

Islamic Books

A Research Blog about Manuscripts, Printed Books, and Ephemera in Arabic Script

From Language to Nation, from State to Religion

The historical occasion for this [conference](#) is the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Columbians Richard Gottheil and A. V. Williams Jackson in 2012. Their initial hire in 1886 provides its starting date. Gottheil was a Semitist and Jewish Studies scholar who was particularly interested in Syriac, Arabic, and early Islamic history. His colleague Jackson was a historical philologist with a focus on the language of the Avesta. Jackson's philological work led him to the exploration of Iranian and Indian history as the context of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. Jackson and Gottheil did not think of themselves as specialists of Islam. But their work on religious minorities in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Muslim societies in the Middle East and South Asia had the unintended consequence of introducing, in an oblique way, Islamic Studies into the Columbia curriculum. Gottheil's successors were Arthur Jeffrey, a scholar of the Quran, and Joseph Schacht, a scholar of Islamic Law. With regard to Jewish Studies at Columbia, the beginning is usually dated to the 1929 appointment of Salo Wittmayer Baron (1895-1989) as professor of Jewish history. Columbia, however, struggled until the end of the 1950s with recruiting a suitable successor to Jackson, in particular after the retirement of his student and immediate successor Louis Henry Gray in 1944.

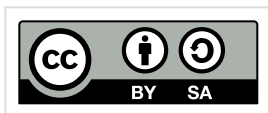
Against this backdrop, the program is divided into three units. The first panel will cover the era between 1886 and 1969. The closing date is the year in which Joseph Schacht passed away. During this era, the study of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish as the three classic languages of the Islamic civilization was the gateway to historically grounded research on all aspects of Middle Eastern, African, Central Asian, and South Asian history and culture, including Islam. Moreover, while in Europe and North America, scholars concentrated on the written heritage of Islamic civilization, reformers and intellectuals in Muslim societies embarked on the project of creating modern national literatures in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and so forth. Throughout the twentieth century, newly constituted states took immense pride in their national languages. Optimism prevailed despite all the challenges, and the general expectation was that, carried along by societal progress and economic development, the national language would support the creation of a national community which, in turn, could accommodate religious traditions including Islam.

The second panel offers a number of case studies about the interaction between Islamic Studies and other disciplines. After 1945, the study of Muslim societies in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia reflected the new political realities of the Cold War era. American and European scholars of Islam could now choose between two competing academic frameworks: departments of national languages, such as Arabic, Persian, or Turkish Studies, on the one hand, and on the other hand, departments defined by social science methodology, in particular Anthropology, Religious Studies, History, Sociology, or Political Science. In addition, many American institutions decided to take federal funding in order to build interdisciplinary Area Studies programs which were primarily defined by geographic boundaries. While governments in Europe and North America tried to utilize religion in general and Islam in particular as an additional means of weakening the influence of communism in the Second and the Third World, some political opposition movements in Muslim societies began to organize resistance against their failing governments within the tradition of Islamic political theory.

The concluding roundtable will explore the current state of Islamic Studies, and hopefully also venture into imagining its future. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, significant Muslim minorities in all societies of Western Europe and North America make it irresponsible to approach Islam as an exclusively non-western religion. The concept of Islamic Studies as historical research on the Islamic civilization in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia may therefore only remain meaningful in subfields, such as the study of Islamic art. In general, Islamic Studies seems on the verge of being subsumed under Religious Studies, while in the United States the official label of Middle Eastern Studies has been criticized as an expression of the Area Studies mindset. The roundtable's institutional context is Columbia's effort to transform itself into a global university, while erasing the last vestiges of its Cold War Area Studies programs. During the last years, the University has founded Global Centers outside the United States, and there are now Columbia satellites in Istanbul, Amman, and Mumbai. In September 2012, the Area Studies Library within the Columbia Libraries system was renamed Global Studies Library.

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