demonstrates points of similarity.¹⁹ A truly comparative method is in fact the best antidote to the framework of exceptionalism discussed above. Azfar Moin’s *The Millennial Sovereign* provides a good example of the potentials for comparative history. In the book, Moin argues that Safavid and Mughal kingship and court culture must be understood in the context of “the cultivated manners, habits, and tastes ... that shaped elite Persianate ‘social personality’ across large swaths of Asia.”²⁰ He in turn explains the formation of that Safavid and Mughal political culture by drawing on historical and art historical methods. Yet he is also careful to point out where the cultures diverged.

19 See Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1964). For more on the “logic of hypothesis testing” that lay at the core of Bloch’s historical approach, see William H. Sewell, Jr., “Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History,” *History and Theory* 6, no. 2 (1967): 208–18.

20 A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 56.

Just as important is the comparative method's tendency to encourage avenues of research beyond language and culture. By exploring points of comparison and contrast *within* the Persianate world, historians will be required, by default, to more frequently ask questions about the material, economic, and political aspects of the region. Here the scholarship on the Persianate world is much less well developed.

The possibility of exploring questions having to do with subjects like trade, economy, and politics raises the issue of being able to find the necessary sources to answer these questions. Over the past twenty years, historians of the Ottoman Empire have outpaced scholars of neighboring regions in exploring a range of historical questions, in large part because of the wealth of sources at their disposal. A recent ten-volume compilation and translation of seventeenth-century court records from Istanbul is remarkable, not only for the work done by its editor, Timur Kuran, but for its sheer depth and the potential research pathways it opens for scholars.²¹ It is difficult to imagine a similar project being possible for the Safavid or Mughal Empires, let alone earlier polities. The majority of sources that have been discovered for these other empires are narrative, literary, or visual in style: chronicles, local histories, biographical dictionaries (*tazkereh*), poetry, painting, and architecture. There are also the European sources, including diplomatic reports, mercantile sources, and travelogues. Nevertheless, and until new genres of sources emerge, even the more "traditional" types of sources can be used in innovative ways to answer new questions.

If a comparative method can be used to highlight ways in which societies and regions shared features beyond language, then equally important is its ability to illustrate differences and divergences. Being attuned to differences within the Persianate world, and to change over time, is essential if scholars are to avoid monolithic and unchanging depictions of Persianate culture. It may be true that a certain region of the globe was united by the fact that some – perhaps even most – of the people spoke Persian, and had an affinity for culture influenced by Persian canonical texts. But we should not close the door to the ways in which that zone does *not* hold together as a unified category of analysis. This seems to have been, at least in part, the motivation behind a series of conferences held at UCLA in 2015 and 2016 on the geographical, social, and

21 Timur Kuran, ed., *Mahkeme kayıtları ışığında 17. yüzyıl İstanbul'unda sosyo-ekonomik yaşam / Social and Economic Life in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul: Glimpses from Court Records*, 10 vols. (Istanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2010).

epistemological “frontiers” of Persian learning.²² The use of the term “frontier” conjures the scholarship, dating to the nineteenth century, on the American West as a zone between metropolitan culture and the wilderness, but it also alludes to more recent scholarship on China, the Ottoman Empire, and Europe that has emphasized the “mobility and fluidity” of frontier zones.²³ It bears reminding that an uncritical emphasis on linguistic and cultural unity beyond national boundaries can have unintended political consequences. Recent references by Russian political leaders to a “Russian world” (*russkii mir*) that extends to, for example, the Ukraine because a majority of Ukrainians speak Russian (in addition to Ukrainian), lays bare what those political ramifications can be.

Differences and divergences are just as important for their role in guarding against the impulse to replicate the “civilizational” model of earlier eras. By tracing the diffusion of Persian culture across regions, historians have moved their analyses beyond national boundaries, but once that has been accomplished – once we agree that Persianate culture was not confined to Iran – then the challenge becomes to write about cultural categories without framing them as inherent and fixed. This was, of course, the problem with some of the older ways of writing about Islam as a civilization, or as Richard Eaton has described it elsewhere, “as a ‘tradition’ that was static, timeless, and uniform, and by implication, impervious to the dynamics of change or historical process.”²⁴ A recent study of Chandar Bhan, a seventeenth-century Mughal historian and literary scholar, again illustrates the potentials for Persianate Studies.²⁵ By placing Bhan in the context of the Indo-Persian secretarial class (*monshi*), and drawing attention to the fact that he was a Hindu Brahman who served a succession of Mughal emperors, Rajeev Kinra challenges modern-day notions of castes in India, and heeds Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s call to avoid falling into

22 See <http://www.1718.ucla.edu/events/geographical-frontiers/> (accessed September 7, 2017).

23 For a comparison between China and the Ottoman Empire, see Peter C. Perdue, “Empire and Nation in Comparative Perspective: Frontier Administration in Eighteenth-Century China,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 5, no. 4 (November 2001): 282–304. For a helpful introduction to the scholarship on frontiers more broadly, see Daniel Power, “Introduction: A. Frontiers: Terms, Concepts, and the Historians of Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” in *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*, ed. Daniel Power and Naomi Standen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 1–12.

24 Richard M. Eaton, “Islamic History as Global History,” in *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, ed. Michael Adas (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 3.

25 Rajeev Kinra, *Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

the trap of placing at the center of analysis “multi-millennial ‘civilizational constants,’” which are seen as defining a region.²⁶

The urge to refute monolithic portrayals of culture is embedded in the very origins of the academic study of the Persianate world. Left unspoken by the authors of this volume’s contributions is how an understanding and appreciation for Persianate culture goes some way toward enriching our collective knowledge of the Islamic world. One of Hodgson’s own objectives in *The Venture of Islam* was precisely that: to “rescue Islam” from the traditional perception of Islamic culture as Arabic and shari’ah-minded, defined in the “pristine period of Mecca and Medina” with its later forms all being derivative. Persianate culture, with its vernacular literature, non-doctrinal and antinomian religious beliefs and practices, and ethnically diverse peoples, would not have fit that traditional image of Islam, propagated both by what Clifford Geertz called Islam’s “Western scholastics, the Arabists” and “its own, the ulama.”²⁷ But now that same logic can be extended to the study of the Persianate world: an understanding of the diversity of culture within the Persianate world will enrich our understanding of that world.

The diversity of culture within the Persianate world brings our attention to another way a comparative mindset can benefit Persianate Studies: by drawing on the questions that animate the study of other supra-national regions and bringing them to bear upon the Persianate world. Richard Eaton’s contribution in this volume begins to do this work, by comparing the Persianate cosmopolis to Sheldon Pollock’s Sanskrit cosmopolis. But there is much more that could be done. Topics having to do with trade and the circulation of people, goods, and ideas, have been the subject of considerable scholarship in fields of inquiry like the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean worlds, but arguably the chief contribution of these supra-national frameworks has been their ability to serve as laboratories to study cross-cultural encounters and exchange. Historians have explored topics like travel,²⁸ trade,²⁹ diplomacy,³⁰ commodity exchange,³¹

26 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 1997): 742–43.

27 Clifford Geertz, “Mysteries of Islam,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 11, 1975, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/12/11/mysteries-of-islam/>.

28 Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

29 K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

30 E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

31 Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985); Marcy Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

tolerance,³² conversion,³³ and communication³⁴ in order to illustrate the ways in which communities across space were held together, or pushed apart. At times, these worlds were characterized by “connected” historical phenomena in seemingly disparate places, but at other times they were defined by contested and violent interactions.³⁵ It remains to be seen if the Persianate world can offer similar lessons.

Finally, a comparative framework would also provide space for the continued use of the category of “Iran” while avoiding the criticism of engaging in nationalist historical writing. It is certainly true that an unfortunate nationalist tendency can be detected in some scholarship on Iran. But there must still be room for historical analyses of Iran, especially if those studies focus on topics like imperial and state formation, political economy, and governance. The Safavid and the Qajar states ruled over a territory they themselves referred to as Iran (*mamalek-e mahruseh-ye Iran*), even if Safavid and Qajar rulers’ conception of Iran was mutable and different than the modern nation-state that shares the name. There are other challenges to writing about the state in the wake of the social and cultural turns – for example, it is no longer acceptable to reify the state or view it as being autonomous from society – but any study that takes the state as its center of analysis will have to grapple with the term “Iran” and what it meant for the rulers who governed it. The logical question then is: can histories of the Persianate world be written without dismissing the category of Iran, and can histories of Iran be written without falling into the twin traps of parochialism and essentialism?

Thus the path moving ahead for Persianate Studies should be to maintain the attention to comparative history without resorting to simplistic definitions

32 David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

33 Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

34 John-Paul Ghobrial, *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Gagan Sood, *India and the Islamic Heartlands: An Eighteenth-Century World of Circulation and Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

35 Sanjay Subrahmanyam has explored almost the full spectrum of interactions between communities. See, for example, his *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); *Three Ways to Be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2011); “Turning the Stones Over: Sixteenth-Century Millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges,” *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 40, no. 2 (June 2003): 129–61.

of Persian culture, and to continue exploring the largely uncharted territory of topics beyond language and literature, while not dismissing the continued relevance of Iran as an analytic category. Based on the essays in this volume, there is much reason to be optimistic about the future of the field.