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# Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921): Religious Reform and the Foundation of a Humanistic Discipline

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On September 23, 1904, the Hungarian Ignaz Goldziher gave the lecture “The Progress of Islamic Science in the Last Three Decades” at the World’s Fair in St. Louis.<sup>1</sup> The fair’s conference program presented Goldziher as professor of Semitic philology at the University of Budapest, but with respect to the modern discipline of Islamic studies, Ignaz Goldziher was much more. Goldziher’s pioneering work laid the foundations for the formation of Islamic studies as an independent humanistic discipline. His work was instrumental in emancipating the study of Islam from the nineteenth-century field of classical Oriental studies and its mere philological confines. Together with his Dutch colleague Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936) and the German scholar Carl Heinrich Becker (1876–1933), Goldziher introduced new methods of research that fundamentally changed our understanding of the history of Islam.

The life of Ignaz Goldziher was a history of both success and failure. The Hungarian Jew was a member of several leading scholarly associations, he was offered a number of chairs at prestigious universities, and he received, on the occasion of the Orientalist congress in Stockholm (1889), the gold medal for his scholarly work from the hands of King Oscar II of Sweden. At the same time, he was a reformist Jewish intellectual searching for a third way between national assimilation and religious orthodoxy. For Goldziher, the modernization of Judaism was key to national integration without assimilation. Being a staunch Hungarian nationalist, he strongly opposed the maintenance of the “ghetto mentality” propagated by the Orthodox Jewry. Unconditional assimilation into Hungarian culture as promoted by the majority of reformists, however, was inconsistent with his deep religious feelings. In the peculiar context of the Hungarian Jewry, Goldziher “found himself among all the chairs” and, therefore, remained what

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1. This brief article builds on the chapter about Goldziher in two of my works; see Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), and “Islamic Studies and Religious Reform: Ignaz Goldziher—a Crossroads of Judaism, Christianity and Islam,” *Der Islam* 90, no. 1 (2012): 106–26.

Peter Haber once called a “marginal man” in Hungarian society, being at odds with all sides.<sup>2</sup>

In the history of the humanities, Goldziher’s work marks a nodal point among disciplines such as semitic philology, history, Protestant theology, Oriental studies and the study of Islam. He studied in Berlin, Leipzig, Leiden, and Vienna before he embarked on a trip to the Middle East in September 1873. This journey brought him to Istanbul, Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo, from where he returned to Budapest in April 1874. In Cairo, Goldziher met the Islamic reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) and joined his study circle, discussing the issues of Islamic reform against the background of readings in essential works of Islamic philosophy and theology. According to his diary, Goldziher found among the Muslim reformists of this study circle like-minded brothers who advocated a reconciliation of faith and modern culture similar to what he wished for with Judaism. He later described these months in Cairo as the happiest period of his life. Goldziher acquired his philological skills in Semitic languages under Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801–88) in Leipzig, after which he engaged in reading major works of historical Biblical criticism, such as those by Heinrich Ewald (1803–75), Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), and Abraham Kuenen (1828–91). The most profound intellectual influence on Goldziher, however, came from the Jewish reformer Abraham Geiger (1810–74). In the work of this Jewish reformer, Goldziher became familiar with the radical Biblical criticism of the so-called Tübingen School surrounding Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74). For Goldziher, reading Geiger was a revelation, and he later applied his concepts of historical text-critical methods to his own fields of interest. Generally speaking, his engagement with the ideas of religious reform and Biblical criticism acquainted Goldziher with the all-penetrating ideas of nineteenth-century intellectual life: historicism, cultural evolutionism, religious rationalism, and social differentiation. These ideas animated later his studies of Islam.

It is against this individual and scholarly background that we have to read Goldziher’s lecture on the progress of Islamic science. To a large extent, Goldziher describes in this lecture the process toward an independent discipline of Islamic studies in light of his own work. This becomes apparent right at the beginning of the lecture, when he points to the methods of historical criticism and comparative religion that have generated “this new scholarly view of Islamic matters.” It was Goldziher himself who introduced these methods to the study of Islam. Briefly situating his argument in the then contemporary state of the art, Goldziher shows in what ways these methods transformed the study of Islam into a modern academic discipline. It was

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2. See Peter Haber, *Zwischen jüdischer Tradition und Wissenschaft: Der ungarische Orientalist Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921)* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 10.

Goldziher who suggested using the prophetic traditions, the so-called hadith literature, as an indirect source for the interpretative reconstruction of the first two centuries of Islamic history. In *Muhammedan Studies* Goldziher applies the methods of historical criticism and suggested understanding these religious and profane stories about the Prophet and his companions as the “ideal desires of the present” projected back into the life of the Prophet. Thus, the historical critical analysis of the hadith provides us, according to Goldziher’s reasoning, with a testimony of the social, political, and cultural developments of the early period of Islamic history.

In the course of his lecture in St. Louis, Goldziher next takes up the issue of Islamic law, which indeed was to become one of the core fields of modern Islamic studies in the twentieth century. Yet in doing so, Goldziher also stresses the enormous difference between the ideal conceptualization of the law in Islamic jurisprudence and the factual historical practices we can observe. In particular the representatives of the orthodoxy of the four canonic schools of Islamic law are the focus of Goldziher’s criticism. In his eyes, the Islamic jurists submerged the spiritual content of Islam as a religion. Here, Goldziher appears to have extended to Islam the same criticism of Orthodox Judaism and Christianity that he expressed in his youth. In so doing, Goldziher applies a concept of religion whose origin was in the revision of Christianity by liberal Protestant theology in the nineteenth century. Thus the rationalization, individualization, and spiritualization of the Christian program implicitly are the standard by which to measure the religious value of a particular cultural tradition. However, in this critique of Orthodox Islam Goldziher is also in mutual agreement with such famous Islamic reformers as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and Rashid Rida (1865–1935). In his last book, Goldziher underpins his position extensively with references to their critical and “anticlerical” writings about the orthodox establishment of Islam. Furthermore, Goldziher shows the ways in which legal scholars incorporated non-Islamic elements into Islamic law and adapted Islamic normative prescriptions to changing social contexts. In his conclusions, Goldziher points to three manifestations of the “scientific progress” that Islamic studies underwent: a deeper knowledge of its constitutive factors, the critical analysis of Islamic documents, and new insights into the historicity of Islamic institutions.

In which ways does this lecture at the St. Louis World’s Fair contribute to the “Forgotten Curriculum of the Humanities”? First of all, Ignaz Goldziher’s lecture is a significant historical document of the formation of Islamic studies as a modern academic discipline by one of its foremost representatives. Directed to a nonspecialized audience, the lecture lays out the contours of a new discipline in the making. Goldziher emphasizes the difference between Islam as a system of normative rules and Islam as a historically changing religious practice, in this way anticipating much later scholarly

developments, such as the contemporary focus on everyday religious practices among Muslims. Moreover, Goldziher emphasized already in the early twentieth century the factual pluralistic nature of Islam and the adaptability of its religious law to changing historical circumstances.<sup>3</sup> In discovering Islam as an independent field of academic research, Goldziher's pioneering work marks a turning point in the disciplinary development of oriental studies. Goldziher was a nodal point in linking nineteenth-century Oriental studies with the disciplines of comparative religion, Protestant theology, and modern Islamic studies. In applying the methods of historicist criticism to Islamic religious traditions, Goldziher changed our understanding of Islamic history and laid the foundations for the formation of Islamic studies as a modern academic discipline. Goldziher developed Islamic studies in the framework of a theory of the evolution of religions according to which he perceived Islam as an integral part of the general development of humanity. In short, "The Progress of Islamic Science" is a key text in understanding the process of the formation and differentiation of specialized humanistic disciplines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Second, and probably even more important today, Goldziher's lecture is an argument against simplistic readings of Edward Said's *Orientalism* avant la lettre. To be sure, the emergence of Islamic studies as a distinct academic discipline took place within the coordinates of the asymmetric power relations of colonialism, which certainly left their traces in the construction of Western representations of Islam. Yet the preoccupation with imperialist politics also reduces the complexities that characterized the emergence of Islamic studies. Founding fathers of Islamic studies such as Ignaz Goldziher, Christian Snouck Hurgronje, and Carl Heinrich Becker hardly fit the Orientalist cliché of Said's *Orientalism*. Even more important, the explanatory framework of colonialism does not neatly fit the role of Jewish scholars in Islamic studies such as Ignaz Goldziher. Under the hegemony of Christianity, Jewish scholars of Islam experienced a situation of "internal colonialization" for which his diary represents a convincing testimony. Goldziher is a prime example of the close relationship between the academic work of Jewish scholars and their striving for religious and political emancipation as a minority within the often hostile environment of rising nation-states. In addition, Said's emphasis of the colonial situation does not always do justice to the agency of Muslim intellectuals and the factual cultural interfaces between European and Muslim thinkers. Indeed, the life and work of Ignaz Goldziher is a perfect example of this cultural interface in which historical processes of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish reform attempts met.

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3. Because of his historicist reading of the hadith literature and his emphasis on the pluralistic nature of Islam, Goldziher has been the target of severe criticism by Islamist and Salfist Muslim intellectuals up to today.

In conclusion, a closer look at Ignaz Goldziher as a humanistic scholar suggests understanding the origins of modern Islamic studies in the context of the nineteenth-century quest for religious reform and the evolution of science as a modern social system rather than simply understanding it as an academic justification of colonialism. Ignaz Goldziher represents a prime example of the role of Jewish scholars in the foundational phase of Islamic studies and their attempts to reconfigure the relationship among the three monotheistic religions in light of European Christian hegemony. Even in its founding phase and in the process of emancipation from Orientalism as a discipline, the leading representatives of modern Islamic studies did not portray Islam as an essentialist entity that is in principle hostile to modern developments. Applying historicist and source critical methods, they rather emphasized contingencies in the historical development of Islam. For this particular reason alone, Goldziher's lecture at the World's Fair in St. Louis seems to be a classical text of humanistic scholarship still well suited to inform contemporary readers.

### FIRST PUBLICATION

Goldziher, Ignaz. 1906. "The Progress of Islamic Science in the Last Three Decades." In *Arts and Science, Universal Exposition, St. Louis, 1904*, vol. 2, *History of Politics and Economics, History of Law, History of Religion*, edited by Howard J. Rogers, 497–517. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.

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