Field Notes

Confessions of a Middle East Studies Specialist

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As I started my sophomore year at Harvard, my goal was to learn everything about something I knew nothing about: the Middle East. Why? Because my stock-in-trade in high school had been my hoard of obscure information about history. The more obscure, the better. Someone advising freshmen on choosing a major had remarked that very few people knew Arabic. (Except for Arabs, of course, but who cared anything about them?) So instead of studying the medieval history of Europe as I had planned, I decided to study the medieval history of whoever the Arabs were.

There was something inconsistent about studying the Middle East from the very start, a chasm between how the contemporary scene and the early centuries of Islam were approached, and virtually no concern, beyond political chronicling, for the middle period between roughly 1200 and 1800. I enrolled in two year-long lecture courses, one called Islamic Institutions and the other a survey of the Middle East covering the geography, anthropology, economics, religion, and history of all periods from ancient to modern times. A young professor of comparative religion, Robert Bellah, taught the former course and shocked the classroom on day one by announcing that the two required books would be the recently translated Muqaddima of Ibn Khaldun and La cité musulmane by a French priest named Louis Gardet. “Is there anyone who does not read French?” No hands went up—Harvard pretense precluded confessing ignorance—but a lot of students did not show up for the second class. And I
shouldn't have; it was my first French book, and two years of *la plume de ma tante* in high school had taught me little.

Bellah, a specialist on Japanese religion, had spent some time at McGill learning about Islam and introduced me and my classmates to a fairly static vision of that faith. Gardet’s notion of *la cité* echoed St. Augustine’s *City of God* and dovetailed with works on religious cultures—Ancient China, Ancient Judaism, etc.—by Max Weber, the German sociologist. Weber was then much admired in American academia for seeing religion, as opposed to Marxist dialectic, as the foundation of cultural identity and the functioning of society.

This view of Islam, as of other faith traditions, was the distillation of several generations of European scholarship in Oriental Studies. The terms “Orientalism” and “Orientalist” denoted this endeavor and were used in entirely positive fashion. I discovered that I could become an Orientalist if I learned Oriental languages, starting with Arabic, and immersed myself in the writings of Orientalists.

I do not remember anything in particular that Bellah said during that year. Of course, it was a long time ago. But I vividly remember specific things that Oscar Handlin taught in a course on American Social history that I took simultaneously. America, it seemed, had been in a continuous state of becoming for some two centuries. Waves of immigration, the opening of frontiers, class formation, social conflict, the myth of the Founding Fathers—how different this was from the seemingly static nature of Islam.

It took me many years to realize that the difference between Muslim stasis and American dynamism came from overarching visions of how to look at the world rather than from parallel scholarly efforts to chronicle social history. Of course, there were only two centuries of Handlin’s America as opposed to fourteen centuries of Bellah’s Islam. And there was all that Arabic to read. Wasn’t a masterful overview perhaps a better goal to aspire to than learning everything that had actually come to pass?

Not to a sullen undergraduate whose greatest desire was to know all the details.

The other course I took that year, the Middle East survey, could not have been more different. Not just from Bellah’s introduction to Islamic studies, but from Harvard College courses in general. A parade of a half-dozen or so professors gave a handful of lectures, each on their individual bailiwicks. Accompanying each cluster of lectures was a mimeographed handout listing recommended books, foreign words, chronologies, subject matter outlines, and so forth. At least two weeks were devoted to slide presentations introducing us to the geography of the region, though not to the people. Derwood Lockard, the course organizer and geography/anthropology presenter, studiously omitted