EXCURSUS

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

Much has been written on historiography and sources, on memory permeating events selectively, and amnesia consciously deciding and unconsciously overlooking events. For example, religious pluralism was always inherent in it but, because of theological and historiographical constructions remained largely unrecognised. Yet, why have mutual interrelations and entanglements been bypassed in so many grand narratives? Why was it taken for granted that religions mutually excluded each other, that an individual could have one religion alone? The “other”, constructed as counter foil, has not only an invisible history but also refers to a substantial influence on the comparative study of religion. Formation of a historical opinion has an inextricable connection between the presentation of past facts and the attitude towards the present. Facts can variously be described as researching, the narrative, the didactic and interpretative.

One finds master narratives of an Islamic history as against divergent ‘sect histories’. Thus narration of the history of Islam in xyz is not an innocent process. It gets the scientist involved in a multi-layered process in which the narrative becomes inevitably rhetorical and the representation of the past is involved in a discourse of power, again dependent on non-academic discourses.

Polyvocality of history in the Muslim context is as difficult to document as in any other “church history”. The idea has all along been to develop a master narrative of Islamic history\(^1\) in annals, biographies and dynastic narratives. Issues most often discussed related to authenticity (from the beginning to ca. 1500 C.E.), and its relation to the sciences of the sayings of the Prophet and discrete anecdotes and reports (akhbar).\(^2\) Historical sources of that time called “narrative accounts” (i.e. \(ta\'rikh\)—chronicles) did try constructing a connected narrative of events,

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\(^1\) Standard work for early Muslim historiography is Franz Rosenthal: *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Leiden: Brill 1968 (2. revised ed.).

such as Tabari’s (died 923) *History of Prophets and Kings*. This correlated with the collective tradition of *akhbar*: instead of interpreting the past, the author was to determine which of the reports about an event were acceptable on the basis of which he compiled them. Thus, we are left with little raw material but with constructed historical “facts” as Muslim historians were more concerned with political legitimacy, and the translation of the Prophet’s redemptive mission into reality rather than with interdependence of social strata and norms. Normative Islamic historical thinking was informed by the idea that history would serve religion and law, a tendency with powerful after-effects. Single events and comprehensive narrations of Islamic history or universal chronicles were the major genres.

With the collapse of the Abbasid Empire, the expansions of Muslim rule and rise of the ‘Gunpowder Empires’ the historiographical hegemony of the Arabic language was increasingly challenged by the Persian language and tradition. Its impact was seen in linguistics and in themes and images carrying the Sassanian context. Historiographically, two trends emerged: the Arab tradition of hadith (*‘ulum al-hadith*) concerned with the accuracy of data, going back to the great tradition of biography, useful for necessary posopographic studies to prove the authenticity of the chain of transmitters (*isnad*). The Persian context brought in the Sassanian tradition of epic writing with a “dramatic resolution” (i.e. Firdawsi (died 1020) and his epigones) which was—in contrast to Arabic history writing—not bound by religion. As a quasi-secularised language, Persian could create a literalised chronicle. Both traditions, the “Arabic history of the age” and the “Persian history of the kings”, however, focused on political prudence and moral admonition, which had an effect on historiography. New historiographical genres developed as well: the dynastic chronicles dealing with political wisdom and royal glorification, were mostly composed by men from scribal groups affiliated to the court. They provided little information on the non-elites. Thus, the literary production of political chronicles mainly reflected courtly life. Zia al-Din al-Barani (1285–1357) may be counted among such writers. Considered the most important political

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