

FOR A METHODOLOGY
OF ISLAMIC STUDIES

ISLAM SEEN BY G. VON GRUNEBAUM

It is certainly not easy to decide whether Moslems are right or wrong to take as a point of departure for an analysis of their culture the works of "Orientalists." As it happens, "Orientalists" are Westerners, and can be defined by foreigners as those whose topic of research is Islam.

The disadvantages can be detected almost at once: such research often turns out to be an ideological critique, in the dullest sense of the term. The result of considerable intellectual effort is almost invariably valueless. Western orientalism is not western "knowledge" applied to a specific subject; in it one can observe a narrowing of the methods used elsewhere. This can be attributed to various reasons: the structure of the research, the choice of postulates, the objectives being sought etc... The 'caste' of the Orientalist, which constitutes a part of the bureaucracy, is accordingly subject to broad determinations which conspicuously limit the possibilities of creating new methods of approach, or even the application of already existing

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

methods.¹ The end result of this is that any critique of Orientalism by Moslems rarely manages to isolate the methodological bases of the specific viewpoints, with a view to rejecting, adopting or using them for other objectives; it remarks upon certain analyses, judgements and descriptions in a specific sense, and associates them directly either with the major political debates which currently separate the West from Islam, or with religious controversies of yesterday. Consequently, and by implication, it adopts the restrictive epistemology—which is often far behind the general evolution of western knowledge—of what it is superficially analysing. Just as the Orientalists are independent of the Church and of modern universities, so their Moslem critics, be it modernist or apologist, form a special 'caste' which is not the *Ulama* class, and even less the active intelligentsia of Moslem countries.

There is, however, one advantage to the critical scrutiny of the work of Orientalists, if one considers it at a certain level. This is that it inevitably steers towards a new form of *munāzara* (dialectical controversy), towards an awareness of the conditions favorable to the achievement of a truth which can be universalized. Without, at this stage, embarking on a lengthy discussion about the existence or non-existence of such a truth, one can nevertheless state there are only two possibilities in this area: either the definition of this truth, or an infinite diversification of the various viewpoints. One can of course easily isolate those non-Moslem Orientalists who have imperialist designs. But what should one make of those Orientalists who are scattered more or less all over, and whose international standing increases year by year, in Eastern Europe, China, Japan, and Latin America? Within the body of Islam itself, how is one to reconcile the Shiite and the non-Shiite viewpoint? or the Turkish viewpoint on Arab Islam with the Arab viewpoint on the Ottoman Caliphate? Again, within the Arab camp, the same cultural fact can be, and already is, the object of differing evaluations.² If we do not want the fragmentation of research

¹ What C. Wright Mills says in *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959, chap. V. about sociologists in general can be applied more particularly to the Orientalists as a specific group.

² As examples of these differences of perspective: Fazlu Rahman, *Islam*, London, 1966; Henri Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Paris, 1969;

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and study to culminate in a form of cultural protectionism, in which each party will keep its patrimony for itself and forbid anyone else to have access to it, we must be prepared to follow certain new rules in our *munāzara*. We should not forget that research can only be progressive when the polemical situation is clearly understood and well organized.

II.

If the framework of our critique is determined in this way, why have we chosen Gustave von Grunebaum? Essentially because he stands at the intersection of several orientalist traditions. Educated in Vienna, he has inherited the whole philological and historicist tradition of the German school, which was a formidable opponent for the Moslem reformers; thanks to the cosmopolitan tradition of the Austrian capital, however, he has also benefited from the experience of other European schools: French, English, Italian and Russian. He later emigrated to the United States, where he attended the University of Chicago. This University is extremely influenced by German sociology, and in effect it functions in this field as the breeding-ground for teaching-staff at other universities. Chicago is well-known for its research in the field of epistemology, the methodology of social sciences, general sociology, anthropology, the sociology of religion, in other words in all the branches of learning in which the Germans of the Wilhelm era excelled. In this environment, von Grunebaum changed from being a philologist and specialist in classical poetry into an anthropological student of Islam. As often happens in the United States, anthropologists are swiftly summoned to positions of responsibility. Von Grunebaum left Chicago and went to Los Angeles where he directed a center for the study of the Near-East. It is here that he is encouraged to apply his general observations on Islam to the contemporary world. Although in this new setting he did undergo the influence of the political sciences, he nevertheless maintained a certain independence of method, which we shall have to emphasize.

Homa Pakdaman on *al-Afghānī*; Nūr al-Dīn Zeine, *Arab Turkish Relations*, Beirut, 1958; Anis Sayigh, *al-Hasbimiyyūn*, 1966, and Moh. Ghazzālī, *Haqiqat al-qawmiyya al-arabiyya*, 1969.

The exemplariness of von Grunebaum's work, as far as inspiration is concerned at least, issues from the diversity of elements which nourish it: a solid classical Graeco-Latin education, complemented by a good knowledge of Byzantium; a familiarity with the main languages of Islam: Arabic, Persian, Turkish; a diversity of methodological elements: philology, the sociology of culture, anthropology, political sciences. And furthermore, by moving from a German to an American setting, and verifying what was happening with him in the study of other fields (the Slavic countries, China, Latin America), von Grunebaum was very conscious of the need to redefine the methods of Islamology.

Because of this exemplariness, which, once again, does not refer to the results, but to the inspiration, nothing is to be gained from making a superficial criticism of his work, or from focussing on his individual and collective prejudices. Rather we should go straight to the bases of his vision, to the challenges he thrusts at Islam. We should note in passing that, although his personal sympathies might extend to several aspects of the Islamic life, towards the type of traditional Moslem in whom he could see the perfect personification of a certain antihumanist humanist, he will never let himself descend to the bad taste of sycophancy. The more time passes, and the more the material and political renaissance of Islam is visible, the more negative become von Grunebaum's opinions, and the more blatant his challenges. But this attitude is certainly preferable to the other sort of attitude which conceals self-interested motives.

III.

When one determines the methodological bases of our author, we can find that, at a certain level, he is very conscious of his presuppositions, but that at a deeper level, he is far from being explicit, believing, as he clearly did, that certain definitions are evident. It is precisely this implicitness to which we should draw attention at a certain stage in our analysis.³

³ This is not an exhaustive study of the work of von Grunebaum. The following are the works utilized: *Islam, Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition* (referred to subsequently as *Isl.*), London, 1965; *Mediaeval*

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From the outset of his scholarly career, in his studies of poetry, he refuses both to conceive of classical Arab poetry as a pure object of aesthetic pleasure, and also to see in it a simple source of historical information. At the same time he rejects the idea of an immediate communicability and that of an absolute commensurability between the two sensibilities: Arab and European. He takes this poetry to be rather the expression of a fundamental spirit which is the spirit of the Islamic civilization in its totality. He himself it is who connects this perspective to what he calls the neo-humanism that presided between the wars. We know, in fact, that this perspective comes from a greater remove, and that it is situated at the intersection of neo-Kantism and Hegel-inspired historicism; at that place where most of the influential schools in the field of the social sciences were born. We should note that the fact that he started these studies with the aspect of poetry is very indicative, because this is the only area in which von Grunebaum has made a concrete study: he moves, subsequently, to the general theory and does not go beyond it; one could therefore admit that the very special characteristics of Arab poetry will have a profound influence on his thought. The transition to culturalism which he makes thus becomes less difficult to comprehend. For, such as it is represented by A. L. Kroeber, culturalism is in effect German-inspired, and in a sense von Grunebaum rediscovers in America the sources of his own thought. With the passing of time, he renders his method more explicit, but it was already entirely explicit in studies on Arab aesthetics.⁴ What are the fundamental notions which he uses?

Islam, a Study in Cultural Orientation, Chicago, 1947 (subsequently *Mod. Isl.*); *Modern Islam, the Search for Cultural Identity*, New York, Vintage Books, 1964 (subsequently *Mod. Isl.*); "Islamic Literature, Arabic" in *Near Eastern Culture and Society*, T. Cuyler Young (ed.) pp. 48-65; "The Problem of Cultural Exchanges" in *Etudes dédiées à Lévi-Provençal*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1962, I, pp. 141-151; *Islam Experience of the Holy and Concept of Man*, UCLA, 1965 (subsequently *Exp. Hol.*); *The Sources of Islamic Civilization in Der Islam*, Berlin, March 1970 (1-54); the dream in classical Islam in *Le rêve dans les sociétés humaines*, ed. by von Grunebaum and R. Caillois, Gallimard; *The Convergence of Cultural Traditions in the Mediterranean Area in Diogenes 71* (Fall 1970), 3-21.

⁴ See essentially "An Analysis of Islamic Civilization and Cultural Anthropology," *Mod. Isl.* 40-97.

1. The first, and in fact the only notion, is that of culture, which serves to delimit the actual object of study. This is not the place to try to analyse the contents of this notion; it would entail simply making a historical, critical assessment of the whole of German-American culturalism. Let us content ourselves by saying that von Grunebaum takes it on in the form in which Kroeber elaborates it, once it had been stripped of all the mystico-Romantic implications which it had preserved with Dilthey and the neo-Hegelians.⁵ The notion of culture is divorced from its origins, which are the concept of an objective spirit which, for Hegel, was a moment of the evolution of the Spirit. Here it is simply a matter of defining an epistemological object, so that a science of culture can be possible and autonomous among the other related sciences: history, the philosophy of history, sociology, political economics. One can instantly see that serious problems will arise, precisely at that moment when it will be a question of individualizing culture in relation to other topics of research: society, civilization, ideology, morality, art. By taking Kroeber as his authority, von Grunebaum, at least as far as his writing is concerned, puts the problematical side of this science of culture between parentheses, although it is of course present in the results of his specific analyses.

What enables this epistemological object to be individualized is the postulation of an invariable element which does not act so much as an element of determination as a principle of unity,⁶ or better still a principle of elimination.⁷ Von Grunebaum uses this notion on numerous occasions in his studies of change, influence between cultures, or evolution of one unique culture. Influence and change come about under the guidance of this

⁵ In spite of things, there still remains something, as testified to by this sentence in *Med. Isl.* 62: "The path of civilization goes from East to West... Europe understood with confusion that she had nothing essential more to learn from her old rival (Islam)."

⁶ This idea was vulgarized especially by R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 1934, chaps. II-III. Cf. the preface by Robert Redfield and Milton Singer to von Grunebaum, *Isl.*, in which the principal ideas are referred back to their Kroeberian origins. The following appears here: "In this sense, one can more easily establish the general cultural structures... of civilisations with sacred literature than one can those of primitive cultures where they remain implicit in as far as they are unconscious canons of choice." Cf. also *Med. Isl.*, 320, *Isl.*, 243, *Mod. Isl.*, 53, 80.

⁷ "Any element chosen by Islam indicates an element rejected." *Exp. Hol.*, 6.

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invariable, whereas evolution is the cumulative consequence of these choices which are all directed in the same sense.⁸ Culture is thus essentially conceived as a principle of elimination, and the period in which one sees the formation, or in other words the obvious appearance, of this direction which makes itself manifest in all the successive choices is the *matrix* of the culture in question. This matrix does not reveal itself objectively (for the society which is being studied itself) and subjectively (for the researcher) until the conclusion of the historical process. To start with it is a simple hypothesis, which is at once objectively and subjectively probable, and which is only verified by and in history. As it eventually appears, culture is a complex of values structured as from a principle of choice and elimination, or from an aspiration.

One can already foresee the problems posed by this postulation of a unitary principle as a "datum" which only history can unveil.

2. The consequence of the preceding postulate, which is also a method of verification, is that culture forms a closed system, because the principle of elimination works on all levels. If the attempts to systematize a given culture, starting with a principle which provides a structure, fail, it is because the culture being studied is not a real culture in the true meaning of the word, or else because the principle being sought is adversary to the investigation, by virtue of its subtlety. For in the setting of culturalism, one cannot envisage the refusal of the notion of system itself.

We should note here that this notion is vague, since all the schools of human sciences use it, and that everything depends on what it in fact recovers. Under the influence of Kroeber, von Grunebaum uses it in the sense of a recurrent *pattern*, of a similar solution given in different areas to formally similar problems (for example, atomism in poetry, in the theory of nature and in political science). From the moment that this principle of integration and elimination is postulated in the

⁸ "The *1001 Nights* reproduce on a small scale the spirit of the Islamic civilization in its totality... which is completely syncretist. This shows its vitality by recovering each one of its loans with its inimitable seal." *Med. Isl.* 319.

heart of culture, its consequences appear as social, moral, aesthetic, political and ecological facts... which are extremely dissimilar, but which can nevertheless be reduced to meanings directly reflected in the principle above-mentioned. The system forms, essentially, the plan of the powerful existence, that is to say, the plan of meaning, in which, little by little, in history and in the mind of the researcher, the socio-historical facts of a culture are diminished. This system, or plan, always remains ideal because the researcher will never manage to reflect in it all the facts offered him by history; but each time that he can connect one of these facts to the primary principle, that is, each time he can render it significant, he will chalk it up in the sky of Ideas, which was originally empty, but which slowly fills up with stars. It is clear that this system is a distant incarnation of the Hegelian totality, but such that it is reflected in the Knowledge of the philosopher, eternally stabilized, having lost its internal necessity. Here it forms one possibility among many many others, which it keeps company in history, which at this point is no more than the spatialized field of the human mind.

If one does not define with some precision the contents of this motion of system, such as they appear in the results of the analysis, one runs the risk of confusing it with other notions which are comparable formally speaking in terms of structure, models, totality, complex, field, and all the more so because virtually all the social sciences operate with two notions: one which gives a unity to the object of study, the other which introduces a principle of evolution, and the problem, for the critique, is precisely to go beyond these formal similarities.

3. The consequence of what is described above is an expressive reduction of all the social facts. It is a question of something far more than association; rather it is a question of a reproduction of the process of elimination and thus of realisation of the first principle on all levels of reality. The worldwide evolution of theology, that is to say, the process whereby all the notions which are used in this evolution belong to the same semantic plan, is necessarily reproduced in the evolution of society and the State, in the evolution of public morality and the formation of ideal human types, of literary expression, urban structure, and so on and so forth. In the last analysis, the city reproduces

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in space, the written work in words, politics in time, or theology in eternity, in the same essential 'plan' of the culture which is to be studied. All the systems of relations therefore can limit themselves to one another, because they are in fact isomorphic.

The major problem will be to justify this reduction in turn. So that it does not have the appearance of being the whimsical choice of the analyst, we shall make it the result of actual historical deployment. The analysis will thus present itself as if it were retracing the historical movement. The Hegelian origin is quite clear, but what is justified where Hegel is concerned is no longer justified in this case, except as the possibility of the existence of an autonomous science.

IV.

Starting off from these presuppositions, von Grunebaum embarks on the study of Islam. Any judgement of the results which he obtains should encompass an evaluation of the presuppositions which have just been outlined. For this reason one must leave aside all the statements—and they are numerous—which can denote a fundamental antipathy on the part of the author.⁹

From the outset von Grunebaum conceives of Islam as a culture, and we should realise that this is the essential point to observe and discuss. The concept of culture, as we have said, is problematic, and this unknown Islam, whose spirit, unitary principle and aspiration must be described, is identified from the beginning with a culture. The whole series of steps is affected by this lack of precision.

This postulated spirit—this foyer of Islam—cannot be directly

⁹ "Islam is eminently human in the sense that it takes man as he is, but it is not humanist in the sense that it is not interested by the discovery and the manifestation of the potential wealth in man," *Med. Isl.* 230. "Islam was checked in its development in the 11th century and remained an unrealized promise." "Islam, attained; it never made up for its delay (compared with other religions)", *Ibid.*, p. 322. "Islam can not easily be considered as creative in the sense in which ancient Greece and the West since 1500 have been." *Ibid.*, p. 324.

apprehended. It can only be apprehended by an attempt, renewed in theory time and time again, to retrace the internal logic of the history of Islam. The only way open to one is that of a double comparativism: one aiming at agreement and homothety between different areas within Islam, the other at their difference and opposition on the exterior. The analysis has four constant variables:

<i>agreement</i>		<i>opposition</i>
Moslem city	≠	classical city
Islamic <i>umma</i>	≠	Greek <i>polis</i> ¹⁰

When the author analyses, and is not content with just summing up, one can see a continual play between intra- and inter-comparativism, and it is by means of these successive accomodations, and direct or mediated identifications, that he arrives at the determination of a fact and at an understanding of it, by one and the same process; for this reason of method, his propositions are just as much opinions.

1. Intra-comparativism: the plan of von Grunebaum's studies, whether long or short, is almost always invariable: a theory of God which follows a type of piety—itself followed by a political theory—which forms the fundamental sequence, the *matrix of Islam*. Why? The theory of God in effect emerges from a textual reading which is positively verified by what is individually lived and negatively verified by the destiny of the Moslem community. It is with this matrix as a starting point that one consequently judges sectorial evolutions: theology, *fiqh* (politics, urban law, social structure), types of personality (biographies, historiography), types of stylization (poetry, *adab*). Here there is a process which is logically divided into two tempos. In the first tempo,¹¹ the history of events is amply introduced as a contributor, and one can easily see why. If one made a direct connection between

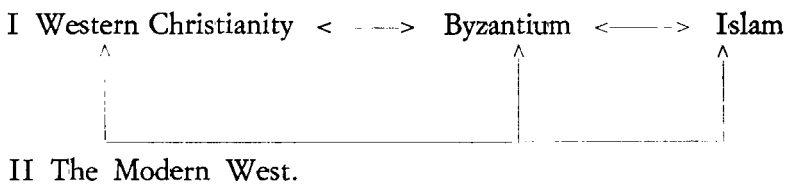
¹⁰ Cf. The structure of the Muslim town, *Isl.* 141-155. "The unit of the Muslim town is functional, not civic." p. 147.

¹¹ Especially chap. "The Mood of the Time" in *Med. Isl.* and "Profile of Muslim Civilization," in *Isl.*

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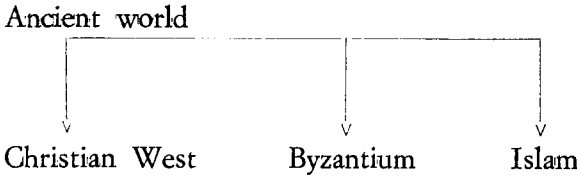
the known facts, Islam would shine forth as a historically accepted unity, by being no more than the theoretical structure of possible societies. One would thus end up with a kind of functionalism applied to the past. To escape this, one requires history to give the initial sketch, namely to fix the sense and the direction of the principle which supplies the structure. This is what separates the culturalism as it is applied to "primitive" societies from the culturalism of von Grunebaum, which attaches to a society which is eminently scriptural. It will nevertheless be a question of seeing whether this precaution is sufficient to ward off all forms of subjectivism.

2. Inter-comparativism: here too one can see two distinct levels. The Christian West and Byzantium are opposed to Islam, but in the same historicity, because the variations between the three units are of a linear order. The modern West is opposed to the three complexes but in increasingly elongated perspectives.



Von Grunebaum, of course, considers the concepts of reference to be already known and he makes the most of this. Because any identification of Islam will depend on the identification of the cultures of reference, one is forced to state that the greater the degree of individualization of the three protagonists of the mediaeval world, the more one can detect a major irresolution as far as their common origins are concerned, as far as the ancient culture is concerned, and above all with regard to the pre-eminent reference represented by the modern West. The ancient world also seems to be conceived as a sequence in which Greece constitutes the classical period and Rome the period of decadence. This ancient world likewise nourishes Islam and Byzantium which form an almost unique case of cultural

parallelism.¹² The relation between classical world and mediaeval Christian West remains in the shadows.



One can trace the two courses as follows:

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	God	Man	Society	Expression	Science
	Coran	Piety	Sects	Poetry	
Theology		Types of heroes	Fiqh	Adab	
Mysticism		Types of stylization	Ecology (city)	Architecture-decoration	

Classical

	world	Byzantium	Islam	Christian West	Modern West
God			++		
Man			+		
Society-State			—		
Expression			x		
Science			—		

It goes without saying that this diagram is theoretical, it is not filled in to the letter, because it is above all a question of filling in the compartments of just one column; if one considers

¹² Von Grunebaum, in his contributions to the *Cambridge Mediaeval History* and elsewhere, has clearly outlined the parallelism between the development of the feudal agrarian structures in Byzantium and in the Abbasid Caliphate, between the forms of piety, between the structures of artistic expressions and so on... without there being any mutual influence; it is rather a question of a flowering of the same basic concepts. Cf. *Med. Isl.*, p. 30.

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the definitions of von Grunebaum as judgements, one can effectively and definitively trace—as we have done—the results of his investigation starting from the matrix: the Koranic *logos*, positively manifested in the life of individuals and negatively manifested by the struggle between sects.

In this respect we have only achieved the condensed result of researches which should theoretically have followed a fairly winding course. The unitary principle should only have been isolated after repeatedly fruitless attempts (in order to offer a clear and rational explanation). The point of departure is hardly of any consequence, moreover, provided that one proceeds armed with binomials: historiography and theology, for example, poetry and types of morality, prose and architecture, politics and types of heroes, and so on; then, by successive and gradual comparisons, and by differential reductions, one should end up by embracing, in one and the same glance, the parallel arrangements of the different concrete manifestations of the same fundamental aspiration of Islam. Of course, we have no means of controlling whether the actual research has been carried out at a high level of methodological precision. Subjectivism lies in wait for the investigation at each step taken, and the results of the investigation remain definitively connected to the value one has given to the method itself.

v.

Before embarking on a critical appreciation of the results obtained by von Grunebaum, let us indicate certain conclusions which issue, of necessity, from the method itself. In this way we are pursuing the analysis of this method.

1. Since the fundamental aspiration is a principle of integration and above all of elimination, anything pertaining to a culture is not *a priori* possible, or, more exactly, probable. When one sets off in search of a secreted or miscarried aspect, one often runs the risk of chasing false reasons, if one is outside the indicated perspective. There are certain questions that one should only pose, and certain areas of research that one should only undertake, with the objective in mind of clarifying a *con-*

trario the first choice which has precisely condemned such questions and areas to be without object. By the very movement which enables us to isolate the matrix of Islam, we restrict its areas of deployment on every level. At any given moment one can detect individual attempts, fragmentary borrowings or contributions, and even generalized though fleeting infatuations; but sooner or later they find themselves ignored, forgotten, eliminated or condemned, depending on their richness, and the danger of disintegration in which they place the fundamental aspiration of society. One can at once see what influences this attitude can have on the direction of research and the evaluation of its results. According to this perspective, no actual existence can be ascribed in Islam to urban law, or tragedy, or dramatic poetry, or State theory, or plastic art.¹³ Of course, the research is not discouraged *a priori* because the "matrix" is only unveiled by successive approximations; many attempts—and in every field—are necessary to each phase; the undertaking is theoretically infinite and the reflection about what is eliminated has as much significance as the reflection about what is effectively realised. Nevertheless one can reject the negative aspect of many of von Grunebaum's judgements on a rudimentary level (judgements about urban law, autobiography, scientific methodology) which has been indicated and which, precisely, poses serious problems to him. If it can be established in effect that there have been numerous attempts, and many adventurous exploits, what, in fact, does become of the power of integration lodged in the fundamental *principle*? Von Grunebaum displays a healthy reaction towards superficial and peremptory judgements which conclude that a state of nondevelopment is linked with a social incapacity. But one should re-

¹³ As far as urban law is concerned, von Grunebaum minimizes R. Brunshwig's research on urban jurisprudence. "The pragmatic nature of a large portion of Islamic jurisprudence is as clearly visible as its refusal to grant any autonomy whatsoever to particular jurisdictions," *Isl.* 154.; for drama: "If Sunnite Islam has not managed to create a dramatic expression, although it was aware of a Greek heritage and also that of India, this is not due to a simple historical accident, but rather to a conception of man in which the specific conflict of the tragic could not see the light of day," *Exp. Hol.*, 12. This idea was taken up by Moh. Aziza in his thesis *L'Islam et le théâtre*. For the State: "The beginnings of Christianity and the duality of the administration enabled the West to escape the disorder which, for Islam, was the consequence of the Utopian hope which it put in the organisation of the State," *Isl.*, 135.

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member what has been said about the lack of imagination, lack of civic sense, historicity, and a scientific spirit in the Arab race. We have to deal here with a moderation in the appreciation, but this is only the reverse side of the narrowness of the field of deployment which was initially identified with Islam.

2. The search for the fundamental aspiration, the "matrix" of Islam, is necessarily the description of a classicism and a tradition: the three notions form, basically, just one notion. The "matrix" is postulated at the beginning of the process as a simple possibility of reorganizing the field of meanings, but one which can only be realised in time. The integration or the elimination of notions, institutions and objects with the aim of achieving a system of values, does not take place automatically, but does so in the hands of people who are organized into groups. The "matrix" can be objectivized when it is established within the attitude of a group, that is to say, when a tradition is established; it is not an ever-present objective structure, rather it is the result of the activity of the people who manifest it in the whole light of effective history. Thus an unconscious classicism is a notion which can serve no purpose, which is not even thinkable in this perspective; classicism only really exists in the moment in which it is reconstructed by a tradition with respect to a past period, and in the period immediately following an awareness of an already incisive decadence. There can only be isomorphy between expressions and "matrix" as from the moment when a culture tries—without succes furthermore—to perpetuate a balance which only emerges as such when it has been irremediably lost.¹⁴ It is only after the 11th century (the great defeat represented by the first Crusades) that Islam finds its "matrix", whereas the preceding period—the 9th and 10th centuries—which the historian considers to be the apogee, cannot represent the central period for the culturalist, precisely because the situation during this

¹⁴ Cf. "The Concept of Cultural Classicism," in *Mod. Isl.*, 98-128, published in *Classicisme et déclin dans l'histoire de l'Islam*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1957, 1-22. If one refers what is said here to Islam in a specific sense, one arrives logically at: Classicism = Tradition. The observations on classicism in the narrow sense used in literature do not clarify the subject, in fact they do the opposite.

period is too blurred; nothing in this period is yet definitively integrated, and nothing is definitively eliminated. In this sense, the adjectives that von Grunebaum unites with the word Islam (mediaeval, classical, modern) are neutral or even super-redundant: there is no difference between classical Islam and mediaeval Islam, or just Islam. A swift examination of the content of the three books will easily convince the reader of this. As for modern Islam, we shall see later on that this is indeed problematical, as is well indicated by the sub-title of the book devoted to it: the search for an Identity. Thus, there is only one Islam which changes within itself when tradition takes form on the basis of a period which is reconstructed and presumed to be classical. Starting from this premise, the effective succession of facts becomes illusory; one can draw examples from any period and from any source one chooses; the logic of the "matrix", finally accepted, is the sole guide to the illustration of this. Despite all the precautions with which we can *a priori* credit a serious and informed researcher, we can, once again, not remove or set aside the suspected subjectivism which hallmarks this whole undertaking.

3. As decadence is contained in the very definition of tradition,¹⁵ the problems of decadence, as such, fade away. One can, of course, talk of attenuating or aggravating circumstances, which either precipitate or delay the decadence, but the real cause is in the "matrix," in the principle of elimination, which is at the same time a principle of identity. Any culture, in as much as it is a closed system structured by a choice, is, after a certain time, dedicated to trampling, to tautology.¹⁶ Once

¹⁵ We arrive at this: (Islam) (unitary principle) (Classicism) (Tradition) (decadence). The period of formation (7th-9th centuries) is a confused and at the same time a creative one. Modern Islam is in its turn confused, but negatively because it is content simply to pursue refusal. To specify oneself once one has found oneself is, of necessity, to stagnate. This is the import of the article "Convergences of Cultural Tradition" which contains various harsh opinions on Arab nationalism which, according to him, tries to differentiate itself on the basis of what is already given and not on what might or could be, as was the tendency with Islam in its period of formation.

¹⁶ As far as the modern West is concerned (and this is an essential point), von Grunebaum seems to think that it possesses a conspicuous privilege due to the fact that for the first time a culture is taking anti-tradition to be

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a tradition is formulated, it is condemned to reformulate itself within a setting which becomes more and more constricted, more and more sterile. Here we can see a distant consequence of the idea of *an end of History*. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no such thing as a decadent Islam, or a modern Islam.¹⁷ In either of these cases, the question to be raised is the following: preservation or abandonment of the fundamental principle, continuity or termination of a culture which beckons the beginning of another culture. Modern Islam is a geographical expression: the world, very briefly, which Islam has had as its domain, and which for more than a century has experienced total intellectual disorder. The numerous studies which von Grunebaum has dedicated to the nationalism, acculturation, westernization and self-interpretation of Moslems all eventually illustrate that the Islam of today rejects the West because it remains faithful to its fundamental aspiration, but also that it can only modernize itself by re-interpreting itself, starting from the viewpoint of the modern West, namely from its idea of man and its definition of truth. Hence the importance which von Grunebaum ascribes to the study of historiography.¹⁸

4. On principle, a culture such as Islam, which became materialized in a tradition, can no longer recognize novelty, strictly speaking. One can aim towards and one can postulate novelty, but one can no longer actualize it, either from the side of the traditionalists who don't claim to, or from the side of the liberals who are adaptors, or from the side of the modernists who accept the inevitable without saying as much, and when it has al-

tradition (to stagnate is to die). The West can therefore only perish by accident or by resigning. (*Mod. Isl.*, 96).

¹⁷ In *Classical Islam*, von Grunebaum halts at the destruction of Baghdad; in *Islamic Literature* (op. cit.) he notes the importance of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, but this in no way influences his judgements. The examples are taken from all historical periods, indiscriminately.

¹⁸ Cf. *Isl.*, 184-185. He reissues Gibb's assertion that there is not a single book in existence written by a Moslem which gives others and Moslems themselves an exact idea of what Islam is. Von Grunebaum adds that this incapacity will last for a long time to come, because the traditional Moslem does not think of his civilization as one among others, whose structural differences result from the diversity of values and possibilities. By implication we have here a definition of the culturalist method considered as the only scientific method.

ready overtaken them. The first group does not see that Islam has already resolved all the problems which it could resolve; the second group is respectful by nature; and the last group does not conceive of the difficulty or the impossibility implicit in the notion of cultural traditions being integrated without a logical basis. Long references to the German and Russian¹⁹ experience try to prove that even in its refusals, contradictions, confusions and complexes, Islam does not innovate at all.

Revolt is not creative, but nor are beginnings. This is why von Grunebaum is opposed to the syncretic view of Toynbee.²⁰ He does leave an exit available, but it smacks too obviously of a certain cosmopolitanism which is traditional to Central European intellectuals, and it does not merge sufficiently with the culturalist method. The only example of successful westernization which he offers us is that of India, and this is not altogether convincing;²¹ it is hard to avoid the impression, in this topic, that it is not the Islamologist who is speaking, but rather the aesthete in admiration of Thomas Mann and the compatriot of Musil.

The above observations were made with a view to showing exactly what the method selected by von Grunebaum implied in the way of necessary conclusions, which themselves give rise to descriptions and judgements. They are not aimed at a critique because, by following this slant, one can easily shed all scientific effort. We are now fairly aware of the epistemological presuppositions of the social sciences, and even of the natural sciences, and sufficiently so to understand that formal critiques of this type are absolutely inadequate. Likewise, a critique with a pragmatic basis which would formulate itself thus: can one, based on these analyses, have an effective political structure in the Moslem countries? would be just as unacceptable, because

¹⁹ Cf. *Mod. Isl.* 347 n. 16, 336 n. 42. An interesting comparison between slavophiles and Arab nationalists who share in common their Romanticism, Utopia, ambiguity of attitude towards western Europe, and also the fact that they monologue with themselves more than they dialogue with the enemy.

²⁰ "It is not very probable that Islam will be lost in western civilization to the point of forgetting its personality, although it can use the external stimulation as a powerful motor to guarantee its revival," *Isl.*, 244.

²¹ *Mod. Isl.*, 389. He quotes as a successful example *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, by Nirad Chaudhuri, 1951. In fact one cannot find a better example of the most thorough intellectual alienation.

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von Grunebaum states explicitly that his attempts are aimed at being, above all, a cultural introspection from the West.²²

VI.

A serious critique should be based on a clear, methodological choice, and remain within the setting of the accepted epistemological rules. Let us look at the culturalist presuppositions of von Grunebaum in an overall sense, then in their results as applied to Islam, submitting in all this however to the laws of modern historiography. Before even opposing his conclusions, we should specify what we have to attribute to von Grunebaum, from the outset. If we do not do this, he will rightfully maintain his claim to the exclusive privilege of objectivity. On this level of his critique, we shall have to accept a certain division of labor:²³ the sociologist must respond to the sociologist according to the rules of the game, the historian likewise to the historian, and we shall see in a while that a special place is reserved for the theologian and the moralist. But one cannot continue to confuse the various fields, using two weights and two measures,²⁴ which, without doubt, has been the fundamental weakness of the *salafi* movement in all its forms, and which will always leave a sense of inadequacy attached to any thought process which has not made the necessary choice between the objective and the subjective, between the discursive and the intuitive, the universalizable and the singularized.

Having stated this directly, what can we object to in von Grunebaum's perspective?

The observations contained in the preceding sections have already let it be understood that a culturalistic analysis—even when it defines itself, as it rightfully can, as a specific field of

²² "There can be no better way to our own soul than the civilization which a great French scholar has called "The Occident of the Orient," in other words the Islamic world." *Exp. Hol.*, 27.

²³ This division will translate by itself a profound transformation of the State and society.

²⁴ Cf. The judgement on Abû I-Hasan Nadwî: "He compares an Islam which is essentially outside and above history with the West (or Christianity) which, for him, only exists in history." *Mod. Isl.*, 252.

research—which voluntarily restrains its field of investigation in order to aim at limited, though significant, results, ends up—as has been predicted—with too many distortions, too many reductions, too many subjectivist confusions, in short an impasse which is too evident to be kept at the center of the human sciences, as von Grunebaum would like to see happen.²⁵ The failure can be attributed to a single cause: the impoverishment of the concept of history.

Culturalism certainly emanates from historicism, but it keeps all the defects of historicism which can be imputed to the Romantic inspiration. Constant appeal is made to history; in reality, it is generally replaced by a theory of history which is only a very poor sketch of history. Too many problems are considered to be false problems from the start, too many documented conclusions are devalued, too many results are given as premises, with the result that it is difficult to see how the culturalist perspective might encourage concrete research.

Let us pass quickly over the idealist prejudice which takes as a structure-giving principle of a culture a choice among possible choices. In as much as no concrete element is dominant, in which the structurization at the conclusion of the process is inferred from a choice to which history alone—such as one interprets it—is beholden, it is a clear matter of an idealist determinism which, once divorced from its Hegelian roots, is finally left without any explicative value, even if it allows for a certain understanding. One can certainly have recourse—and one is not mistaken in so doing—to the example of the natural sciences to uphold the idea that their course is not fundamentally different and that the results are only dissimilar in as far as there is a difference between the constructed “objects” of the two categories of science. In this case, one should also follow the example of those natural sciences which abandon the hypothesis which, in order to be maintained, increasingly narrows down the field of research or distorts the facts observed to excess. So the culturalism of von Grunebaum ends up in this sort of restriction and distortion.

²⁵ “I maintain that, for our era, cultural anthropology conceived as an human introspection by means of an analysis of culture occupies the central position in the system of sciences,” *Mod. Isl.*, 50.

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1. This is especially visible in the case of Islamic science which clearly troubles the author,²⁶ at once because it exists and does not merge with the unitary principle of Islam which is so apparent, and also because of the famous problem of its influence over Europe. It has already been observed that the evolution of this science did not coincide at all with that of society or the State; the great scientific findings occurred during periods of political decadence and social chaos. This evolution has been very little studied indeed and might certainly illuminate a lot of facts, which are now obscure, about Islamic culture and society. Now, in this respect, von Grunebaum devalues both his knowledge and his research by having recourse to a theory of truth which he considers to be central and structure-giving in Islam and he comes to the conclusion in any event that this knowledge could only be marginal and could only constitute a miscarriage, founded as it is on an inadequate epistemology. But in Western Europe the situation was no different up to and probably beyond the 17th century.²⁷ And what is more, one does not take into account the scholars' caste autonomy. Who is it who tells us that the dominant ideology (theory of truth) was that of the group of scholars?²⁸ Directly linking the "truth" of the theologians to the practical knowledge of the scholars simply makes us blind to the real sequences, and to what has permitted the development, preservation and stagnation of this Islamic science. Here one can clearly see how a theory of history impoverishes real history and, in a sense, impedes research. Simply saying that Islamic science was in any event condemned to miscarry in no way explains to us why Ibn Nafis worked in the free conditions in which he worked and was forgotten in the way he was forgotten, whereas Galileo was a troubled man, but yet was not for-

²⁶ "We have a tendency to admire the scholars of the Middle Ages who broke down the barriers which the queen of the sciences—theology—had set up in opposition to a rational investigation of the world. Despite the respect due to their intellectual boldness, it is not always possible to shed the fact of knowing or not knowing whether they had the *right* to separate themselves from the established system." *Med. Isl.* 331.

²⁷ Let us recall the recent discussions on the "philosophy" of the Renaissance, which was less "scientific" than the Early Middle Ages. It is enough to remember G. Bruno and Paracelsus and the powerful return of the practice of magic etc...

²⁸ See M. Mahdi, "Remarks on the Theologus Autodidactus of Ibn al-Nafis," *St. Isl.*, XXXI, 1970.

gotten. Likewise to say that it is an outward graft is just as unsatisfactory, because there is too long an interval between the period when this graft took place and the period in which Ibn Nafis lived, for example.

2. The same restriction has reference to the particular study of the numerous states of decadence in the area of Islam, which are all singular. Mamlouk decadence; Mogul decadence; Ottoman decadence; Alawit decadence, and so on. Who could be satisfied by reducing all these to an abstract model which is that of the Abbasids or Saljuqids? For in this culturalist perspective, the problem changes its direction: instead of the why behind this decadence, the question shifts to the why behind the persistence; von Grunebaum expresses it at least once²⁹ and can give no convincing response, unless it is a recourse to fatalistic individualism. This is similarly the recurrent problem of contemporary Islam. To define it solely by its composite character is too descriptive. Von Grunebaum subscribes to the opinion formulated by W. Cantwell Smith that it was only the Turks, among all the Moslems, who definitively adopted the viewpoint of western historiography, but why was it just them? and why not the Arabs? Because it is a question of a choice, the author seems to be saying, which will always be inexplicable in the deterministic sense whether it comes early or late, one can thus estimate without influence the time which passes before the choice.³⁰ This is tantamount to giving, *a priori*, great weight to the champions of explicit traditionalism, whereas there is something else in present-day Islam other than the body of the *Ulama* and the professional apologists, even if one has to recognize clearly that the *aggiornamento* of the *Ulama* is and will be of major significance. Von Grunebaum delimits the area of contradictions, but does not go further than this, by seeing where there is a devaluation of real history, but more especially an acknowledgement that culture cannot explain culture, nor its crises, nor its excesses.³¹

²⁹ "... the tenacious vitality of this (Islamic) civilization whose answers to the great problems of the human mind still satisfy an eighth of mankind, is truly astonishing." *Med. Isl.*, 346.

³⁰ See *Isl.* 230. "A new self-interpretation of Islam demands the acceptance of the scientific spirit and criticism."

³¹ *Ibid.*, 244. "Nationalism is the cause of the delay of historiography, of the mental attitude, etc." But how to realise nationalism itself?

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3. Let us lastly consider the impression of extreme subjectivism in the construction of the "matrix" of Islam. One can certainly always retort that it is only apparent at the final stage of the presentation, that it has been more systematic at the stage of the research. While keeping this in mind, one is nevertheless troubled by the incongruity of the examples and quotations, which certainly proves an uncommon breadth of horizon, but is far from helpful in gaining one's conviction. Cultural analysis aimed to systematize the facts so as to escape from a traditional pointillism, and here it is itself very close to being a new eclecticism. Does the fundamental choice of a culture reside in the final analysis in the personal choice of the analyst?

All these remarks, once again, would be reduced to nothing if, despite, or because of these restrictions, reductions, and *rap-prochements*, one might end up by isolating this famous "structure-giving principle." During the numerous and often subtle analyses of von Grunebaum, the reader becomes sensitive to a number of agreements, continuities, disagreements and contrasts which should all point towards a nucleus which is their common base, but it is precisely here that the deception begins. If one takes the most explicit texts on this topic: the conclusion of *Mediaeval Islam*, the chapter: *Profile of Muslim Civilization in Islam*, the chapter: *An Analysis of Islamic Anthropology and Cultural Anthropology in Modern Islam*, one can detect four characteristics which predominate: antihumanism, truth as an absolute which is revealed, the static personality, which is obedient and calm, and a particular tone.³² The latter has no heuristic value; the three other aspects refer finally to a choice of God against man. The problem does not lie in a

³² "It is essential to understand that Islamic civilization is a cultural entity which does not share our profound aspirations. It is not vitally interested in rational introspection, and even less interested by the study of the structures of other cultures, neither as an end in itself nor as a means of reaching a better understanding of its own peculiarities and its own past... One can try to connect this to its fundamental anti-humanism, that is, to its deliberate refusal to accept man, in whatever degree, as the standard or yardstick of things and the tendency towards self-satisfaction... where psychological truth is concerned." *Mod. Isl.* 55. "The force of Islam comes from the complete equilibrium of the personality which it is capable of producing once it has achieved its acme." *Med. Isl.* 347. "The sciences (are) fundamentally an invariable system of truths, formal as much as concrete, which were granted to man in storage in a time which is immemorial." *Ibid.*, 328. "Islam... has a flavor about it which cannot be mistaken." *Ibid.*, 324.

discussion of this aspiration to see if it is really the aspiration of Sunnite Islam, but rather in seeing that it is too general really to individualize Islam. This can be clearly seen when von Grunebaum tries to define the Arab culture, or else when he characterizes all the pre-modern cultures³³; he gives us no means of isolating Islam within pre-modern cultures, and the Arab culture within Islam itself. Eventually we have a quasi-equation: (Islam) (Culture) (Arab culture) (pre-modern culture) (negative of modern Culture). Agreements and contrasts are in fact states which exist between the modern West and pre-modern cultures.

Thus despite their wealth, the specific analyses are incomensurable with the conclusions which, in reality, simply reproduce the presuppositions of the method itself. Culture as a principle of organization and differentiation and Islam defined as culture maintain the status of postulates after the analysis as above. Culturalism certainly remains a philosophy, and it is far from being a decontracted method of scientific investigation. Incidentally, there is nothing invalidating in this, and, faithful as always to his historicist inspiration, von Grunebaum would doubtless have maintained the proclaimed privilege of the West on the basis of culturalism as a philosophy because it would be the effort which singularizes it among all the other cultures.³⁴ There is even a possibility that Islam takes this philosophy to its own account, just as it has taken many other things, all the more so because it encompasses within itself numerous parts which really refer back to science and which, precisely, realize its persistent influence.

Our role is to isolate these scientific elements and to show in what wider methodological setting they could be integrated.

VII.

We have said that the preceding critique, and any other critique incidentally, would only be acceptable if one accepted for oneself

³³ Cf. *Isl.*, 58-77, for Arab culture and *Rêve...* p. 8 and 9. "Before Descartes all civilizations are mediaeval, pre-modern."

³⁴ "All that we can really do is to leave our successors convincing examples of our type of comprehension and the type of truth we have arrived at. Our method will not be lost, but many of our results... will gradually and inevitably become (for those who will follow us) rough documents which will help them to retrace our aspirations." *Mod. Isl.*, 96.

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the principle of present-day historiography, that is to say that truth is in an indefinite process. Under these conditions there would have to be points of convergence and even comparable courses starting from common operational notions which nonetheless differed in their design, which would have to be perfectly clarified.

The essential point of divergence concerns the concept of history; we maintain the non-reduction of real history (expansion of events of different orders, of different significations experienced in a unique time) to culture; and just as this cannot be reduced to ideology, that is, to theory which is present in it at any given moment, ideology in turn goes beyond at each moment, and theology itself is a restrictive theory of the man-God relation. This is valuable for Islam, as it is for every other historico-geographical area.³⁵ It is perfectly legitimate to isolate the study of culture as an autonomous field with a specific temporality, but what is not legitimate is to claim that this temporality is, by itself, a normative factor.

One should indeed note that the will to systematize is justified and that to maintain the wealth of real history is not to accept the "pseudo-logic" of positivistic history based on occurrences. This latter takes the confusion of facts to be an empirical systematization, and it does not see that the temporality which serves it as a reference is itself an artificial construction. Everyday or "political" temporality (in the vulgar sense of the word political) thus imposes itself on other temporalities: economic, politico-social, cultural, ideological, psycho-sociological, and so on...; and even when the professional historian writes the history of attitudes, or economic history, etc., he does not isolate the specific temporality of each one of these fields. Everything is dissolved in an apparent intelligibility which is that of occurrence. It is because the fallacious aspect of this intelligibility appeared a long time ago that the philosophies of history have come into being. The later tendencies—historicism,

³⁵ One can certainly claim that it is this possibility of reduction which individualizes Islam. Von Grunebaum does not say as much expressly, but one can infer it from many of his opinions. However, one can claim this for any kind of society in a past period and it seems to me impossible to confirm or nullify it. The reconstructions carried out by ethnologists remain, in this sense, always within the framework of ethno-centrism.

sociologism, culturalism, epistemologism³⁶—which all search for a point of departure other than the political event, all aim in their own way at a more elaborated concept of history by means of an unveiling of a specific temporality. The mistake begins when this temporality is consequently decreed as the only real one, and the scientific initiative dissolves into philosophy. If one is careful not to go this far, the undertaking remains perfectly legitimate. What gives it even more validity as far as Islamic history is concerned, is the fact that we have, in effect, the impression, starting from partial studies (concerning essentially language, literature, theology and historiography) that cultural temporality is dominant for a certain period. In order to construct a faithful image of what we understand, we are almost driven to use the notion of articulate system. This, one might say, imposes itself by itself. But let us be specific: all we obtain is nothing more than an image. Systematicity, by itself, is not a reason. Its justification can be found in another area, another temporality, which is still largely adversary to our investigation. History as a series of occurrences, which is not negative-critical history, or programmatic history, remains and will always remain the order of the day. All progress eventually issues from it. But nothing can be checked until the distant day when it will be able to respond to all our questions.³⁷ The other fields should be studied each according to their own logic.

Of course, we shall never sufficiently stress the fact that in this respect the history of Islam is dangerous and seductive. Seductive because it appeals to system and structure; everything is given to us in the first instance in the framework of culture and ideology; we have a theory of religion and few witnesses to religion as lived, we have a theory of politics and few precise political documents, we have a theory of history, and few events with dates attached, we have a theory of the social structure and few individualized “acts,” we have a theory of economy

³⁶ Such as is represented today by M. Foucault. R. Aron strongly recalls in this respect the methodological affiliation between Foucault and Dilthey. *D'une Sainte Famille à l'autre*, Gallimard, 1969, 259.

³⁷ This is the basis of many critiques on the research on ideological movements. Since you recognize the priority of the economic factor, deal with economic history and leave ideology alone, they seem to say. Thus they indefinitely oppose a should-be to being because they too do not deal with economic history.

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and few numbered series, and so on.³⁸ The danger is that one risks confusing theory and fact at any given moment, because the one is disposable whereas the other demands research and elaboration at one and the same time. It is this situation which provides the culturalist analyses with their appearance of truth, because the temporality which they postulate agrees with that which Islamic tradition has imposed itself. We are condemned ourselves, from one moment to the next, to be or to appear to be like the culturalists, but our role is precisely never to forget that this temporality—that of tradition and that of cultural analysis which seems to suit it so well—is no more than an elaboration—it is not bare reality. The formal agreement between several facts and their reduction to a common meaning, suffices to understand the culturalist, but it is not the explanation; the factor which determines this agreement itself is outside culture. It must be demonstrated whenever possible; one must always remember the postulation that one still does not possess the means.³⁹

This refusal to reduce history to its theory, while still legitimizing the partial systematizations, achieves a conceptual differentiation: the structure is not *a priori* an isomorphic reflection; culture is not the primordial choice between possible developments, but it is the complex of cultural works, whether they are presently all systematizable or not; the symbolic correspondence or reduction is not a determination; it is the limitation by a determining element which is alien to the culture which realizes this correspondence. Of course, this difference in the utilization of notions is not visible straightaway; in certain developments, above all those which concern the ideology of culture (theory of poetry, theory of God, theory of grammar), the utilization of the same operational means (agreeing or diffe-

³⁸ The book by Reuben Levy, *Social Structure of Islam*, Cambridge, 1962, in fact analyses a social structure which is far more normative and theoretical than it is factual.

³⁹ The analyses in my work, *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine*, Paris, Maspéro, 1967, in effect resemble those of the culturalists, but those who perceive in them a Hegelian idealism have not read the book very well; they have not seen that it only represents one moment of analysis, that it is put in the perspective of the ideologists themselves. It is never stated that ideological evolution is at the basis of social evolution; but only that at a given moment (for reasons whose explanation is not within the scope of the work) the ideological contradictions become important, if not determining factors.

rential comparisons, identification of a break and of a reorganisation of the conceptual whole, the pursuit of a series of possible expressions of a similar principle in different areas...) can render this difference almost imperceptible. It is at this level that one can reconsider many of von Grunebaum's analyses, in which his considerable culture is a source of astonishment. For this course alone allows us to escape our endemic ills: the eclecticism and the immediate identification with the subjectivity of the past. This is accordingly the only means of achieving a certain objectivity, which is certainly not the absolute truth, but which is the basis of the intercomprehension, because the tradition that was for us this objectivity cannot be imposed on the other traditions.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ As an example of extreme subjectivism one can quote numerous studies by Abu Zahra on the history of Fiqh, and by Shawqī Daif on literature. If one does not manage to detect the differences and if one does not manage to systematize them, one will always be prey to the eternal present.