

Scholarship, Truth, and Islam

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Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 360pp., \$35 cloth.

DO WE HAVE REASONS TO AGREE with Alexander Bevilacqua that “a foreign religion [or people or culture] can be studied in rich careful detail, without anger or partiality, and without explicitly rejecting [the] established faiths or institutions [of a scholar]”? Can Christians be committed to their religion, and at the same time pursue a fair-minded, accurate understanding of Islam? At stake in these seemingly straightforward questions is whether objectivity—the establishment of facts in the pursuit of truth—is not only possible but also an ideal to which the conduct of a scholar should conform when undertaking research.

That there are difficulties in achieving an accurate understanding of a foreign religion or culture is acknowledged. After all, new facts emerge, forcing a modification of an investigator’s research so as to account for them. In addition, the circumstances in which the investigator finds himself or herself are always changing, so that new questions or new ways of looking at already established facts arise. Thus, the pursuit of truth never comes to an end; rather, that

pursuit is better understood as being asymptotic. Compounding these difficulties, no investigator of an alien religion or people—past or present—can fully extricate himself or herself from the influences of his or her own culture and time. In order to pursue the goal of an impartial, accurate understanding of that religion or people, one lessens the consequences of the influences of one’s own culture on one’s thought and judgment by feeling one’s way into that alien environment—immersing oneself in its language, history, and artistic achievements. This latter methodological requirement of arduous training and self-discipline so as to understand as impartially as possible the alien culture is known by the German term *Verstehen*.

Difficulties in achieving scholarly objectivity also exist for the native-born when they seek to analyze their own society and culture, as the influences of the latter obviously have a bearing on their judgment. In this case, native-born analysts may view their society in a more impartial manner by knowing the history of other societies, thereby examining their society in reference to others through comparative analyses. In doing so, especially useful for the pursuit of scholarly objectivity is the investigator’s recourse to trans-cultural and even trans-historical analytical categories, for example, “state,” “empire,” or “monotheism.” The use of these and other categories is not to gainsay their abstract character, which must be qualified in light of always numerous, historical details that complicate that use.

While acknowledging these difficulties, they ought never to serve as excuses for dismissing the very idea of scholarly objectivity in the pursuit of truth within the historical or cultural sciences. Too often today, one finds that dismissal as an example of the devolution of intellectual life, where scholarship is wrongly understood to serve, often with varying degrees of thuggery,

political partisanship. It is, thus, intellectually refreshing, even ennobling, that in this fine book on the history of the early European scholarship, from approximately 1650 to 1750, of Islam, Arabic history, and Islamic civilization, Alexander Bevilacqua has answered this question about the possibility of scholarly objectivity with a resounding *yes*: we do have reasons to think it is possible to study a foreign religion and culture without anger or partiality. It was done in the past by those early European, Christian scholars of Islamic religion and culture examined by Bevilacqua, and by implication should continue to be done.

for example, debates over the possibility of different types of revelation (as argued by al-Suyūṭī); arguments for the existence of independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) and differences over what might be meant by it; from al-Qushayrī's *tafsīr*, *Subtle Allusions*, a distinction between the elect and ordinary people, and the bearing of that distinction on esoteric and exoteric interpretations of the Qur'an, as argued by al-Kāshānī's *tafsīr*. Thus, the Qur'an itself was in the early Islamic tradition a text openly explored for numerous possibilities of wide-ranging interpretation. Even recognition of abrogation, that is, the extent to which one,

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What Bevilacqua describes as “the Republic of Arabic letters” was the emergence during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of a number of European scholars who, although Christian, championed Islam as a worthwhile subject of investigation. Characteristic of those scholars was that they learned Arabic so that they could immerse themselves into the Islamic tradition by reading its primary sources. Those sources not surprisingly began with the Qur'an. However, in order to achieve a better understanding of the Qur'an, those scholars not only read it in Arabic but also studied the *tafsīrs*, the commentaries on it, for example those by al-Bayḍāwī and al-Suyūṭī. They also read al-Bukhārī's collection of the *ḥadīth* (reports of the deeds and sayings of Muhammad), and theological and philosophical treatises, for example those by Avicenna and al-Ghazālī.

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later Qur'anic verse may render null and void an earlier verse when those verses appear to be in conflict with one another, was openly entertained. These possibilities were only reinforced when these early European scholars read other works, especially by the Mu'tazilites (the so-called Islamic rationalists) and Sufis (the so-called Islamic mystics), that offered arguments for allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of the Qur'an. Finally, some of these scholars of the Qur'an recognized what remains underappreciated even today: that some Muslim beliefs and rituals, and even sections of the Qur'an, had their origin in Jewish beliefs and practices. These were conveyed not only in the stream of Jewish traditions known as “Israelitica,” but also in the Talmud and rabbinic midrash, for example, the possible or even likely dependence of the laws of Sura 17: 22-36 on the seven laws derived by the rabbis, as described in the Talmud's Tractate Sanhedrin 56, from the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9.

While these Christian scholars studied the Qur'an and the diverse Islamic traditions of interpreting it, their curiosity was by no means confined to religion. They also became familiar with various histories, for example, al-Ṭabari's *History of the Prophets and Kings* and al-Athīr's *The Complete History*. In addition to learning Arabic, some of these scholars learned Persian and Turkish so as to read these and other works, including poetry. Bevilacqua concludes his study of these remarkable scholars by characterizing his own book as having made a distinction "between the creation of knowledge, on the one hand, and normative evaluation, on the other." But the merit of his distinction is precisely because it was one made by the majority of the scholars whom he has examined, and by those who followed them, for example, in the twentieth century, Franz Rosenthal, translator into English of al-Ṭabari's *History* and Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah, An Introduction to History*.

Of the numerous individuals who make up Bevilacqua's Republic of Arabic letters, some of the key figures dealt with by him are as follows. The first was the Englishman Edward Pococke (1604-1691), who earlier in his life had lived in Aleppo and Constantinople. He was first holder of the professorship of Arabic at Oxford, and author of *Specimen Historiae Arabum (A Sample of the History of the Arabs)*, 1650 which Pococke dedicated to his patron, the great Christian Hebraist and historian of English law, John Selden. The Italian Lodovico Marracci (1612-1700), having contributed to the editing of the Bible in Arabic (1671), translated the Qur'an into Latin (1698). Marracci was a Catholic priest of the Clerici regolari a Mater Dei, and beginning in 1656 holder of the chair of Arabic at the Collegio della Sapienza in Rome. George Sale (1696-1736), an English solicitor by profession, was the first translator of the Qur'an into English (1734). Adrian Reland

(1676-1718), Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Utrecht, was author of *De Religione Mohammedica libri duo (Two Books about the Mohammedan Religion)*, second revised edition 1717). Noteworthy about Reland, as Bevilacqua observes, is that he used Islamic texts from Southeast Asia, for example, translations of the Qur'an into Malay and Javanese, to correct mistranslations of the Qur'an and, hence, attendant misunderstandings of Islamic beliefs. The Frenchman Barthélemy d'Herbelot (1625-1695) is particularly important, having produced, with his assistant Antoine Galland (1646-1715), the *Bibliothèque Orientale (Oriental Library)*, 1697). With its 8,158 alphabetically arranged articles on a wide range of topics that drew upon numerous sources in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* provided "the most ambitious single overview of [Islamic literary and intellectual culture] until the publication of the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (1913-1936)." Galland, who had lived in Istanbul, merits further mention as the translator into French of *The Thousand and One Nights*, and holder of the chair of Arabic in the Collège de France. The Englishman Simon Ockley (1679-1720), following the example of Pococke's *Specimen*, emphasized the importance of knowing Islamic history for Europeans with his authorship of two books, *The Conquest of Syria, Persia, and Egypt by the Saracens* (1708) and *The History of the Saracens* (1718).

For the most part, the works of these and other scholars on Islam and Islamic history exhibited a fair-minded impartiality that Bevilacqua describes in detail. Many of these works were free from confessional concerns. Their authors sought to establish facts so that accurate understandings could be achieved. When a view was incorrect, these scholars did not hesitate to correct it, even if doing so meant criticizing the proponent

of the mistake, no matter who he may have been. So, for example, Pococke, concluding that the stories about Muhammed having been inspired by a dove (as recounted by Shakespeare in *Henry VI* at the end of Act I, Scene II), or having trained a dove to feed from his ear, or having tricked his followers into believing that the dove represented the Holy Spirit had no Arabic or Muslim source, criticized those like Hugo Grotius who repeated such fictions, the sole purpose of which was to serve Christian polemic. Similarly, the Frenchman Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, author of *Législation orientale* (1778), dismissed Montesquieu's exaggerated view of oriental despotism in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) by noting that the laws of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states protected private property and its use. Lest one get the wrong impression, the commitment to a fair-minded exploration of facts did not prevent these and other representatives of the Republic of Arabic letters from critically evaluating Islamic beliefs, such as the ideas about the sensual pleasures that await one in Paradise. The lodestar for the scholars of Bevilacqua's Republic was truth, not apologetics.

There were, of course, occasional exceptions to this scholarly objectivity, for example, Marracci, whose commentary accompanying his translation of the Qur'an was overtly polemical. But what is quite remarkable about the impartiality of the majority of these scholars is that their pursuit of a truthful and often appreciative understanding of Islam and its history occurred at the same time as, and thus despite, the imperial expansion of the Ottomans who were at the gates of Vienna in 1529 and 1683. Moreover, and to return to the question that began this review, most of the scholars of Islam and Islamic civilization discussed in this book were Christians. Thus, their open, impartial investigations

were not dependent upon the so-called Enlightenment's deprecation of religious commitment. In fact, Bevilacqua observes that these Christian scholars were usually far more enlightened in their examination of Islam than were the representatives of the Enlightenment.

If there is a shortcoming to this good book it is that Bevilacqua leaves the reader with the impression, surely unintended, that this Republic of Arabic letters arose as if out of thin air, as if it did not owe its existence to previous scholars of other intellectual pursuits. The tradition of scholarly objectivity found in Bevilacqua's Republic had previously been laid by, for example, the critical reception of Roman Law; the use of philological arguments by Lorenzo Valla in determining that the *Donatio Constantini* was a forgery; Erasmus' critical editions of the New Testament in Latin and Greek; and the Hebraists of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, who, although Christian, sought an impartial understanding of the Old Testament, the history of ancient Israel, and the rabbinic tradition, including the Mishnah and Talmud. Pococke, it will be remembered, was a protégé of the Hebraist John Selden whose motto, adopted by him in the face of persecution for his pursuit of historical truth, was "liberty above all things."

What are we justified to expect from intellectuals, and, when they are financially supported by the public, to demand from them? It is not to develop public policy, or to be engaged in politics. They are, of course, free to do so as citizens. But as intellectuals we are right to expect that they deal with facts as they pursue truth. They are not to deceive by propagating half-truths; and they are not to lie. We are in Bevilacqua's debt that he has given us in *The Republic of Arabic Letters* an example of intellectuals who largely fulfilled this expectation of what intellectuals should be and what they should do. a