

Second Annual Levtzion Lecture

Perspectives on the Indo-Islamic World

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at Tel Aviv University)**

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Abstract

This lecture reviews five new and distinct perspectives that have so far emerged in the literature (scholarly and otherwise) on the Indo-Islamic world: the perspective of a clash of civilizations (two-nation theory); the perspective of accommodation and assimilation (one-nation theory); the perspective of a neo-Islamic world; the perspective of Islam on the periphery; and the world-historical perspective of geography. It argues that the fifth perspective validates elements of the preceding four but reveals them as one-sided and insufficient by themselves. The conclusion is that we need all five simultaneously.

תקציר

הרצאה זו סוקרת חמש השקפות חדשניות ונבדלות זו מזו, אשר הופיעו עד כה בספרות (האקדמית והאחרת) ביחס לעולם ההינדו-מוסלמי: השקפה של התנגשות הציוויליזציות (תאורית שתי האומות), השקפה של התאמה והיטמעות (תיאוריית האומה האחת); השקפת העולם הניאו-אסלאמי; השקפת האסלאם בפריפריה; וההשקפה העולמית-היסטורית של הגיאוגרפיה. ההרצאה קובעת שההשקפה החמישית נותנת תוקף למרכיבים של ארבע ההשקפות האחרות, אך חושפת אותן כחד-צדדיות וכבלתי-מספקות בפני עצמן. המסקנה היא כי יש צורך בכל חמש ההשקפות גם יחד.

Prof. Andre Wink is a Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, whose main research interest is the history of India and of the Indian Ocean area. His most important publication is *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, planned as a five-volume work which analyses the historical developments in India and the Indian Ocean in the period from the 7th to the 18th century. So far, the first three volumes have been published by E.J. Brill and by Oxford University Press. In addition, Prof. Wink is the author of *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Svarajya* (Cambridge University Press, 1986). During the 2005-2006 academic year, Prof. Wink was George L. Mosse Visiting Fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

It is a pleasure and an honor to be invited to deliver the second Nehemia Levtzion lecture here today. No scholar has done more than Nehemia Levtzion to advance the comparative approach to the study of Islamization. In what follows, my lasting debt to his work will be patently evident.

Let me begin by making clear what I mean by ‘the Indo-Islamic world’. I mean by that somewhat awkward term not just ‘Islamic India’ but something much larger than that: essentially the entire region extending from Afghanistan through all of South Asia and including the entire mainland as well as the islands of Southeast Asia, the ‘Indic’ world in other words – only a part of which went over to Islam. In a geographic sense, the Indo-Islamic world is roughly coterminous with Monsoon Asia.

The crude demographic facts of the Indo-Islamic world, thus defined, are well known. We are talking here about approximately two billion people, of which perhaps a fourth or a third are Muslims, and the rest mostly Hindus and Buddhists, or belong to a dozen or so much smaller religions. The broad implication of this demographic situation is that a majority of the world’s Muslims currently live in an Indic environment, where however they have historically been and continue to be a minority.

Divided as it is between two civilizations, the Indo-Islamic world is a badly neglected historical field. Compared to the Arabic-speaking heartlands of Islam, the Indo-Islamic world has been practically ignored. It was too Indian for the Islamicists. And it was too Islamic for the Indianists – who traditionally chose to focus on the classical, pre-Islamic age of Indian civilization. While neglected, however, the field of Indo-Islamic studies has nonetheless expanded over time, especially in the last

few decades. Even though it remains small by comparison with that of the Arab-Islamic world, we now have a substantial body of specialist studies focusing on this region. And we even have a fairly clear sense of a number of distinct perspectives emerging.

In this lecture I intend to briefly summarize the broad and distinct ‘perspectives’ or ‘paradigms’ that have so far emerged in our thinking about the Indo-Islamic world as a whole. These perspectives are often at odds with each other, or they may emphasize different aspects of our field of study, but they all have in common that they try to make sense of Islam as a minority religion in the Indic environment. I have identified a total of five such perspectives, and this number includes my own – which will come at the end.

1. A clash of civilizations. This is probably the oldest perspective we have and used to be known as the ‘two-nation theory’ (on which Pakistan was founded). It is still widespread, but I associate it largely with previous generations of scholars. These earlier scholars took as their starting point the writings of the great German comparative sociologist of religion Max Weber, who had proclaimed Islam a *Kriegerreligion* or ‘warrior religion’. A good example of someone who shared this perspective is John F. Richards, a prolific scholar of Indo-Islamic history, who also happens to have been my predecessor at the University of Wisconsin in the 1970s. In an article of 1974, entitled ‘The Islamic Frontier in the East: Expansion into South Asia’, Richards wrote: ‘...the extended interaction between two radically different civilizations, Islamic and Hindu/Buddhist, is comparable to the similar encounter of Muslim and Christian civilizations. European and Middle Eastern historians have long recognized the complexity, severity and intensity of the *clash between the two civilizations* [italics mine]...However, those scholars

concerned with Indo-Muslim history have been much less aware of a parallel frontier on the eastern flank of expanding Islam...The time depth, the continuity, and the cultural significance of this enormous human encounter have thus been underrated.’¹

Richards then goes on emphasizing the importance of the ‘extended military and political struggle’² in this encounter, presenting a long catalogue of battles, clashes, skirmishes, and raids undertaken by invading Muslims over hundreds of years in various parts of the Indian subcontinent. He also outlines the modes of Hindu resistance, and other reactions of fear, hostility and hatred evoked by Muslim aggression. He probes the reasons why the Muslims ultimately won, and some of the social and political as well as technological alterations that were the result of the Muslim conquest. But he is almost exclusively interested in the military encounter, viewed as the violent clash between two very different and mostly incompatible civilizations.

2. Politically correct America (1980s and 1990s). The generation of scholars that came immediately after John Richards adopted an almost diametrically opposite perspective. What happened in the field in the 1980s and 1990s is a good example of generational overthrow, although to some extent this perspective echoed the ‘one-nation theory’ as espoused by Mahatma Gandhi (among others).

According to this second perspective, the movements of Muslim armies and the use of force teach us nothing or very little about the growth of the most important Muslim communities in India or Indonesia.

¹ J. F. Richards, ‘The Islamic Frontier in the East: Expansion into South Asia,’ *South Asia*, 4 (October, 1974), (pp. 91-109), p. 91.

² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

It stresses not conflict but accommodation between the expanding Islamic world and Indian societies in the medieval and early modern periods. It looks at Islam as India-oriented, mystical and inclusive rather than Mecca-oriented, prophetic and exclusive.³ Sidestepping military history, it focuses above all on peaceful conversion, on Sufism, and on cultural syntheses of Indian art and literature with Islamic elements.

More particularly, this perspective emphasizes that in the demographically most important Muslim areas of India, in the Panjab and Sind, and in East Bengal, and to a large extent also in Indonesia, Islam spread among the rural masses not by force but by conversion among preliterate peoples on the ecological and political frontier of an expanding agrarian society. Conversion to Islam is seen not as a radical break with the past but as a form of accretion. Accretion is a form of incomplete conversion by which people add new deities or superhuman agencies to their existing cosmological stock. In terms of social organization, accretion entails no Muslim communal exclusiveness or even distinctiveness.

In the words of one proponent of this perspective, Richard M. Eaton, a historian at the University of Arizona, ‘whatever [ambivalence] urban intellectuals may have felt about Indian culture ... at the folk level millions of Indians were converting to Islam, or, more precisely, assimilating Islamic rituals, cosmologies, and literatures into their local religious systems.’⁴

If the proponents of the clash of civilizations perspective argued that the invading Muslims, in their iconoclastic fury, destroyed or

³ For this terminology, cf. A. Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture* (New Delhi, 2005), p. 107.

⁴ R. M. Eaton, *Islamic History as Global History* (Washington, D. C., 1990), p. 35.

mutilated thousands of Hindu temples and religious icons, this second perspective simply denied that there had ever been such a pattern of wholesale Hindu temple destruction by Muslims in India. That view was now attributed to Hindu nationalists like Sita Ram Goel, who relied on the suspect evidence of British colonialists like Sir Henry Elliot and Professor John Dowson, who in their turn wished to show their predecessors in a bad light.⁵ Not only was the evidence suspect, but the earlier colonial authors also failed to grasp that temple destruction in the written texts often served as a ‘rhetorical trope’. To quote the same author, Richard M. Eaton, again, ‘...by relying on evidence found in contemporary or near-contemporary epigraphic and literary evidence spanning a period of more than five centuries (1192-1729), one may identify [only] eighty instances of temple desecration whose historicity appears reasonably certain.’⁶ Eaton, further, warns that temples had always been natural sites for the contestation of kingly authority, even before the coming of the Muslims. The Muslims, far from being iconoclasts, just continued established patterns. Moreover, when in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Muslims raided South-Indian temple cities, they did that to acquire the extra resources they needed to fend off the Mongols on the northwest frontier – a temporary and legitimate expedient.⁷

In this second perspective, all other issues which have to do with Indian art and literature were revisited in a more or less similar fashion

⁵ For Sita Ram Goel’s views, see Sita Ram Goel, *Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them*, 2 Volumes (New Delhi, 1990-91).

⁶ R. M. Eaton, ‘Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States,’ *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 11:3 (2000), (pp. 283-319), pp. 296-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 297-8.

and with similar results. What happened to Sanskrit literature during the many centuries of Muslim rule? For all we know from the earlier scholarship and from early travelers and colonial observers, its fate was like that of Hindu temple architecture: it mostly atrophied or was destroyed and disappeared. In 1815, Mountstuart Elphinstone, for instance, reported from Peshawar about a remarkable mullah who was studying Sanskrit, ‘a language of which none of his countrymen know the name.’⁸ In another revealing passage, Francois Bernier, the French doctor who attended the Mughal court in the second half of the seventeenth century, reported from Varanasi that Sanskrit books were burned by the Muslims: ‘They [the Veda] are so scarce that my Agah, notwithstanding all his diligence, has not succeeded in purchasing a copy. The Gentiles indeed conceal them with much care, lest they should fall into the hands of the Muhammadans, and be burnt, as frequently has happened.’⁹ Yet, Sheldon Pollock, a professor of Sanskrit at the University of Chicago, wrote this in a recent article on ‘The Death of Sanskrit’: ‘The specific conditions for the death of Sanskrit ... are certain to be multifarious and sometimes elusive. One causal account, however ... can be dismissed at once: that which traces the decline of Sanskrit culture to the coming of Muslim power.’¹⁰

American scholars of these two decades (the 1980s and 1990s, and slightly more) have also tried to show that the whole phenomenon of Islamist violence, of Islamic jihad, can be understood entirely as a

⁸ M. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, 2 Volumes* (First publ. 1815; Karachi, 1992), I, pp. 82-83.

⁹ F. Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668* (Second edition revised by V. A. Smith, New Delhi, 1989), pp. 335-6.

¹⁰ S. Pollock, ‘The Death of Sanskrit,’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43, 2 (2001), (pp. 392-426), p. 416.

response to Western intervention. Again, earlier scholarship on, for example, the nineteenth-century Indo-Islamic reform movements had tried to demonstrate repeatedly and emphatically that such movements often resulted in systematic and organized violence against villages which would not submit to the reformist notion of an Islamic community. This was shown to have been the case for example with the so-called Padri movement which swept Sumatra and emanated from Aceh.¹¹ That movement was inspired by Muhammad Ibn `Abd al-Wahhāb of eastern Arabia and, like him, idealized the earliest Islamic centuries and deprecated all later developments. Padri leaders in the Minangkabau highlands of Central Sumatra used the typical instrument of Islamic revivalism, the jihad, and moved immediately to the final stage of the jihad, armed combat against unbelievers and those Muslims who did not conform to the puritanical Wahhabite views and practices, and who continued to indulge in cockfighting, gambling, and the use of tobacco, opium and alcohol. Yet, when Stephen F. Dale, a historian at Ohio State University, writes about the ‘suicidal jihad syndrome’ which has been in evidence for so long among coastal Muslim groups like the Mappillas of Malabar and the Acehnese of Sumatra, he is at great pains to show that this is not ‘due to the inherent fanaticism of Islam’ (as is the typical phrase in the colonial literature), but a reaction against Portuguese and Dutch interference in the pepper trade that for centuries had remained the unquestioned monopoly of these groups.¹²

¹¹ Ch. Dobbin, *Islamic Revivalism in a Changing Peasant Economy: Central Sumatra, 1784-1847* (London & Malmö, 1983).

¹² S. F. Dale, ‘The Islamic Frontier in Southwest India: The Shahid as a Cultural Ideal among the Mappillas of Malabar,’ *Modern Asian Studies*, 11, 1 (1977), pp. 41-55.

Many more examples could be given. The point is that recent scholarship in America (as well as elsewhere) on the Indo-Islamic world has produced a thoroughly sanitized perspective from which virtually all conflict is purged – except conflict generated by the West.

This represented a kind of generational overthrow, a kind of ‘overcorrection’ of the perspective of the earlier scholarship, which had often been diametrically opposed to it. The same tendency to ‘overcorrection’ of earlier, sometimes prejudicial and hostile, views of Islam and Muslims characterizes much of the American scholarship on the Muslim Middle East in the 1980s and 1990s as well. As Martin Kramer has argued, in these two decades Middle Eastern Studies in America have become ‘factories of error.’¹³ According to Kramer, the unanticipated outbreaks of the Lebanese civil war and the Iranian Revolution effectively led to a sweeping rejection of the then still commonly held modernization and development theories, leaving the field without a dominant paradigm, and vulnerable to academic insurgencies. In addition, according to Kramer, from 1967 onwards, the Arab-Israeli conflict made for a deepening politicization of the field. This was exacerbated in the late 1970s by the publication of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978). The intellectual agenda of *Orientalism* was to show that the Palestinians were but the latest victims of a deep-seated prejudice against the Arabs, Islam and the Orient more generally. This was ‘a prejudice so systematic and coherent that it deserved to be described as “Orientalism”, the intellectual and moral equivalent of anti-Semitism.’¹⁴ Said, in effect, defined this term as ‘a supremacist ideology

¹³ M. Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (Washington, D. C., 2001).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

of difference, articulated in the West to justify its dominion over the East...racism of a deceptively subtle kind.’¹⁵ It was this message that was taken up by a generation that was already disillusioned with America on account of its role in Vietnam. The result was a blanket condemnation of all forms of Western imperialism and ancillary discourses of knowledge and a mostly uncritical defense of their alleged victims.

3. New World. I want to move on to another perspective which is distinctive and different from the preceding two: that the Indo-Islamic world is a New World, a *neo*-Islamic world. This perspective originates from the observation that in the Indo-Islamic world the vast majority of Muslims are converts to Islam, and relatively recent converts to boot. It culminates in the conclusion that this Islam of converts is somehow derivative of the real Islam of the Arabs and therefore deeply alienated. We find this perspective not only in the annals of historical scholarship but, more explicitly, in the work of V. S. Naipaul, in particular in his travel account *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples*.¹⁶ Naipaul summarizes it as follows: ‘Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert’s world view alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ V. S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (London, 1998).

unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil.’¹⁷

Naipaul sees conversion to Islam as ‘a kind of crossover from old beliefs, earth religions, the cults of rulers and local deities, to the revealed religions – Christianity and Islam principally – with their larger philosophical and humanitarian and social concerns.’¹⁸ In the West this process has had a parallel in late antiquity, in the conversion to Christianity. In the Indo-Islamic world, however, the crossover to Islam is still going on. ‘It is the extra drama in the background,’ writes Naipaul, ‘... the steady grinding down of the old world.’¹⁹

In line with this, Naipaul also argues that there has never been anything like a final Islamic conquest of India. This is why in the eighteenth century, the peoples who rose to power after the Mughal decline – the Marathas, the Sikhs, and so on – were still able to champion their own faith against the Muslims.²⁰ The British period then came to be a time of Hindu regeneration. This was the beginning of the intellectual distance between the two communities. That distance has grown with independence. In the end, it was ‘Muslim insecurity’ that led to the call for the creation of Pakistan.²¹ But the creation of Pakistan ‘went at the same time with an idea of old glory, of the invaders sweeping down from the northwest and looting the temples of Hindustan and imposing the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

²¹ *Ibid.*

faith on the infidel.’²² And in the school history books, writes Naipaul, the history of Pakistan would become only an aspect of the history of Islam. The Muslim invaders, and especially the Arabs, would become ‘the heroes of the Pakistan story.’²³ ‘It is a dreadful mangling of history. It is a convert’s view; that’s all that can be said for it. History has become a kind of neurosis.’²⁴

In summary: from this perspective, only an Arab can be a real Muslim. The convert is a pseudo-Muslim; he invented Arab ancestry, denying his real self, obliterating as much as possible his own real history; his Islam is a kind of neurosis; and, in the final analysis, his Islam is not part of an integrated identity, hence ‘it can be easily set on the boil’.

In an interview with *The New York Times* of 28 October 2001 – just after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and just after having won the Nobel Prize for literature – Naipaul was asked: ‘Are you surprised by Osama bin Laden’s support in Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Iran – countries you wrote about in your travel books on Islam?’ Answer: ‘No, because these are the converted peoples of Islam. To put it brutally, these are the people who are not Arabs. Part of the neurosis of the convert is that he always has to prove himself. He has to be more royalist than the king, as the French say.’²⁵

If Naipaul became the most celebrated proponent of this perspective, it is in fact much older than him and it once had a wide

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *The New York Times, Sunday Magazine*, 28 October 2001, p. 14.

resonance, as a literary theme, and in the colonial imagination more generally. The theme of the devout or zealous Arab towering over the inarticulate natives of the remote East-Indian islands, and stirring up Islamic revolt, is well-known from the works of Joseph Conrad. In *Lord Jim*, for example, Conrad brings up a wandering stranger, an ‘Arab half-breed,’ Sherif Ali, who...’ on purely religious grounds, had incited the tribes in the interior (the bush-folk, as Jim himself called them) to rise, and had established himself in a fortified camp on the summit of one of the twin hills. He hung over the town of Patusan like a hawk over a poultry yard, but he devastated the open country.’²⁶

Around 1889, a Dutch Islamicist and influential adviser to the Dutch colonial government, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, wrote that ‘the credulity of the masses in Java enables foreign Muslims too easily to seduce them into religious-politics movements and if the agitators are Arabs, they can always be sure of a certain amount of success.’²⁷

The British government in India was similarly haunted by the idea that the Muslim population could ‘easily be set on the boil.’ In November 1914, upon entering the First World War, the Turkish Sultan, the spiritual head of all Sunni Muslims, gave in to German prompting by declaring a jihad on Britain and her allies. A jihad manifesto was issued that was particularly aimed at *Indian* Muslims. The German Foreign Ministry hoped that the Sultan’s proclamation would ‘awaken the fanaticism of Islam’ and might lead to a large-scale revolution in India.²⁸ The British

²⁶ J. Conrad, *Selected Works* (New York, 1994), p. 219.

²⁷ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century* (Leiden, 1970), p. 219.

²⁸ For these events, see D. Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York, 1989), esp. p. 96 ff; C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Verspreide Geschriften, 6 Volumes* (Bonn & Leipzig, 1923-27), III, pp. 257-92, 327-54.

worried about this possibility a great deal. For Kitchener, the War Minister, already traumatized by the 1898 uprising in the Sudan and with the Indian Mutiny of 1857/8 still in mind, the possibility that a jihad might be hurled against Britain was a recurrent nightmare. Over half of the world's Muslims were under British rule: seventy million in India alone, constituting a disproportionately large part of the Indian army; millions more in Egypt and the Sudan, along the Suez canal route to India, policed by tiny British garrisons that would be swept away in a revolt. These wartime fears became the subject of a novel, *Greenmantle*, by the Director of Information, John Buchan, in which Germany makes use of a Muslim Prophet, 'of the Koreish, the tribe of the Prophet himself,' who appears in Turkey and instigates a jihad against Britain's empire.²⁹ The novel dramatizes the fear that the jihad would ignite the Indian Muslims: 'There is a dry wind blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark. And the wind is blowing toward the Indian border ... There is a Jihad preparing ... There will be hell let loose in those parts pretty soon. Hell which may spread. Beyond Persia, remember, lies India.'³⁰

In actual fact, when the Turkish jihad was proclaimed in 1914, nothing happened, no parched grasses were ignited – but it is striking that fears of a German-instigated jihad persisted for a number of years. If such fears eventually subsided during the 1920s and 1930s, it was not least because Adolf Hitler was an outspoken opponent of the strategy of mobilizing India's Muslims against the British empire. As Hitler explains in *Mein Kampf*: 'The "Holy War" can give our German *Schafkopf*

²⁹ J. Buchan, *Greenmantle* (London, 1916), p. 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

players the pleasant thrill of thinking that now perhaps others are ready to shed their blood for us – for this cowardly speculation, to tell the truth, has always been the silent father of all hopes; in reality it would come to an infernal end under the fire of English machinegun companies and the hail of fragmentation bombs.³¹

And during the Second World War, as is well known, Hitler resorted to a quite different strategy to subvert the British Empire in India. Rather than instigating a jihad among Indian Muslims he relied on the Japanese to do the job, by planning an invasion of India from the East.

Even so, in more recent times, it was the Arabs again who turned up on the Indian frontier to instigate a jihad against the infidels. Supported by the Americans, this time, and by the Saudis, they became involved in proxy warfare against the Soviets in Afghanistan. This led to a confrontation that many were quick to call the New Great Game. In these final days of the Cold War, the Arabs and their leader Osama bin Laden were widely perceived to have pulled the strings of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as their offshoots in Kashmir, and it was they who were regarded as the driving force behind the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, ‘the grinding down of the old world’.

4. Peripheral Islam. The preceding perspective almost imperceptibly merges with another common perspective on the Indo-Islamic world: that it is a *peripheral* (and in the East Indies even a *provincial*) part of the Islamic world. This perspective is another consequence of the historic equation of Islam with Arabs and the Middle East. Throughout history there has always been a large chorus of voices which denounced the poor quality of Islam in the Indic world, its somehow not getting up to the

³¹ A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York, 1971), p. 658.

Arabian standard, imagined or real. Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, a theologian of the time of Akbar and Jahangir, is just one example of the many theologians and jurists who lamented the deplorable state of Islam in India. Another example, in the middle of the eighteenth century, was the great reformist theologian Shah Waliullah who complained that as a Muslim he was living ‘in exile’ in India, although his ancestors had settled there centuries before. Muslim self-respect has always been low in the East Indies. Snouck Hurgronje observed in Mecca that ‘most Javanese lack in an international gathering of Muslims the necessary self-respect which partly explains the contemptuous treatment they often receive ... They start by regarding their own home as a dunghill in comparison with pure, holy Mecca, because the outer forms of life here (in Mecca) bring to mind the Muslim faith; there often the heathen past ... [And] at the same time they sacrifice without inner strife every patriotic feeling, every inclination to native custom, to the uplifting consciousness of solidarity with the great Muslim Empire ... they look down on the “impure” society to which they once belonged...’³²

Mountstuart Elphinstone did not fail to note in the early nineteenth century that in the Afghan-Durrani dominions India did not have ‘a great reputation for learning’ and that for Islamic education Afghan mullahs preferred to travel to Bukhara, which was a great seat of Muslim scholarship, or traveled even much further.³³ In the eighteenth century, as was also keenly highlighted by Naipaul, Indian Muslims had become increasingly worried about the future of the Islamic religion and their own loss of power in India. Their last hopes were fixed on the Durrani

³² Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka*, p. 233.

³³ Elphinstone, *Kingdom of Caubul*, I, p. 250.

king Zaman Shah, who in 1797 advanced to Lahore. ‘Every Musulman’, reported Elphinstone, ‘even in the remotest regions of the Deccan, waited in anxious expectation for the advance of the champion of Islam.’³⁴

5. World History. I now come to the final perspective, that of world history. This is the perspective that I have tried to pursue, over the past twenty years or so, in my multi-volume book *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*.³⁵ It aims to understand Islamic history as a form of world history, while at the same time attempting to re-introduce geography as a key factor in historical understanding. This geographical approach to world history has been pioneered by such authors as William H. McNeill, Edward Whiting Fox, Jared Diamond, and, among Islamicists, by Marshall G. S. Hodgson.

The remaining question to be addressed in this lecture will therefore be: what does the geographical approach to world history contribute to our interpretation of the Indo-Islamic world; and how does this fifth perspective relate to the other four perspectives that have been reviewed earlier on. I will try to show that the fifth perspective takes us back to the other four, and that it accommodates something of each of them.

From a geographic perspective, the Indic or ‘Hindu-Buddhist’ world is primarily seen as a sedentary, agricultural, and settled realm with a plurality of earth religions and a polytheistic pantheon – not unlike what we had in the settled parts of the Middle East prior to the rise of Christianity, in other words in the world of late antiquity. This Hindu-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 316.

³⁵ A. Wink, *Al-Hind-The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, 3 Volumes* (Leiden and Boston, 1990-2004); (Paperback, Oxford & New Delhi, 1991-2006). Two more volumes are forthcoming.

Buddhist world – overwhelmingly a world of settled agriculture and dense populations in monsoon-fed and irrigated river plains – has a very long pedigree, underwent many mutations, but it still exists. And much of its sacred geography is still intact too, its monumental temples included. Everything here belonged to a particular time and place, and did not have a universal appeal. In that respect, it provides a sharp contrast with the strict monotheism, universal aspirations, and global outlook of the Islamic world. In short, Hinduism (as also the ‘Hinduized’ Buddhism of medieval and modern times) did not have a global outlook, whereas Islam did.

That there is such a contrast between Hinduism and Islam in terms of a global outlook is not just an Islamic or Western prejudice but has been observed by Hindus (or at least by some of them) as well. For instance, in a recent book called *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* (2005), Narendra Singh Sarila, an Indian diplomat and a Hindu, makes the following sweeping observation: ‘Until the early part of the twentieth century, Indians belonging to the Hindu faith, on returning home from journeys abroad, were required to take a dip in the holy Ganga as part of a purification ritual. If contact with the outside world was shunned to such a great extent, how could they be expected to know much about other people...? In this respect, those Indians who were converted to Islam gradually acquired a different frame of mind. Islam was a universal faith with a global perspective ... Even an uneducated Muslim in an Indian village would have heard about Jerusalem, Istanbul, Baghdad, Bokhara, and even Cordoba, besides of course Mecca and Medina. However Islam-centric, and however limited

their vision, the Muslims of India were much more the citizens of the world than their Hindu compatriots.’³⁶

This is a sweeping observation, no doubt, but one that is supported by all the evidence. Early legal digests like the Baudhayana Dharmashastra or Manava Dharmashastra already imposed restrictions on maritime travel for high-caste Hindus and prescribed the avoidance of those who had undertaken such travel. A Brahman who went to sea was to be excluded from the religious festivals and was also no longer allowed to participate in the caste meals.³⁷ By the beginning of the early modern era, Portuguese sources testify that all sea-faring merchants in Malabar were Muslims and that ‘the Gentiles do not travel by sea.’³⁸ And, to illustrate this further, in 1826, a regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry refused to board ships to cross the ‘dark waters’ to Burma, a trip that would have defiled the high-caste Hindus who comprised most of the regiment.³⁹ There have been, to be sure, historically important diasporas of Hindu and Jain commercial and financial castes on the African coast, in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and in Central Asia, and Iran, and in Malaysia, but these were almost always made up of sojourners, exclusively male, who would return home after a stay of a few years abroad, and did not settle down permanently, did not proselytize, maintained an isolated cultic life, and did not intermarry with the local population.⁴⁰

³⁶ N. S. Sarila, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 365-6.

³⁷ Wink, *Al-Hind*, I, p. 73.

³⁸ Wink, *Al-Hind*, II, p. 278.

³⁹ S. Wolpert, *A New History of India* (Seventh edition, New York, 2004), p. 216.

⁴⁰ See S. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550-1900* (Leiden, 2002).

Beyond the Indian subcontinent, in places like Cambodia or Java, the main centers of Indic civilization were invariably inland, in the areas of wet-rice cultivation, where ‘Indic’ or ‘Hindu-Buddhist’ meant sacerdotal, religious sanctification of permanent, agricultural communities which kept themselves at one remove from the ‘lawless’ maritime world and from the seaboard that thrived on trade.⁴¹ Hindu Java, in the fourteenth century, as one observer noted, ‘cherished no other ideal than to remain as it was, shunning all change.’⁴² Its kings saw themselves as the custodians of a religiously sanctioned social order which was based on tributary flows from the periphery to the center and defined all other movement – inside and outside the territorial state – as subversive.⁴³

As I said before, this Indic world of sedentary peasant societies was similar to the sedentary societies that developed in, for example, Egypt and other parts of the Mediterranean in antiquity. They all produced monumental temples, some, as in the case of Egypt, also monumental tomb architecture. From Egypt to Cambodia and Java, these were conservative social formations, obsessed with the idea that the world was created out of chaos and that a settled and ordered way of life had only been established with infinite hardship. They understood that the immanent forces of chaos would overwhelm their world if the correct religious rites and rituals were not performed regularly in the shrines and temples.

⁴¹ Wink, *Al-Hind*, I, pp. 334-58; II, pp. 365-80; III, pp. 215-43.

⁴² B. Schrieke, quoted in Wink, *Al-Hind*, III, p. 223.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

In the geographic perspective of world history, the rise of Islam represented a decisive shift in the relationship between this sedentary, polytheistic world of peasant agriculture and what was traditionally its most threatening source of chaos: the world of the nomads of the great arid zone, and the world of seafaring people.

The world's largest continuous arid zone, as Hodgson emphasized, runs from Morocco and the Sahara, to the Levant and Iran, and on to the steppes and deserts of North China.⁴⁴ It also extends southwards deeply into the Indian subcontinent. About half of the Indian subcontinent belongs to the arid or semi-arid zone.⁴⁵ Looking at this arid zone as a geographic continuum, how do we know that such a shift in the balance between this nomadic/arid zone and the sedentary/Indic social formations occurred?

We see it in the near universality of a horse-warrior revolution in the high Middle Ages, the changing modes of warfare, the spread of mounted archery, and attendant phenomena.⁴⁶ We also see it in the rise of new and eccentrically located capitals on the interface of the nomadic and sedentary worlds.⁴⁷ This too was a worldwide phenomenon, ranging from Vienna to Tabriz, to Beijing, and, in the Indian subcontinent, to Delhi, Devagiri, Warangal, Dvarasamudram, and to Bijapur, Golkonda and Vijayanagara. These new capitals were all located on the fringes of the arid or semi-arid zone and could mediate between sedentary investment

⁴⁴ G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 Volumes (Chicago & London, 1974), II, p. 71 ff.

⁴⁵ Wink, *Al-Hind*, III, pp. 82-83; J. J. L. Gommans, 'The Silent Frontier of South Asia, c. A. D. 1000-1800,' *Journal of World History*, 9/1 (1998), pp. 1-23.

⁴⁶ Wink, *Al-Hind*, II, esp. 79-110.

⁴⁷ Gommans, 'Silent Frontier'; J. J. L. Gommans, 'The Eurasian Frontier After the First Millennium A. D.: Reflections along the Fringes of Time and Space,' *The Medieval History Journal*, 1/1 (1998), pp. 125-43; Wink, *Al-Hind*, III, p. 95.

and the mobilization of the resources of military entrepreneurs, merchants and pastoralists. And we see the same shift in the rise to political power of new, post-nomadic elites: Turks and Mongols to be sure, but also pastoral people from the arid uplands of the Indian peninsula that emerged under such dynasties as the Yadavas, Hoysalas, and Kakatiyas, as well as those of Vijayanagara.

In addition, as I also indicated, we observe a parallel shift in the balance between seafaring people or ‘sea nomads’ and the agricultural world – at about the same time. Here too, the course of Islamic expansion was determined by geographic space, more specifically by empty space: if it did not follow the vagaries of the world’s arid zone, it generally followed the sea lanes.⁴⁸ Islam arrived in the Indic world either through the arid zone or by the sea.

From the point of view of Hindu sacred geography, these domains were morally and, in many respects, functionally equivalent. Both represented the frontier of settled, that is, of civilized life. Like the desert, the sea was ultimately a wilderness, a place where there was no community and where the individual was free from the constraints of community life. This was where the ranking order of settled society broke down and where the environment necessitated permanent movement.

The rise of Islam on the Indian Ocean seaboard is thus evidence of the same shift in the balance between nomadic/mobile people and the settled, agricultural order. Among the coastal and maritime Muslims, the hierarchy of social ranks came to be determined by the tradition of physical mobility and participation in trade. Probably they originally inserted themselves in local society by a special Islamic institution which

⁴⁸ Wink, *Al-Hind*, III, esp. pp. 96-118.

was particularly vigorous among the Muslims of the Maldives and Calicut, and which was known as *mut`a*, a ‘temporary marriage.’

It is striking to see that the ethos of the Muslims of the harbor towns was the exact opposite of the isolationism, xenophobia and rural orientation of the dominant Hindu society in Malabar.

Mobility, of either kind, however, precluded rootedness and hence ensured lasting marginality. At the same time, the late conversion of Indic populations occurred on the fringes of the Hindu orthodoxy of the agricultural realm and often did remain mere accretion. And this is why, from the geographic perspective, there has always been that sense of insecurity that struck V. S. Naipaul, and the recurrent fear on the part of the Muslim population of the Indo-Islamic world of being overwhelmed by non-Muslim or Indic traditions older than Islam and more broadly supported. This sense of insecurity runs deep and can be traced back from the present conflict in Kashmir and the nuclear arms race between Pakistan and India, to the Partition, through the reform movements of British India and Dutch Indonesia, to the eighteenth-century Hindu Renaissance, to Aurangzeb’s Islamization policies, to Akbar’s de-Islamization policies, and beyond, to the volatile and short-lived, post-nomadic dynasties of medieval India, as well as to a succession of Indo-Islamic states with outspoken Shivaistic and Buddhist features in Indonesia. The same sense of insecurity explains why there is also, in the Indo-Islamic world generally, a sense of compromise, a sense of being on the periphery. In the end, therefore, the geographic or world perspective on Indo-Islamic history does not dismiss any of the other perspectives as irrelevant but recognizes that there is something to be said for each of them. There *was* a clash of civilizations and it is continuing to this day. At some level Indo-Islamic civilization *is* derivative of Arabian Islam. And there was also a good deal of assimilation and accommodation with

local cultures (or ‘earth gods’), even though, as Nehemia Levtzion (in contrast to so many recent revisionists) clearly perceived, ‘diversity ... did not break the unity of Islam...’⁴⁹

⁴⁹ N. Levtzion, ‘Toward a Comparative Study of Islamization,’ in: N. Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam* (New York & London, 1979), (pp.1-23), p. 1.

The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies

The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies was established late in 2004 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Center strives to encourage and initiate research regarding Islamic religion and civilization, from the advent of Islam in the seventh century C.E. until today, in the Arab world, elsewhere in the Middle East, in Asia and Africa and also in the West. In order to fulfill this goal, the Center organizes research groups, conferences, seminars, and lectures, supports individual and group research, distributes scholarships, and encourages dialog between scholars of Islamic studies and related fields. Islam is understood not just in the narrow sense as a religion, but also as a culture and civilization, and thus the Center will deal with such subjects as religious thought and practice, material and intellectual culture, politics, society and economics. To this end, the Center supports inter-disciplinary research with scholars in religious studies, history, the social sciences, law and other fields. Innovative research projects within established disciplines are also encouraged and supported. The Center directs some of its activities towards the general public, in order to bring about greater understanding of Islamic religion and civilization. The publications of the Center seek to reach a wide audience of scholars as well as the interested public.

Since its founding in the 1920s, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has had a proud tradition of Islamic, Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, today continued mainly in the Institute of Asian and African Studies in the Faculty of Humanities, but with cooperation with colleagues also in the Faculties of Social Sciences and Law. Scholars from the Hebrew University in these fields have a world-wide reputation for their research and publications. Hundreds of students, including many dozens of graduate students, are enrolled in various programs dealing with these subjects.

Much of the impetus for the establishment of the Center comes from the desire of colleagues and friends to perpetuate the memory and continue the work of Professor Nehemia Levtzion, who passed away in August 2003. Professor Levtzion was a member of the Institute of Asian and African Studies and a noted scholar of the history of Islam in Africa and the social history of Islamic religion and culture. He was also well-known for his public activities in the sphere of academic administration and related matters, both within the Hebrew University and on a national level.

The Annual Nehemia Levtzion Lectures bring distinguished international scholars to the Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies to deliver a talk on a subject of broad interest in the field of Islamic studies. The Levtzion Lectures are held in cooperation with leading academic institutions in Israel. The first Levtzion lecture was delivered by Prof. Michael Brett in January 2005, and was published in 2006 under the title: "The Islamisation of Egypt and North Africa".