

Seminar Report

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# Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) and his Significance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC) held a seminar entitled 'A Pioneer of Islamic Studies in Hungary: Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) and his Significance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' on 4 October 2000, in co-operation with the Hungarian Embassy in Cairo. The work of Ignaz Goldziher can still be regarded as seminal for numerous fields within Arabic and Islamic Studies.

too heavily determined by the evolutionist theories of his time to escape from explaining the regional variety of 'popular' beliefs in terms of local substrates dating from pre-Islamic times.

In the same vein, Catherine Mayeur (Paris) discussed Goldziher's interpretation of the famous *mawlid* of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta as a linear continuation of the ancient Egyptian solar cult at Bubastis. Modern anthropological work has shown that this cult of a Muslim saint can be explained fully within an Islamic framework. One important historical point made by Mayeur is that, through the works of such European scholars as Vollers and Littmann, Goldziher's interpretation came to confirm Muslim reformists in their rejection of such practices as belonging to polytheism (*shirk*).

Turning to political history, Ferida Jawad (Groningen/Cairo) drew attention to the lack of progress made since Goldziher endeavoured to explain the *shu'ubiyya* movement in the Abbasid period as a mainly pro-Persian nationalist political party. In Jawad's view, 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars have failed to offer satisfactory alternatives, especially due to their use of terms they never properly defined, such as 'social cultural movement' and 'cultural identity' (Gibb), the 'position' of the respective peoples in Islam (R. Mottahedeh), Persian vs. Arab 'race' (D. Agius), and Arab 'nationhood' (B. Lewis).

Rachida Chih (Paris/Cairo), introduced her paper on the 'Nouvelles perspectives de recherche sur le rôle des saints et soufis

dans la société égyptienne contemporaine' with a reference to Goldziher's work on Muslim saints. However, she stressed the need to pay more attention to living saints and to emphasize their considerable impact on Egyptian society. Chih illustrated this with an outline of her own research on Sufis of the Khalwatiyya brotherhood, particularly in an Upper Egyptian rural setting, combining textual analysis and historical anthropological fieldwork.

The presentation by Hassan Hanafi (Cairo) was mostly consecrated to an Arabic annotated translation of Goldziher's *Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* by 'Abd al-Halim al-Naggar, published in 1955. This translation influenced various other Egyptian scholars, such as sheikh al-Dhahabi (assassinated in 1976) and Hassan Hanafi himself. Rather than simply rendering Goldziher's text in Arabic, the translator produced numerous marginal corrections on and additions to such issues as the Judaeo-Christian background of the Qur'an, its codification and punctuation, the alleged incompatibility between legalist Islam and mysticism, and contradictions in al-Ghazali's works.

Two speakers discussed topics more loosely connected to Goldziher's work, which were nonetheless of much relevance to the general theme of the workshop. Iffat Al-Sharqawi (Cairo), in 'Reason and Revelation in the Thought of Fakhr ad-Din al-Razi', analysed al-Razi's ideas on a very central issue in Islamic dogmatics and philosophy, and added comments on their importance

for present-day Muslim intellectual challenges. Gino Schallenberg (Leuven/Cairo) discussed the 'Diseases of the Heart' (*Amrad al-Qalb*) in the works of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, who sought to refute what he considered to be excesses in certain Sufi practices and beliefs.

The seminar had the character of a workshop in that ample time was reserved for discussion and exchange of information. More particularly, in a panel discussion chaired by Mustafa Kamel el-Sayyed (Cairo), the participants were asked to reflect upon the progress and prospects of Islamic Studies since Goldziher's days. Some of the issues debated were: the increased application of tools taken from sociology, economics and political science to assess questions about the compatibility of Islam and development or democracy; the concept of 'Islamization of Knowledge', which might be understood as a reaction to what is conceived as the myth of the objectivity of the social sciences; and the problem of interaction between Muslim societies and the scholars who study them. ◆

A slightly more elaborate report on this seminar will be published in the NVIC Newsletter 4 (2000); see also [www.leidenuniv.nl/interuniv/nvic](http://www.leidenuniv.nl/interuniv/nvic)

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Goldziher's life and working methods were highlighted particularly in a presentation by Tamás Iványi (Budapest) entitled 'Positivism with a Personal Approach – Goldziher at Work', based on Goldziher's diaries and annotated copies of Arabic manuscripts.

Three speakers sought to assess the value of Goldziher's studies for current and future research. Sándor Fodor (Budapest) stated that whereas Goldziher's work on Islamic history, including Qur'anic exegesis

and dogmatics, philosophy, and legal thinking, has retained much of its value, his studies on 'popular' religion now raise serious methodological questions. According to Fodor, Goldziher's admiration for 'high' Islamic culture – he regarded Islam as the only religion able to satisfy inquisitive philosophical minds – was counterbalanced by an outright contempt of magical practices in Islam (as well as in Judaism and Christianity), which he often dismissed as 'religious swindle'. And even when he wrote in more objective terms about such topics, he was



Ignaz Goldziher  
in 1880.

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