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# CARL HEINRICH BECKER AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN ORIENT

by

JAMES HERMAN

Under the Direction of Jared Poley

## ABSTRACT

Prior to Germany's emergence as an imperial power in 1884, scholarly knowledge of the Orient was only deemed useful to a handful of academics, largely in part because oriental scholarship's primary emphasis was the study of classical languages and ancient manuscripts. German colonialism, on the other hand, required the creation of a new body of oriental knowledge, one that was firmly rooted in the contemporary world instead of antiquity. In 1907, Carl Heinrich Becker published *Christianity and Islam*, one of the first pieces of scholarship to examine the modern Orient with a modern methodology. In particular, it was Becker's adoption of the sociology of religion, a concept pioneered by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, which allowed him to interpret the modern Orient in a way not previously possible under the philological tradition that defined oriental studies for previous generations of scholars.

INDEX WORDS: Carl Heinrich Becker, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Islamic *Kulturgeschichte*, Community of Discourse, Sociology of Religion, German Orientalism

CARL HEINRICH BECKER AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN ORIENT

by

JAMES HERMAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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CARL HEINRICH BECKER AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN ORIENT

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my friends and family. My friends have always supported my passion for history, even if it meant missing out on the occasional misadventure. My parents have always believed in me, and I remain convinced that this has made all the difference. And, of course, I owe a debt of gratitude to my beloved Karen. She has been a constant source of encouragement, and I would not have been able to complete this project without her unwavering support.

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It would not have been possible to complete this thesis without the expert guidance of Jared Poley. It has been a privilege to hone my craft under his watchful eye, and I'm thankful for both his poignant criticism as well as his unfathomable patience. I would also like to thank Gregory Moore for reviewing drafts and helping me track down additional source material. On a final note, I'd also like to thank Denise Davidson for her words of encouragement throughout the research process.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: AN ORIENTAL RENAISSANCE

The unification of Germany in 1871 ushered in a new era of oriental studies. The consolidation of political authority by the Kingdom of Prussia over the German speaking peoples of Central Europe was achieved on the back of consecutive military victories over Denmark, Austria, and France, and the official proclamation of the German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles signaled the arrival of the Germans as a major player on the European stage. Economic integration, expedited by the construction of new railways, propelled German industries and commercial operations to new heights. During the years immediately following unification, currency reform and French repatriations injected substantial amounts of paper money into the economy.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the creation of a centralized government and the rapid privatization of wealth in German society severely mitigated the cultural influence of religious and clerical authority. The end result for many orientalist scholars was a newfound sense of academic freedom and the establishment of a new patronage system. According to Suzanne Marchand, these convergent developments “generated a great leap forward in oriental studies, one which deserves to be called a Second Oriental Renaissance.”<sup>2</sup>

The French historian Edgar Quinet first developed the notion of the Oriental Renaissance in *Génie des Religions* (1841), but the term did not enter the historiography of German Orientalism until Raymond Schwab’s *The Oriental Renaissance* (1950). In keeping with the spirit of Quinet’s work, Schwab argued that the arrival of Sanskrit texts in Europe during the eighteenth century “produced an effect equal to that produced in the fifteenth century by the arrival of Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 122-125.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 158.

manuscripts and Byzantine commentators after the fall of Constantinople.”<sup>3</sup> While the classical Renaissance introduced Europeans to Greek and Roman antiquity, the Oriental Renaissance introduced Europeans to the rest of the world. For Schwab, Europe’s rediscovery of the Orient was characterized by three essential features: “the ability to decipher unknown alphabets, acquired in Europe after 1750,” the individual efforts of orientalists like Anquetil-Duperron and Sir William Jones, and a strong affiliation with Romantic literature and poetry.<sup>4</sup> In *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, Suzanne Marchand expands on Schwab’s thesis by identifying a second renaissance in the history of German oriental studies. Schwab’s periodization of the Oriental Renaissance spanned the course of two centuries, and the movement’s most notable legacy was the gradual proliferation of the Orient into the European imagination. Marchand’s Second Oriental Renaissance, on the other hand, was defined by the rapid transformation of the Orient into a modern subject between the years 1871 and 1900.<sup>5</sup>

The present study takes the Second Oriental Renaissance as its point of departure. It was during this period that the primary emphasis of oriental scholarship shifted from the ancient to the modern Orient. Marchand explains this radical shift in terms of Germany’s emergence as an imperial power in 1884 combined with the willingness of scholars to meet society’s demand for a new kind of oriental knowledge.<sup>6</sup> My thesis works within the historiography established by Suzanne Marchand’s *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire* by accepting the premise that imperialism acted as a catalyst for the modernization of oriental studies. I also accept her argument that German unification opened up new possibilities for scholars of the Orient, thereby facilitating a Second Oriental Renaissance. It must be noted, however, that Marchand’s analysis

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, trans. Gene Patterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 157-162.

<sup>6</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 333-348.

emanates from the vantage point of the *longue durée*. My thesis, on the other hand, searches for a more immediate interpretation and thus represents a more narrowly defined inquiry into the intellectual arsenal of the first modern oriental scholars. Scholars of the ancient Orient, for example, utilized tools such as biblical criticism, philology, and archeology in order to access their subject matter.<sup>7</sup> However, when tasked with interpreting the modern world, these tools were largely ineffective. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* offered no greater insight into the workings of modern Mesopotamia than the *Iliad* did into modern Greco-Turkish relations. As is often the case, the emergence of new problems requires the development of new tools. The purpose of my thesis is to explore the development of the intellectual tools necessary for the study of the modern Orient as they developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the German Empire.

My thesis advances the argument that the study of history and sociology was instrumental in bringing the Orient into the modern world. Central to my study is the work of Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933), one of the Wilhelmine period's most eminent orientalists. It is my contention that Becker's comparative analysis of Christianity and Islam, austerey entitled *Christentum und Islam* (1907), represents the first major work of modern oriental studies.<sup>8</sup> *Christianity and Islam* recounts the parallel historical development of Christianity and Islam as complex, yet fundamentally similar, religious systems that only diverge at the point of the Renaissance. Moreover, I have selected *Christianity and Islam* because it was published during Becker's most productive and innovative years as a scholar. In many ways, Becker's career mirrored larger developments in the field of German orientalism. Although Becker quickly adopted the modern Orient as his object of study, his training as an orientalist was nearly

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<sup>7</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 102-105.

<sup>8</sup> I will hereafter refer to *Christentum und Islam* as *Christianity and Islam* because I have chosen to base my analysis on H. J. Chaytor's 1909 English translation of the text.

identical to his eighteenth and early nineteenth-century counterparts. For instance, he was introduced to oriental studies through Old Testament criticism, the field's traditional point of entry, and he studied with several students of Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer, one of the most influential philologists of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> In 1908, Becker accepted an appointment at the *Kolonialinstitut* in Hamburg, an important training ground for Germany's colonial and overseas administrators.<sup>10</sup> While in Hamburg, Becker aggressively advocated the implementation of *Islamwissenschaft* (the scientific study of Islam) on behalf of Germany's colonial project. Becker's first publication at Hamburg, *L'Islam et la Colonisation de l'Afrique* (1910), a none-too-subtle treatise on racial and religious hierarchies in Africa, exemplified his deep commitment to *Islamwissenschaft*. In summation, the publication of *Christianity and Islam* represented a liminal moment in Becker's academic career when was no longer a traditional orientalist but not yet a crude mouthpiece for German colonial ambitions.

My central argument is that Becker's *Christianity and Islam* employed key concepts from *Religionssoziologie* (the sociology of religion), a field pioneered by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, as its methodology of choice for transporting the Orient out of antiquity and into the modern world. As such, my thesis represents a comparative analysis of *Christianity and Islam*, on the one hand, and the sociological writings of Weber and Durkheim on the other. There is a wealth of historiography that links the work of Durkheim and Weber to the burgeoning field of sociology. According to Ken Morrison, the early twentieth-century writings of Weber and Durkheim, in addition to Karl Marx's *German Ideology* (1845) and *Capital* (1867, 1885, 1894),

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Overlook Press, 2006), 198.

<sup>10</sup> Nina Berman, *German Literature on the Middle East: Discourses and Practices, 1000-1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 160.

constituted the formation of a new body of knowledge known as structural theory.<sup>11</sup> Structural theory denotes “a family of perspectives in social thought which use specific techniques of interpretation for studying history, human nature and society” and derives its name from “the tendency to conceptualize society as a structure of social fields which exist outside the individual.”<sup>12</sup> In this view, the purpose of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) was to delineate the influence of a specific social field, i.e. religion, on human behavior and social activity. My thesis accepts the position that numerous scholars, including Ken Morrison, have put forth—that the works of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber constitute a single, coherent thought community, or community of discourse. Moreover, it is my contention that Becker’s *Christianity and Islam* represents the confluence of the sociology of religion with traditional oriental studies, two previously separate communities of discourse.

In order to demonstrate the connection between the orientalism of Becker and the sociology of religion of Weber and Durkheim, my thesis employs the methodological approach advanced by Dominick LaCapra in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (1983). LaCapra’s work represents a fierce rejoinder to Clifford Geertz’s anthropological notion of “thick description.” In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz interpreted culture as a fundamentally semiotic phenomenon. “Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” Geertz understood culture “to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an

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<sup>11</sup> Ken Morrison, *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2006), 3-6.

<sup>12</sup> Morrison, *Marx, Durkheim, Weber*, 4.

interpretive one in search of meaning.”<sup>13</sup> At the center of Geertz’s semiotic universe is the primacy of signs. Signs allow members of a society to communicate with one another and can include language, clothing, and even non-verbal gestures. To understand the signs themselves, however, requires a heavy contextualization of the culture in question: “As interworked systems of construable signs, culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be casually attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described.”<sup>14</sup> The implication for historians is that the interpretation of textual evidence ultimately rests with the historians ability to “thickly describe” the context in which the text was originally produced. In this view, providing historical context is the chief aim of the historian’s craft.

LaCapra, on the other hand, undermines the wonder-working power of heavy contextualization by complicating the relationship between text and context. LaCapra’s argument is that

the special value of [“thick description”] is the insistence upon the way a context has its own complex particularity that calls for detailed interpretation—indeed the way it may fruitfully be seen on the analogy of the text. Intellectual history shares with the disciplines such as literary criticism and the history of philosophy, however, an initial focus upon complex written texts and a need to formulate as a problem what is often taken, deceptively, as a solution: the relationship between texts an their various pertinent contexts.<sup>15</sup>

According to LaCapra, intellectual historians must problematize the relationship between text and context instead of relying on the uncritical assumption that “any given context is *the* context for the adequate interpretation of texts.”<sup>16</sup> In the case of Carl Heinrich Becker, there a number of

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<sup>13</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Geertz, “Thick Description,” 14.

<sup>15</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 16.

<sup>16</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 16.

distinct contexts against which his life's work could potentially be interpreted: late nineteenth-century oriental studies, German colonialism, Wilhelmine Germany, *fin-de-siècle* Germany,<sup>17</sup> Weimar Germany (Becker was the Weimar government's Minister of Sciences, Arts, and Public Instruction during the 1920s),<sup>18</sup> or in the case of the present study, the sociology of religion. According to LaCapra, these various contexts are essentially "interacting contexts whose relations to one another are variable and problematic and whose relation to the text being investigated raises difficult issues in interpretation."<sup>19</sup> To alleviate these challenges of interpretation, LaCapra developed six different frameworks of analysis—the relations of a text to "intentions, motivations, society, culture, the corpus, and structure."<sup>20</sup>

Given that the purpose of the present study is to definitively link Becker's *Christianity and Islam* with the sociology of religion espoused by Durkheim and Weber, my methodological approach is largely based on LaCapra's understanding of the relation of culture to texts. LaCapra envisions intellectual history as "a history of intellectuals, of the communities of discourse in which they function, and of the varying relations—ranging in often complicated ways from insulation to openness—they manifest toward the larger culture."<sup>21</sup> There is certainly sufficient reason to believe that works of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx constitute a community of intellectuals, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that their work possesses a kind of inter-textual coherence. My thesis, on the other hand, makes the case that Becker's *Christianity and Islam* warrants his inclusion into this community of discourse. In fact, Becker and Weber were personal acquaintances and colleagues at the University of Heidelberg for several years, and their

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<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld, "Germany at the Fin de Siècle: An Introduction," in *Germany at the Fin de Siècle: Culture, Politics, and Ideas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2004), 1-32.

<sup>18</sup> Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 199.

<sup>19</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 35.

<sup>20</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 49.

professional relationship was most certainly Becker's introduction to the world of sociology. Although first published in 1912, Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* was actually composed between the years 1902 and 1911, right at the height of both Becker's and Weber's scholarly power.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it was during the aforementioned period that Durkheim was most concerned with similar issues of society and religion, albeit from his academic post at the Sorbonne.

In other words, the present study establishes textual coherence between Becker's work and the work of Durkheim and Weber by affirming the sociology of religion as an adequate context for the interpretation of Becker's most significant text. Although LaCapra endorses a "community of discourse" approach to intellectual history, he also insists

the focus on communities of discourse must be cogently related to the problem of textual interpretation. It is not enough to establish influence or the existence of shared paradigm through the enumeration of common presuppositions, questions, themes, or arguments. One must elucidate in a more detailed way how the borrowed or the common actually functions in the texts in question.<sup>23</sup>

LaCapra's warning is reminiscent of Quentin Skinner's notion of the "reification of doctrines." In "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," Skinner argued that intellectual historians must resist the temptation to "search for approximations of the ideal type" because such an approach "yields a form of non-history which is almost entirely given over to point out earlier 'anticipations' of later doctrines, and in crediting each writer in terms of this clairvoyance."<sup>24</sup> As such, the present study avoids the mere cataloging of common influence as well as any version of the anticipation of ideas. Instead, my thesis emphasizes "the issue of how

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<sup>22</sup> Morrison, *Marx, Durkheim, Weber*, 231.

<sup>23</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969): 11.



common ideas function differentially in different texts.”<sup>25</sup> The context of *Religionssoziologie* in the present study is analyzed under the framework established by LaCapra, which is to say that context, in general, is conceptualized as a “limited, critical concept in historical research.”<sup>26</sup>

On a final note, a brief historiographical overview of Carl Heinrich Becker is in order. Although numerous historians have acknowledged Becker as a key figure in the modernization of oriental studies, rarely has his work been the subject of an extended literary, sociological, or historical analysis. In *Weber and Islam* (1974), Bryan S. Turner asserted that Max Weber derived the majority of his working knowledge of Islamic social structures from the work of Becker, his Heidelberg colleague.<sup>27</sup> Turner also described Becker and Weber as sharing similar views on the differences between European and Islamic feudalism insofar that the latter was defined by an unmistakable affinity for prebendalism.<sup>28</sup> The most intriguing feature of Turner’s brief treatment of Becker, however, was the claim that Becker promoted a mono-causal explanation for “the foundation and expansion of Islam” that was based the external influence of “economic necessities.”<sup>29</sup> Mark Batunsky categorically rejected this claim in “Carl Heinrich Becker: From Old to Modern Islamology” when he argued that Becker’s view on the “evolution of the Muslim Orient” paid tribute to a multitude of factors—social, intellectual, and ethnic.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Batunsky’s central argument was that in Becker’s work

the Muslim and Christian civilizations, considered almost totally separate until then, became interrelated and dialectically united, though different in their essential contents; they became two “sides” of the same cultural circle. Closed in Antiquity and even in the Middle Ages, that circle was “broken” later and in

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<sup>25</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 99.

<sup>28</sup> Turner, *Weber and Islam*, 127.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, *Weber and Islam*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Batunsky, “Carl Heinrich Becker: From Old to Modern Islamology. Commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ‘Der Islam als Problem,’” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 13, No. 3 (Aug. 1981), 293.

modern times, mainly due to the Renaissance and Reformation, but it should close again in the future, as its “sides” became dependent on the same fields of gravity represented primarily by Hellenism.<sup>31</sup>

Published in 1981, Batunsky’s essay paid careful attention to the nuances of Becker’s pluralistic cultural analysis, and despite its emphasis on Becker’s earlier writings, the article represents one of the most detailed and substantial scholarly treatments the German orientalist has received to date. However, in light of more recent scholarship, Batunsky’s work suffers from a failure to situate Becker within the larger context of German Orientalism.

After the publication of Batunsky’s article, there was very little of note written about Becker until Gottfried Hagen’s “German Heralds of Holy War: Orientalists and Applied Oriental Studies.” Published in 2004, Hagen’s essay was primarily concerned with Becker’s advocacy of *Islamwissenschaft* during the years immediately preceding the First World War, although he does offer a few key insights about Becker’s academic career. For instance, Hagen argued that Becker’s early work “sought to locate Islam as a civilization in a global historical process” while his later work emphasized the advantages of “instrumentalizing” Islam for colonial purposes.<sup>32</sup> Hagen’s observations about Becker’s career trajectory are echoed in the scholarship of Nina Berman, Robert Irwin, and Suzanne Marchand. Although Becker’s work only receives a brief mention in Berman’s *German Literature on the Middle East* (2011) and Irwin’s *Dangerous Knowledge* (2008), it is clear that both scholars view Becker as a transitional figure, a crucial stepping-stone on the path to modern oriental studies. While Marchand share this interpretation of Becker’s place in the larger history of German Orientalism, she also manages to significantly expand on the scholarship of Batunsky and Hagen by presenting a more comprehensive account of Becker’s entire professional life. More specifically, Marchand argues that Becker was never

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<sup>31</sup> Batunsky, “Carl Heinrich Becker,” 297.

<sup>32</sup> Gottfried Hagen, “German Heralds of Holy War: Orientalists and Applied Oriental Studies,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, n. 2 (2004): 148-149.

able to successfully balance the objective scholarship of his early academic career with the kind of political relevancy that defined his later political career. It is for this reason that Marchand described Becker's legacy as being simultaneously "progressive and reprehensible."<sup>33</sup>

Returning to LaCapra's conception of a community of discourse, it is clear that Becker's most significant historiographers—Batunsky, Hagen, and Marchand—have primarily interpreted his work as a mixture of traditional oriental studies and turn-of-the-century German colonialism. My thesis complicates the historiography of C. H. Becker by positing a third community of discourse, the burgeoning field of sociology. Although *Christianity and Islam*, the key text under consideration in the present study, certainly fits under the purview of the established orthodoxy, my interpretation of the text is that it represents a meditation on the modern world, a world defined by both the complexity of its cultural systems as well as its shared historical link to the past. The sociology of religion, a concept that preoccupied the period's most influential thinkers, provided Becker with a new methodology for investigating a new Orient.

Historians seldom mention *Christianity and Islam*. As such, Chapter Two capitalizes on the opportunity to introduce the reader to Becker's revolutionary text by outlining a few its key arguments and ideas. More importantly, this chapter develops a basic framework for understanding Becker's conception of Islamic *Kulturgeschichte*, and it is for this reason that Chapter Two is entitled "Islamic *Kulturgeschichte*."

Chapter Three, entitled "The Sociology of Religion," expands on Chapter Two by comparing Becker's methodology to the sociology of religion. The purpose of this chapter is to identify key elements of sociology within Becker's *Christianity and Islam* and firmly situates his work within the camp of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of*

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<sup>33</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 367.

*Religious Life*, considered by many to be the definitive classic of the sociology of religion, is the key text under consideration.

Chapter Four, entitled “Culture and the Study of History” examines the more historicist and cultural elements of *Christianity and Islam*.

Chapter Five functions as the conclusion of the work. This chapter also offers brief commentary on Weber’s famous rationalization thesis.

## 2 ISLAMIC KULTURGESCHICHTE

In *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, Suzanne Marchand argues that the scholarly work of Carl Heinrich Becker was “instrumental in laying the foundations for a new sort of Islamic *Kulturgeschichte*” and that by “removing both positivistic objectivity and romantic origin-seeking from the study of Islamic history,” Becker “made possible a rich means of understanding East-West cultural interactions in the ancient and medieval worlds.”<sup>34</sup> Nina Berman echoes this claim in *German Literature on the Middle East* when she notes that “together with Martin Hartmann (1851-1918), and in spite of significant differences in outlook, Becker changed the field of German Oriental studies, making the *contemporary* Middle East a worthy object of study for the first time.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, if Hartmann’s *Islamische Orient*, the first installments of which were published in 1899, represented the call to arms on behalf of the modern Orient, then Becker’s *Christianity and Islam* (1907) and his formulation of Islamic *Kulturgeschichte* (cultural history) was most certainly its greatest champion. As a result of their innovative scholarship, “the applicability of scholarly knowledge [about the modern Orient] became a point of discussion” in Wilhelmine Germany.<sup>36</sup>

From the Reformation to the mid-nineteenth century, German orientalism favored “Central European religious and political affairs, university building, classical philology, and Old Testament criticism” over imperial envy.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the early colonial ambitions of the British, French, and Dutch—defined by “cross-oceanic commerce and colonization”—were almost

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<sup>34</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 366.

<sup>35</sup> Berman, *German Literature on the Middle East*, 160.

<sup>36</sup> Berman, *German Literature on the Middle East*, 160.

<sup>37</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 28.

entirely alien to the Germans.<sup>38</sup> It was instead an unstable border with the Ottoman Empire that defined Germany's relationship to the non-European world. As such, the decline of Ottoman power over the course of the eighteenth century opened up new avenues of inquiry for scholars of the Orient, and by the mid-nineteenth century, the profession was undergoing a handful of quiet innovations.<sup>39</sup> However, it was only during the late nineteenth, i.e. Second Oriental Renaissance, that the "applicability of scholarly knowledge" became a prerequisite for conceptualizing the Orient. The earliest work of Carl Heinrich Becker, such as his dissertation on the writings of Abu'l-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi, attests to his keen interest in the history of the post-Hellenic Orient, but his philological methodology remained firmly rooted in the past.<sup>40</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to outline some of Becker's main points from *Christianity and Islam* in greater detail. In particular, this chapter develops a rudimentary framework for interpreting Becker's understanding of Islamic *Kulturgeschichte* (cultural history) as well as his views on the nature of modernity. *Christianity and Islam* is relatively unknown to scholars of orientalism, and it is certainly unheard of amongst historians of sociology. As such, it is worth exploring a few basic elements of the text before juxtaposing it against the exceedingly well-known works of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. It is my contention that it was not until the publication of *Christianity and Islam* in 1907 that the history of the ancient Orient was brought fully into the modern world. Becker's scholarship traced the historical and sociological development of both religions from the original teachings of Jesus and Muhammad through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. Becker's main line of argument was that medieval Islam borrowed ideas from early Christianity so extensively that Christianity's later adoption of those same ideas during the period preceding the Renaissance was not only

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<sup>38</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 103.

<sup>40</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 361-362.

metaphysically straightforward but also completely natural. In fact, Becker viewed both Christianity and Islam as joint heirs to a glorious Hellenic past.

The opening pages of *Christianity and Islam* are dedicated to outlining Becker's research paradigm. As such, Becker's first order of business was to disentangle oriental studies from Christian theology. In Becker's time, it was still popular for orientalist scholars to view the study of Islam as a method of improving the proselytizing techniques of missionaries or securing "scientific proof" of Christianity's superiority.<sup>41</sup> Becker, on the other hand, was interested in approaching Islam from a decidedly "historical perspective" in order to obtain a "clear view of the influence which Christianity has exerted upon other religions or has itself received from them."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Becker defended the comparative approach toward the analogous development of Christianity and Islam on the grounds that

a world-religion, such as Christianity, is a highly complex structure and the evolution of such a system of belief is best understood by examining a religion to which we have not been bound by a thousand ties from the earliest days of our lives. If we take an alien religion as our subject of investigation, we shall not shrink from the consequences of the historical method: whereas, when we criticize Christianity, we are often unable to see the falsity of pre-suppositions which we necessarily bring to the task of inquiry: our minds follow the doctrines of Christianity, even as our bodies perform their functions – in complete unconsciousness.<sup>43</sup>

Chapter Three will examine the evolutionary aspects of Becker's methodology in greater depth, but what Becker was essentially calling for was a more self-conscious and objective approach to history. In his study, Christianity functions as a familiar point of reference. Becker used it to break down misconceptions, to make foreign ideas more relatable, and ultimately, to make the "alien religion" of Islam a little less alien. His treatment of Islam, on the other hand, was

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<sup>41</sup> Carl Heinrich Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, trans. H. J. Chaytor (New York: Harper Brothers, 1909), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 2-3.

designed to serve as the template for exactly the sort of sober and cool-headed historical methodology and analysis required to study all religions, Christianity included.

Becker's understanding of world religions as "highly complex structures" was integral to his conception of Islamic *Kulturgeschichte*. According to Becker, it was self-evident that the structures of both Christianity and Islam had changed over time, but in his view, these changes were chiefly influenced by culture. Take, for instance, Becker's treatment of the Quran as an historical document:

Muhammad had an indefinite idea of the word of God as known to him from other religions. He was unable to realize this idea effectively except as an immediate revelation; hence throughout the Quran he represents God as speaking in the first person and himself appears as the interlocutor...[as such,] it was of primary importance that the Quran should be regard as God's word and not as man's. This fact largely contributed to the secure and uncontaminated transmission of the text, which seems also to have been left by Muhammad himself in definite form.<sup>44</sup>

Becker's argument that the preservation of the Quran in unaltered form stemmed from the belief that Muhammad served as a direct mediator between God and man was hardly original. What is novel about Becker's approach, however, was that he viewed this phenomenon through an historical lens. If approached from the perspective of a theologian, as was customary at the turn of the twentieth century, the question of the Quran's divinity would most likely be framed in terms of its veracity. From the point of view of a Christian theologian, the answer to this particular question was almost certainly a forgone conclusion. Becker, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with how religious beliefs, regardless of their truth-value, influenced social activity. In Becker's view, the act of preserving a holy text in its original form for over a millennium certainly constituted a social activity, if not a full-scale social institution. The

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<sup>44</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 10.



implication for Becker, a historian of Islam, was that the Quran represented a reliable historical document penned by the founder of the religion himself.

In *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840), the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle famously declared that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men.”<sup>45</sup> Carlyle envisioned history as a celebration of great men—leaders, creators, and innovators of the highest order. Great men, in short, were nothing less than heroes, and these heroes most often took the form of prophets, poets, priests, men of letters, and kings. Interestingly, the only prophet included in Carlyle’s study was Muhammad: “We have chosen Mahomet (Muhammad) not as the most eminent Prophet; but as the one we are freest to speak of.”<sup>46</sup> As previously noted by Marchand, the mid-nineteenth century witnessed quiet innovations in the field of oriental studies, and among the greatest of these innovations was the re-imagining of Muhammad as a legitimate prophet. Carlyle, for instance, conceded that while Muhammad was “by no means the truest of Prophets,” he was most certainly a “true one” and that “our current hypothesis about Mahomet, that he was a scheming Imposter, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to any one.”<sup>47</sup> In light of shifting attitudes about the legitimacy of Muhammad’s status as a prophet, Carlyle experienced a level of academic freedom not previously known to scholars of the Orient. It is partly for this reason that he considered Muhammad to be the prophet he was “freest to speak of.” It also helped Carlyle’s case that Muhammad was considered a prophet outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and therefore there was much less at stake in re-defining his legacy.

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1840), 34.

<sup>46</sup> Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 53.

Carlyle's *On Heroes* represented one of the earliest formulations of the Great Man theory of history, and there exists a degree to which Becker's *Christianity and Islam* fits within this tradition. The key difference between Carlyle and Becker, however, was that Becker interpreted the Quran as an historical document instead of a holy book. In other words, Becker viewed the Quran as the product of a single man, albeit a holy man, and therefore interpreted the text as a window into the "workings of [Muhammad's] mind."<sup>48</sup> The majority of *Christianity and Islam* was devoted to enumerating Christianity's numerous influences on the early development of Islam, and one of Becker's main lines of argument was that Muhammad exercised a great deal of creative control over nascent Islam. According to Becker, Muhammad regarded Islam as a "faith rather of experience than of theory or dogma" while simultaneously envisioning Christianity as representative of "all pre-existing intellectual culture."<sup>49</sup> As such, the influence of Judaism and other regional religions was folded into the cultural current of Christianity, and their combined influence on Islam was mediated almost exclusively through a single individual. In Becker's view, the rapid proliferation of Islam—especially in regions of the world that would later become sites of German colonial interest—attested to the sheer scale of Muhammad's individual influence on world affairs.

Although Becker agreed with Carlyle that Muhammad was neither huckster nor heretic, he maintained that Muhammad's knowledge of Christianity was completely fragmented and

consist[ed] of certain isolated details, partly apocryphal, partly canonical, together with a hazy idea of the fundamental dogmas. Thus the influence of Christianity upon [Muhammad] was entirely indirect. The Muhammedan movement at its outset was influenced not by the real Christianity of the time but by Christianity which Muhammad criticized in certain details and forced into harmony with his preconceived ideas.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 39-40.

<sup>50</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 25-26.

According to Becker, much of Islam's individual character was determined by Muhammad's misinterpretation of Christian theology. As evidence of Muhammad's misinterpretation, Becker cites Muhammad's belief that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a "malicious invention of the Jews, who in reality crucified some other sufferer while Jesus entered the divine glory."<sup>51</sup> In Becker's view, not only did Muhammad's rejection of the crucifixion signal that he had "no idea of the importance of the Crucifixion the Christian Church" but that he also lacked any real understanding of the Old and New Testament.<sup>52</sup> As such, Becker considered it second nature for Muhammad to habitually prioritize his own preconceived notions over fragments of Jewish and Christian ideas. As further evidence of this phenomenon, Becker pointed to Muhammad's interpretation of Abraham. After experiencing resistance from the Jewish residents of Medina, Muhammad shifted his message from the teachings of Moses and Jesus to Abraham, whom "he was more than ever inclined to regard as his special forerunner."<sup>53</sup> Becker also argued that Muhammad linked Abraham with "ancient Meccan Ka'ba worship," a sacred site to both ancient Arabs and contemporary Muslims. "Thus," Becker added, "Islam gradually assumed the form of an Arab religion, developing universalist tendencies in the ultimate course of events."<sup>54</sup> In this view, the Arab-centric orientation of Islam stemmed directly from Muhammad's individual and idiosyncratic interpretation of Abraham. As such, Becker has presented an explanation of a sociological phenomenon—the supremacy of Arabs in the Islamic Orient—in terms of historical and cultural development, i.e. the absorption of an ancient, ethnically coded practice into a new religious tradition. Moreover, the sociological and cultural dimensions of this historical process

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<sup>51</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 20-21.

<sup>53</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 27.

were preserved in the text of Quran, generally unaltered over time due to Muhammad's own belief about the nature of his work.

An additional point of contact between Christianity and Islam was the development of similar moral systems. According to Becker, morality in both Christian and Islamic theology during the Middle Ages was predicated on a critical distance between God and man. In many ways, the present life was merely a brief prelude to a far richer afterlife. According to Becker, medieval Christian morality most often assumed the form of the Imitation of the Master, an “attempt to repeat [Christ's] poverty and reunification of personal property.”<sup>55</sup> Muhammad, by contrast, “was neither poor nor without possessions: at the end of his life he had become a prince and had directly stated that property was a gift from god.” In Becker's view, the adherence of Muslims to the Sunnah—a set of teachings and practices traditionally attributed to Muhammad—represented a misguided attempt at replicating the moral code of the Imitation of Christ. Becker's argument was that by conflating Muhammad's position in Islam with the centrality of Christ's Incarnation in the Christian tradition, Muslims only succeeded in replicating the most mundane and trivial aspects of Muhammad's life. Furthermore, the purpose of Becker's *Kulturgeschichte* was to identify the historical emergence of cultural practices, especially practices that were at odds with the intellectual traditions from which they emerged. In Becker's view, there was nothing inherent to Islam that recommended the Imitation of the Master as moral code, thus demonstrating the external influence of Christianity on early Islamic practices.

The influence of Islam on Christianity, on the other hand, occupied a much smaller section of *Christianity and Islam*. It is highly significant that Becker only mentioned a few specific instances of Christianity adopting ideas from Islam, chief among them “commercial products of the East” as well as “important economic methods, the ideals of our so-called

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<sup>55</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 62.

European chivalry and of its love poetry, the foundations of our natural sciences, even theological and philosophical ideas of high value were then set to us from the East.<sup>56</sup> Instead, Becker conceived of the relationship between Christianity and Islam as dialectical in nature, and he framed the question of Islamic influence in terms of understanding how Christian Europe eclipsed the Islamic Orient after the sixteenth century. In other words, Becker was most heavily concerned with how Christianity assumed the role of senior partner in a post-Hellenic dialectic. The short answer was that “the source of both religions [laid] in the East and in Oriental thought.”<sup>57</sup> According to Becker, Islam incorporated the intellectual tradition of Christianity with great flexibility because of the origin of both traditions was firmly rooted in the Orient: “the rising power of Islam, which had high faculties of self-accommodation to environment, was able to enter upon the heritage of the mixed Greco-Oriental civilization existing in the East.”<sup>58</sup> As a consequence of Islam’s penchant for seamless adaptation, “it gained an immediate advantage over the West, where Eastern ideas were acclimatized with difficulty.” Becker envisioned Islam as a rejuvenating power in the Orient, and he identified centuries of Islamic proliferation as a period of great cultural flourishing. As such, Becker noted that it was only in recent history that Islamic cultural development stalled and that Christian Europe rose to take the Orient’s place.

In many ways, the text represents Becker’s attempt at explaining the Great Divergence, i.e. the considerable economic gulf between Europe and the rest of the world.<sup>59</sup> According to Becker, it was the Renaissance that “[liberated] the West from the chains of Greek ecclesiastical classicism, from Oriental metaphysical religion, and slowly [paved] the way for the introduction

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<sup>56</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 100.

<sup>57</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 94.

<sup>58</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 98.

<sup>59</sup> Although Samuel P. Huntington coined the term in 1996, the concept is more familiar to historians in the form of Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000).

of Germanic ideals directly derived from true classicism. Not until the [Renaissance did] the West burst the bonds in which Orientalism had confined it.”<sup>60</sup> There are a number of key points to draw out from this passage. First, there’s a definite sense in which Becker viewed modernity as a break from the past. For instance, Becker described Europe’s relationship with the greater Mediterranean world—in the form of both Greek and Oriental influences—as a form of bondage that was not broken until the Renaissance. Becker’s high praise of “Germanic ideals,” on the other hand, certainly reflected Wilhelmine Germany’s rising star in the constellation of European powers, but there’s also the sense in which the derivation of those ideals from “true classicism” implies a strong link to the past. As such, it is my contention that Becker’s conception of modernity was fundamentally historical in nature. Modernity represented progress, a major step in the linear progression of time. Although were a handful of exceptions—thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler come to mind—the mood in Germany during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was generally optimistic, so it is not entirely surprising that Becker situated the rise of Germany within a larger historical narrative of European emancipation. In this regard, the modernism of German Orientalism was diametrically opposed to the modernism that defined *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.

### [INCOMPLETE]

In *Fin-De-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (1980), Carl Schorske argued that in the face of intensified ossification of both political and social structures, the citizens of late-nineteenth-century Vienna retreated to the interior—the political gave way to the psychological. In a society where there existed no prescriptions for treating political malaise, Sigmund Freud instead turned to a theory of man and society rooted in neither history nor tradition. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud outlined

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<sup>60</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 103-104.

Psychoanalysis, then, represents not only a retreat from the past but also from all manner of political engagement. the unconscious and to the interpretation of dreams to understand the root cause of human suffering

"In the following pages, I shall demonstrate that there exists a psychological technique by which dreams may be interpreted and that upon the application of this method every dream will show itself to be a senseful psychological structure which may be introduced into an assignable place in the psychic activity of the waking state."

**[Elaborate here.]** Artists like Gustav Klimt, on the other hand, created intensely personal and self-reflective works. According to Schorske, the culture of the fin de siècle was defined by the desire to not only subvert the historical but to transcend it entirely. Modernity in Vienna, with its emphasis on the psychological, was rooted in an attempt to move beyond history during a time in which political and social institutions remained immovable.

My argument, on the other hand, is that German scholars of the Orient moved in the opposite direction of their Viennese counter-parts. Instead of breaking free from the chains of history, they actively sought to impose history onto a traditionally ahistorical entity, i.e. the Orient. **[Add more about Schorske's view on liberalism vs Eley/Blackbourn liberalism]**

**[Ignore rest of chapter]**

Second, Becker views the

In a similar vein to Karl Marx's conception of the Asiatic Mode of Production, a connection explored in greater detail in Chapter Four.

terpreted the shift from the ancient to modern Orient as an extension of Germany's entry into the colonial race in 1884. Moreover, Marchand has argued that this unprecedented shift of scholarly emphasis was made possible, at least in part, by significant changes in the structure of German universities and patronage practices brought about by unification in 1871.<sup>61</sup>

Carl H. Becker's *Christianity and Islam* represents the culmination of all these changes in German society.

By emphasizing the modern Middle East over the ancient Orient, *Christianity and Islam* represented a radical departure from

fundamental rupture in the history of oriental studies. Becker's emphasis on adhering to a strict historical methodology is certainly key in modernizing oriental studies. However, Becker's

Although *Christianity and Islam* marked a radical departure in the study of Islam

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<sup>61</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 165-167.



### 3 THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

The connection between the political interests of the German Empire and the scholarly research of the academy has been thoroughly explored. The purpose of this chapter is to expand on this historiography by analyzing the precise *method* through which Carl H. Becker was able to challenge the deepest convictions of oriental scholarship and transform the modern Orient into a “worthy object of study.” As such, this chapter will demonstrate that Becker adopted the sociology of religion—a concept pioneered by two of the twentieth century’s greatest social theorists, Max Weber (1864-1920) and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917)—as his methodology of choice.<sup>62</sup> The cultural and intellectual legacies of Weber and Durkheim are closely associated with the *fin de siècle*, but historians have primarily treated Becker as a traditional orientalist and a colonial figure. By connecting Becker’s work to the burgeoning field of sociology, this chapter will establish Becker as a key participant in a larger debate about the applicability of sociological

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<sup>62</sup> Chapter 4 will explore Becker’s connection to the third founding father of sociology, Karl Marx.

and cultural analysis in understanding the origins of the modern capitalist system as well as the historical development of world religions. More specifically, it is my contention that Becker's *Christianity and Islam* bridged the gap between traditional oriental studies and cutting-edge social science, thus facilitating an unprecedented cross-pollination of ideas between two previously separate communities of discourse.

As previously noted in Chapter Two, Nina Berman was correct to point out Martin Hartmann's role in shifting the attention of oriental studies from the ancient to modern world, but his primary contribution to the field was inspiring a young Carl Becker to abandon traditional philology in favor of modern Islamic *Kulturgeschichte*. Hartmann, for instance, was in many ways too peripheral a figure to be taken seriously by the academic establishment. Hugo Winckler (1863-1913), a German archeologist most famous for discovering the ancient capital of the Hittite Empire in Boğazkale, Turkey, described him as a “white raven” because unlike other philologists, he was most at home with “the real-existing Orient [instead of] grammatical treatises.”<sup>63</sup> Hartmann's *The Arabic Press of Egypt* (1899), originally published in English instead of German, testified to his keen interest in modern developments. Later in his career, Becker referred to Hartmann as “a wild weed in the so well-ordered and properly-trimmed French garden of the Fleischer school.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps Hartmann's status as a marginal figure was partly to blame for the failure of his research paradigm to gain wide acceptance, but there was also a sense in which Hartmann's work lacked scholarly objectivity—Marchand describes his work as possessing “deep prejudices”—and intellectual rigor.<sup>65</sup> What Becker brought to the table, on the other hand, was both a prestigious academic pedigree and a rigorous methodology.

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<sup>63</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 356.

<sup>64</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 356.

<sup>65</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 361.

Becker was initially trained as a philologist under the guidance of Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801-1888), who himself was trained by the great Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838). Given his excellent pedigree, ever so important for an aspiring academic, as well as the fact that he would later become the first director of the *Kolonialinstitut* in Hamburg in 1908, it should come as no surprise that Becker was one of the most eminent orientalist working in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century. But reputation alone does not a legacy make. The most significant difference between the scholarship of Hartmann and Becker was that the latter adopted a cutting-edge methodology, i.e. the sociology of religion, which infused his work with greater intellectual rigor, won it wider academic relevancy, and eventually secured its political notoriety.

Although Becker's work was arguably more historical than sociological, *Christianity and Islam* shares much in common with the sociology of religion espoused by both Weber and Durkheim. These sociological affinities can be partly explained by Becker's professional relationship with Weber. Becker was part of an intellectual circle at the University of Heidelberg that included Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch (1851-1923), Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915), and Eberhard Gothein (1853-1923). According to Suzanne Marchand, Becker's understanding of Islamic history was deeply influenced by this coterie of academics and their "intense world, where neo-Kantian philosophy met sociology of religion and where evolutionary and materialist development was being rigorously tested against the findings of historicist-philological scholarship."<sup>66</sup> Alexander Haridi also explores the Becker-Weber connection—in addition to other historiographical considerations, such as Troeltsch's concept of *Kulturkreis* (cultural circle)

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<sup>66</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 362.

and historicism—in the second part of his M.A. thesis on the subject.<sup>67</sup> Although Weber certainly exhibited a greater influence on Becker than vice versa, it would seem that Becker, to his credit, made an impression on Weber when it came to his writings on Islam. In *Weber and Islam*, Bryan S. Turner argued that Weber derived the majority of his working knowledge of Islamic social structures from the work of his colleague.<sup>68</sup> Given the multiple points of connection between both their lives and their work, there is sufficient reason to believe that Becker was well immersed in the sociological literature of the time.

Weber published numerous essays on the sociology of religion, none more famous than *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Weber's argument was that the rise of capitalism in Western Europe was intimately linked with "the Calvinist belief in the moral value of hard work and fulfillment of one's worldly duties."<sup>69</sup> In other words, Weber was exploring the influence of cultural ideas on human actions and the subsequent impact of those actions on the development of social structures and modes of economic activity. In similar fashion, Durkheim utilized the sociology of religion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) as a means of demonstrating the inherently social nature of all religious beliefs and practices. He argued that the foundation of religion rests on the domain of the sacred, but instead of describing the innate properties of the world, the concept of the sacred merely imposes itself onto the world as a cognitive category, thus putting it within reach of the social scientist. In Durkheim's view, religion "first enables the group to recognize itself as a group, and thereafter the universe becomes a spiritualized extension of the group, whose meaning pertains to the group and

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<sup>67</sup> Ursula Wokock, *German Orientalism: The Study of the Middle East and Islam from 1800 to 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 12.

<sup>68</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 99.

<sup>69</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002), back cover.

supports its sense of identity and unity.”<sup>70</sup> As such, religion represents the webs of significance through which individuals must negotiate their relationship to one another as well as to society writ large. Religion is, in Durkheim’s estimation, no more than society worshipping itself.

Although Becker was originally a Semiticist and Assyriologist, he later came to specialize in the history of Islam. The overarching goal of his scholarship was to “normalize” Islam, to make it intelligible, to bring it into world history. Islam was perceived in the nineteenth century as a monolithic system that bundled race, religion, and culture into a single timeless, decadent, and tangled mess. Becker and his cohort were the first generation of oriental scholars to challenge both the orthodoxy of a timeless Orient as well as the largely uncontested cultural and ontological standing of Christianity. In the closing pages of *Christianity and Islam*, Becker noted the waning influence of religion in twentieth-century Europe:

If I correctly interpret the signs of the times, a retrograde movement in religious development has now begun. The religion inspiring a single personality has secured domination over the whole of life: family, society, and state have bowed beneath its power. Then the reaction begins: slowly religion loses its comprehensive force and as its history is learned, even at the price of sorrow, it slowly recedes within the true limits of its operation, the individual, the personality, in which it is naturally rooted.<sup>71</sup>

In Becker’s view, the study of history was directly linked to diminishing power of religion in every day life, and by introducing the historical method to oriental studies, Becker was essentially undermining the good standing of Christian apologetics as a legitimate mode of thought. Becker also noted that the religious atrophy produced a distinct feeling of “sorrow,” an observation that spoke to the fin de siècle’s crisis of faith. As such, it should be noted that Becker’s challenge to time-honored traditions and institutions was not fundamentally different

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<sup>70</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (New York: OUP, 2001), xx.

<sup>71</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 108-109.

than what Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was demonstrating with money or what Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) had in mind with this work on human consciousness.

In *The Philosophy of Money* (1900,) for example, Simmel traced the historical development of money from the earliest barter systems to the early twentieth-century monetary system. The direct trade of goods was the chief characteristic of economic activity during the most primitive stages of human development, but as the complexity of these societies increased over time, they eventually adopted specific forms of currency. In most cases, this currency either reflected the most important good in that particular society—such as bronze coinage in the coastal city of Olbia—or adhered to the medieval mentality of “much gets more” by producing physically large paper and metal currency. The principle of “much gets more” was also the driving force behind the accumulation of precious metals in the mercantilist system of early modern Europe. In turn, the accumulation of currency stimulated industry and trade, thereby initiating the first major step in money’s transformation from substance to symbol. Instead of viewing money as a direct relationship between two quantities, money was now valued in relation to a third quantity: labor. Simmel’s central argument was that society’s increasingly symbolic understanding of money closely mirrored its level of intellectual and cultural development. The evolution of money from substance to symbol, then, can be understood as “a fundamental re-orientation of culture towards intellectuality.”<sup>72</sup> Simmel expanded on this idea by demonstrating the rationalizing and democratizing power of symbolic money in contemporary society, and he concluded his work by assigning money an integral role in Europe’s cultural shift from an absolute to relative understanding of existence. The underlying assumption of Simmel’s work was that societies progress from lower to higher forms of organization, and it was this

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<sup>72</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (New York: Routledge, 2004), 162.

evolutionary understanding of social structures that united Simmel's project with the work of the fin de siècle's most celebrated intellectuals: Durkheim, Freud, Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), Weber, and others. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that Becker's *Christianity and Islam* employed an evolutionary understanding of historical development—especially in regard to religion, culture, and society—that expressed deep affinities with communities of discourse other than turn of the century German orientalism.

In *Christianity and Islam*, Becker developed a methodology that relied on the concept of religious forms. He argued that Christianity and Islam represented highly complex forms of religious life, and the majority of his study was dedicated to demonstrating Islam's evolution from a simple form to a complex structure. According to Becker, Islam in its original form was “merely a recognition of Arab supremacy, of the unity of God and of Muhammad's prophetic mission.”<sup>73</sup> But, as Becker continues:

In a few centuries Islam became a complex religious structure, a confusion of Greek philosophy and Roman law, accurately regulating every department of human life from the deepest problems of morality to the daily use of the toothpick, and the fashions of dress and hair. This change from the simplicity of the founder's religious teaching to a system of practical morality often wholly divergent from primitive doctrine, is a transformation which all the great religions of the world have undergone.<sup>74</sup>

Becker was a believer in the *a priori* existence of religious feeling, and he thought that the founders of the great religions—Jesus of Nazareth, Muhammad, the Buddha—were able to successfully inspire the feelings of true religion in the human heart. Religious systems, or what we might call organized religion, resulted from the interaction of genuine religious feeling with the “pre-existing capacities of civilization.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, our quest for higher understanding

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<sup>73</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 34.

<sup>74</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 34-35.

<sup>75</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 35.

is always limited by the time and place in which we exist, by our need to secure resources, and by our desire to die another day.

In regard to the *a priori* existence of religious feeling, Becker was not as radical a thinker as Durkheim. Although Becker undermined traditional notions of religious feeling by including religions other than Christianity, he never challenged the divinity of the individual experience. He left sufficient room in his account for European Christians to dismiss other religions as inappropriate structures that misinterpreted a truly legitimate and unabashedly divine experience. Durkheim, on the other hand, argued that religious feeling, although very much real, was actually a sociological phenomenon. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim argued that the totem was “both the symbol of god and of society” and that god and society were therefore “one and the same.”<sup>76</sup> Durkheim, along with Weber, believed that human beings are social animals that are often, if not always, unaware of the webs of significance in which they are ensnared. Durkheim also believed it was the task of social scientists to disentangle those webs. The most complex of these cultural webs was, of course, religion. At several points in the text, he makes clear that religion would not have survived if it were nothing more than a “system of misleading fictions.”<sup>77</sup> While Becker merely assumed the authenticity of religious feeling in the traditional sense, Durkheim actively demonstrated that such feelings derived from our inherently gregarious tendencies, our primordial connection to the clan. Religion, for Durkheim, was a social experience, not a spiritual one.

A second fruitful comparison between the two thinkers was their understanding of religious forms. In *Christianity and Islam*, Becker conceived of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism as complex religious structures emanating from the same fundamental experience of

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<sup>76</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 154.

<sup>77</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 71.



“true religion.” Contemporary religion, for Becker, was comparable to a game of telephone where the original message was distorted every time it was whispered in the ear of the next person in line.<sup>78</sup> Each new layer of religious complexity altered the meaning of the original message:

The object of all this investigation is, in my opinion, one only: to discover how the religious experience of the founder of a faith accommodates itself to pre-existing civilization, in the effort to make its influence operative. The eventual triumph of the new religion is in every case and at every time nothing more than a compromise: nor can more be expected, inasmuch as the religious instinct, though one of the most important influences in man, is not the sole determining influence upon his nature.<sup>79</sup>

In Becker’s view, a nascent religious movement could only survive if it was able to effectively accommodate itself to society, but cultural accommodation also implied compromising certain key elements of the original message. It was therefore the case that the success of the major world religions—measured in terms of both temporal longevity and geographical scope—was contingent upon their unique ability to accommodate the values of various cultures and societies from one time period to the next and “to make [their] influence operative.” For Becker, what the world religions had in common was that they evolved from simple forms, i.e. the original teachings of a single individual, to complex structures that possessed distinct political, cultural, and even economic dimensions. It was in this sense that Becker’s view of religious forms was decidedly evolutionary. In fact, Becker’s argument about the complexity of religious systems in

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<sup>78</sup> Telephone, a popular children’s game, is better known as “Chinese whispers.” The image of the Orient, i.e. all non-European lands, as a site of utter confusion and distortion is a classic orientalist motif, perhaps most famously invoked in George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant” (1936): “This is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of the events the vaguer it becomes.” It is interesting to note, then, that Becker’s interpretation of Christianity as an historical and cultural phenomenon originating in the Orient suggests that it too was subject to these same forces of oriental distortion.

<sup>79</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 108.

highly complex societies was reminiscent of Simmel's observations about the development of complex monetary systems in advanced civilizations.

It is also important to note that Becker only extended the authenticity of religious feeling to the three aforementioned religions. He had nothing to contribute on the subject of magic or on the so-called primitive religions. Durkheim, on the other hand, considered the "lesser religions" as being "no less worthy than others."<sup>80</sup> The reason that Durkheim held all religions equal was because he believed that all forms of religious practice were manifestations of the exact same phenomenon: totemism. Religion, according to Durkheim, was always the "collective represented in symbolic form."<sup>81</sup> In other words, the totem embodied society, and if society, or the collective, became increasingly complex, so too did the totemic principle. Whereas Becker believed that there was something genuinely troubling about the current complexity of religious forms, Durkheim considered the emergence of religious complexity as the product of a natural and scientific process, not at all different from how a plant develops from a seed or a chicken from an egg. It was for this reason that Durkheim believed that an analysis of the most elementary form of religious life—Aboriginal Australian totemism—constituted "one well-made experiment" that could shed new light on the most universal elements of religion.<sup>82</sup>

A Durkheim-inspired comparative history of Christianity and Islam would most certainly focus on the individual totems of each religion. In Becker's view, however, Christianity and Islam were cut from the same Hellenic cloth. To be more precise, Christianity was complicated by the Greco-Oriental culture of later Hellenism, and Islam, in turn, was influenced by what Becker called Christian Oriental Hellenism. In his later work on the subject, particularly *Der Islam im Rahmen einer allgemeinen Kulturgeschichte* (1922) and *Das Erbe der Antike im Orient*

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<sup>80</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, xix.

<sup>82</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, xvi.

*und Okzident* (1931), Becker asserted that “Muslim civilization [was] one of the chief heirs of the cultural legacy of antiquity.”<sup>83</sup> It was Becker, after all, who famously remarked that “ohne Alexander den Großen, keine islamische Zivilisation!”<sup>84</sup>

Becker’s *Christianity and Islam* represented the integration of Islam into world history. More specifically, he was attempting to demonstrate how Christianity and Islam emerged from the same Mediterranean culture. However, the assertion that Christianity and Islam shared a common heritage was highly problematic in a society that consistently weighed the moral and scientific progress of European Christendom against the perception of a stagnant Orient. In response to this conundrum, Becker defined religion as a function of culture. While other scholars maintained that the religious teachings of Islam were the primary mover of men in the Orient, Becker had something else in mind: “Die Religion blüht und gedeiht auf dem Boden, den andere Mächte gedüngt und vorbereitet haben.”<sup>85</sup> More importantly, however, Becker argued that it was the Renaissance that divided the West from the East. The Renaissance marked the point in history where Christianity became modern and Islam remained medieval. A second failing of Islam was that it was unable to fully incorporate the Christian Oriental Hellenism that came before it. One of the shining achievements of modern Christianity, according to Becker, was that it absorbed the greatest virtues of Greek and even Oriental culture without fundamentally altering its identity.

Becker’s interpretation of the Renaissance in Western culture echoed the findings of his colleague Max Weber. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber

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<sup>83</sup> Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge*, 198.

<sup>84</sup> The origin of this quote is unclear, but it is routinely associated with Becker. Irwin, for instance, attributes it to Albert Hourani’s “Islam and the Philosophers of History” (1980).

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Mark Batunsky, “Carl Heinrich Becker: From Old to Modern Islamology. Commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ‘Der Islam als Problem,’” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 13, No. 3 (Aug. 1981), 292.

rejected Marxist historical materialism in favor of cultural explanations that identified religion, among other things, as the engine of historical change. His central argument was that the rise of the modern capitalist system was contingent upon the widespread acceptance of Calvinist values. According to Calvinist doctrine, there could be no salvation through faith. Long before the creation of man, God had already preordained which souls to save and which souls to condemn. There was no way of knowing for certain if an individual was one of God's predestined elect, but it was believed that an individual's economic and social circumstances might offer a key indication.

In keeping with the fin de siècle *mentalité*, Weber placed a heavy emphasis on the intense anxiety that such a religious teaching would create. Calvinists lived in constant fear that they were not one of the elect, so they did everything in their power to ensure, at least in their own minds, that they were worthy of God's grace. The most conspicuous site of Calvinist piety was the workplace. Calvinists believed that one's work was a holy vocation. To work well was to worship well. They also believed that professional success was an indication of God's grace, and to be frivolous with one's earnings was to insult what God had so generously given them. Calvinists, by and large, did not donate large sums of money to their church, which left them with the option to either save or invest. Given that Calvinists must constantly work and never spend, it was no small wonder, at least according to Weber, that Calvinists were the first group of people to accumulate large amounts of capital.

The common thread linking the works of Becker and Weber was that they both used religion and culture as a means of understanding the Great Divergence. According to Mary Fulbrook, "the encyclopedic works of Max Weber represented an extraordinary attempt to explore and explain the uniquely dynamic paths of Western history, in comparison with patterns

of society and culture in other areas of the world.”<sup>86</sup> Both Becker and Weber, born in 1876 and 1864, respectively, were part of a generation of scholars that was trying to find new ways of understanding both the world and Europe’s place in it. They both considered culture the primary engine of historical change, and their work was ultimately situated between “scientific positivism and a more historicist idealism.”<sup>87</sup> Although they both rejected the dialectical thinking of Marxism, they effectively demonstrated that men do indeed make their own history, albeit not as they please. Culture is the limiting factor, often in the form of religion, but they still managed to allow space in the study of history for the creation of human meaning and motivation. As a result, their work bears the mark of the modern. Also of particular importance for this German pair was the fact that the German Empire had finally entered the Imperial Age. If scholars could discover the root of European dominance, they could, at the very least, help maintain it.

One of the key themes of the fin de siècle was how an entire generation of anxious thinkers found new and innovative ways of saying exactly the same thing as previous generations. In Becker’s case, he affirmed the commonly held belief that Christianity was far more advanced than Islam, but he rejected the notion that Christianity was inherently better or more truthful than Islam. He instead argued that Christianity was more advanced because it underwent a series of historical and intellectual processes that Islam simply did not. In theory, Islam was capable of the very same development, but as Becker noted, it took Christianity centuries to reach its modern formulation. The implication is clear.

Becker’s thesis wasn’t just a symbolic victory for all things Christian and European. He firmly believed that his research could be put to good use by the German imperial project, and indeed it was. His later essays on colonialism outlined racial and religious hierarchies: white

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<sup>86</sup> Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 146.

<sup>87</sup> Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany*, 146.

Europeans were a step above Orientals who themselves were a step above black Africans. Likewise, Christianity was ranked higher than Islam, which, in turn, was ranked higher than paganism. What was most fascinating about Becker's choice of hierarchies was the renewed sense of importance it gave to his earlier work on Islam. According to Becker, Europeans must become accustomed to the idea of an Islamic Africa because if given the choice between Christianity and Islam, which was precisely the choice European colonizers had hope to impose, black Africans would always choose Islam because it was a closer to "the natural forms of black thought."<sup>88</sup> In other words, the transition from paganism to Islam was merely a hop, skip, and a jump whereas the transition from paganism straight to Christianity represented too great a chasm. Religious forms develop over long periods of time, and Becker argued that trying to eradicate Islam would completely undermine Europe's civilizing project. Islam was an important stepping-stone for the eventual Christianization of Africa.

The Second Oriental Renaissance lifted oriental studies to new heights. In the words of Enno Littman, taken from a letter written to Carl Becker in September of 1913:

What [amazing] work has been completed in the last fifteen years! How unimaginable our knowledge has been, from all sides, enriched! What new perspectives have been opened for us in all, absolutely all, areas of scholarship! One is breathless and can hardly keep pace. We live in an era of electricity, even in scholarship!<sup>89</sup>

For German orientalists, the fin de siècle was indeed an age of electricity. German universities remained Christian and classical, but new spaces were being opened up for Oriental scholarship. New sources inspired new methods. Becker's scholarship on Islam certainly represented an improvement over the previous generation. He challenged the notion that Islam was fundamentally timeless and foreign by comparing it to the most familiar of religions:

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<sup>88</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 365-366.

<sup>89</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 212.

Christianity. He gave Islam a history, and he subjected it to the rigor of intellectual scrutiny. Becker was at the cutting-edge of his profession, and the quality of his work placed him in the company of great minds like Weber and Durkheim.

On the other hand, German Orientalism in the fin de siècle was inherently linked to empire. Becker was part of a unique cohort, the first generation of scholars that sought to convert their knowledge of the Orient into colonial power. Becker eventually gave up his life in academia to become a government official and fully pursue the politics of colonialism. Never before had knowledge been quite so dangerous.

#### **4 CULTURE AND THE STUDY OF HISTORY**

In *Christianity and Islam*, Carl Heinrich Becker developed a view of religious systems that not only mirrored, at least to some degree, the theoretical model employed by Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* but also incorporated some of Max Weber's most pertinent insights on the relationship between culture and history. Broadly speaking, the sociology of religion is the application of sociological principles to the study of religion, and Becker's implementation of the sociology of religion places *Christianity and Islam* firmly within the tradition of both Weber and Durkheim. Sociology, a discipline "commonly held [to have] crystallized in the nineteenth century against the background of an accelerating industrial revolution," was instrumental in re-making the modern Orient as a worthy object of

study.<sup>90</sup> Becker's scholarship, deeply rooted in social and cultural analysis, placed him at odds with the third founding father of sociology, Karl Marx. The purpose of this chapter is to re-affirm Becker's connection to the burgeoning field of sociology, envisioned in the present study as a community of discourse, by linking his work to the historical debate between Max Weber and Karl Marx about the rise of the modern capitalist system. As such, this chapter will juxtapose the cultural analysis of Becker and Weber against Marx's historical materialism. While on the subject of culture and history, this chapter will also examine Becker's work in light of Weber's famous rationalization thesis. My argument is that Becker's *Christianity and Islam* represents the introduction of rationalization to oriental studies.

In regard to the development of the world's major religions, Becker believed culture to be of the utmost significance. In *Christianity and Islam*, Becker draws a clear distinction between the ability of the founders of the great religions—Jesus of Nazareth, Muhammad, the Buddha—to inspire feelings of “true religion in the human heart” versus the intricate religious systems that eventually crystallized around their original messages.<sup>91</sup> Durkheim made a similar observation in *The Elementary Forms* when he deliberately selected the Arunta of central Australia as the subject of his study. He believed that their “primitive religion” was ripe for scientific investigation because their society “exhibited the most simple social structure—structures devoid of accretions which accumulate over the course of development.”<sup>92</sup> In Durkheim's view, structural accretions hinder the observation of pure phenomenon, but it was these very same structural accretions and cultural crystallizations that formed the basis of Becker's study.

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<sup>90</sup> W.S.F. Pickering, *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion: Themes and Theories* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), xix.

<sup>91</sup> Carl Heinrich Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Pickering, *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion*, 103.



Given that *Christianity and Islam* was a work of history and not theology, Becker was primarily concerned with historical development of Christian and Islamic societies and not questions of spiritual veracity. Moreover, in order for Becker to compare “like versus like,” he had to assume the authenticity of religious feeling in both religions. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to Durkheim’s position that religious feeling, while very much real, is actually derived from our inherently gregarious tendencies and therefore a sociological phenomenon. A second benefit of Becker’s distinction between the authenticity of religious feeling and religious systems is that it allowed him, to borrow Durkheim’s language, distinguish the sacred from the profane. Oriental studies was a more conservative enterprise than the world of social science inhabited by Weber and Durkheim, and it served Becker well to make clear that his historical and sociological critique was aimed solely at conspicuous, man-made structures and as such, fell strictly within the realm of the profane.

Furthermore, Becker argued in *Christianity and Islam* that religious systems resulted from the interaction of genuine religious feeling with the “pre-existing capacities of civilization.”<sup>93</sup> In Becker’s view, “the highest attainments of human life are dependent upon circumstances of time and place, and environment often exerts a more powerful influence than creative power.”<sup>94</sup> In regard to the impact of environmental factors on the development of human civilization, Becker sided with Weber and his special emphasis on the primacy of culture over the historical materialism of Karl Marx. Becker, for instance, has little to say in *Christianity and Islam* about material conditions and economic activity. It was, instead, the “Greco-Oriental *culture* of later Hellenism,” and neither the material conditions of first-century Galilee nor the

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<sup>93</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 35.

<sup>94</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 35.

economic activity of the Roman Empire that threatened to “[overpower] the teaching of Jesus.”<sup>95</sup>

Becker notes a similar course of development for Islam, and he argues that it did not take long for the young religion to “assume the spiritual panoply” and defend itself from external threats.<sup>96</sup>

Although Weber never completed a full-scale treatment of Islam, he makes a similar argument to Becker in other parts of his sociological writings. In *Weber and Islam*, Bryan S. Turner characterizes Weber’s interest in Islam as being split between two different topics: the Islamic ethic and the socio-economic structure of later Islamic political dynasties. On the topic of the Islamic ethic, Turner recapitulates Weber’s argument as follows:

Although Islam emerged at Mecca as a monotheistic religion under the prophetic supervision of Muhammad, it did not develop into an ascetic this-worldly religion because its main social carrier was a warrior group. The content of the religious message was transformed into a set of values compatible with the mundane needs of a warrior stratum. The salvational element of Islam was transformed into a secular quest for land; the result was that Islam became a religion of accommodation rather than a religion of transformation.<sup>97</sup>

Indeed, Weber notes a similar process by which Sufism “catered to the emotional and orgiastic needs of the masses,” thereby transforming popular Islam into “a religion of mystical flight.”<sup>98</sup> In both versions of the Islamic ethic, it was very much the case that “the pristine message of Meccan monotheism” was polluted and consequently transformed by what Becker described as the “pre-existing capacities of civilization.” As noted by both thinkers, the true religion of the holiest prophets is always refashioned by the culture of the particular time and place in which it first plants its roots.

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<sup>95</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 35. Emphasis mine.

<sup>96</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Turner, *Weber and Islam*, 171.

<sup>98</sup> Turner, *Weber and Islam*, 172.

In *Weber and Islam*, Turner also argues that Max Weber derived the majority of his working knowledge of Islamic social structures from Becker.<sup>99</sup> If Turner's assertion is correct, then it is likely that Weber based some of his conclusions on the Islamic ethic on the following passage from *Christianity and Islam*:

It would be incorrect for the most part to regard the warrior bands which started from Arabia as inspired by religious enthusiasm or to attribute to them the fanaticism which was first aroused by the crusades and in an even greater degree by the later Turkish wars. The Muhammadan fanatics of the wars of conquest, whose reputation was famous among later generations, felt but a very scanty interest in religion and occasionally displayed an ignorance of its fundamental tenets which we can hardly exaggerate... These impulses were economic and the new religion was nothing more than a party cry of unifying power, though there is no reason to suppose that it was not a real moral force in the life of Muhammad and his immediate contemporaries.<sup>100</sup>

Becker identified “warrior bands” as the primary “social carrier” of Islam, and in his view, these warrior groups—originally Arabian but later mostly Turkish—were motivated first and foremost by economic necessity. There's a sense in which Becker considered these warriors as Muslim in name only, and he demonstrated no reservation in describing their ignorance of their own religion as existing beyond hyperbole. On a final note, Becker maintains his commitment to the authenticity of religious feeling by refusing to undermine the possible religious and moral motivations of Muhammad and his earliest followers. Again, there is a clear distinction in Becker's work between true religion and the “pre-existing capacities of civilization.”

The reason for Weber's articulation of Islam's militaristic and mystically aloof ethic was to demonstrate its incapability with the rise of capitalism. To be clear, Weber wasn't dismissing the ability of Islamic civilizations to adopt the capitalist system once it was already in existence. He was instead suggesting that the orientation of the Islamic ethic predisposed it against the emergence of the “ascetic this-worldly” outlook necessary to break the cycle of pre-capitalist

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<sup>99</sup> Turner, *Weber and Islam*, 99.

<sup>100</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 29.

economic activity. Take, for example, Weber's argument—which clearly expands on the work of Becker—that the “mundane needs of a warrior stratum” transformed Islam into a “secular quest for land.” In *Christianity and Islam*, Becker argued that Islam routinely incorporated Christian ideas regardless of whether those ideas actually corresponded to the material activity of Islam's warrior stratum:

Either religion regards man as no more than a sojourner in this world. It is not worth while to arrange for a permanent habitation, and luxurious living is but pride. Hence the simplicity of private dwellings in medieval times both in the East and West. Architectural expense is confined to churches and mosques, which were intended for the service of God. These Christian ideas are reflected in the inexhaustible storehouse of Muhammadan theory, the great collections of traditions, as follows: “The worst use which a believer can make of his money is to build.” “Every building, except a mosque, will stand to discredit of its architect on the day of resurrection.” These polemics, which Islam inherited from Christianity, are directed not only against building in general, but also against the decoration of lofty edifices... These theories were out of harmony with the worldly tendencies of the conquerors, who built themselves castles, such as [Qasr] Amra: they belong to the spirit of Christianity rather than to Islam.<sup>101</sup>

The key difference between Christianity and Islam, at least in practice, was the latter's emphasis of temporality over spirituality. On a theoretical and theological plane, both Abrahamic religions considered “man as no more a sojourner in this world.” As a result of the present life representing a mere prelude to the next one, Christians and Muslims were implored to donate their money to their church or to their mosque instead of investing in greater comfort and luxury, but in Becker's view, Islam's commendation of modest accommodations channeled the spirit of Christianity rather than essence of its own religious tradition. To support his argument, Becker cites the incredible ease with which the economic activity of Islam's “worldly conquerors” thwarted the religious virtue of humility. If modest accouterments were in fact ingrained in the spirit of Islam, then the construction of elaborate fortifications—such as Qasr Amra in the early

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<sup>101</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 55-56.

eighth century—would have neither taken place nor would they have been accepted by Muslim locals. The implication of this particular argument, however, was that Europeans adhered to the spirit of Christianity by refusing to build ornate castles, a claim that certainly represents a wild stretch of the imagination.

Nevertheless, it was Becker's contention that religious beliefs exerted a dominant influence on economic activity in Europe while posing the reverse scenario in the Orient. This position not only represented a common strain of thought between Becker and Weber, but it also acted as the point of departure for Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. In *The Protestant Ethic*, as well as some of his sociological writings on Islam, Weber described religious ethics as being wholly separate from the original intentions of each religion's earliest practitioners. As such, the Protestant and Islamic ethics are essentially cultural formations, a synthesis—or dialectic—of new religious ideas with old cultural institutions. In the case of Weber's most famous study, he argued that the origin of capitalism was linked with the emergence of a unique religious belief: the doctrine of double predestination. In Weber's words, it was "by the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men...are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death."<sup>102</sup> According to Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, Weber maintained that the theological position of predestination produced within Calvinist believers an

enduring crisis of "proof"—of demonstrating *to oneself* that one was among the chosen spiritual elite—fashioned a distinctive kind of individual...Unable to find solace in the sacraments or in the image of a kindly God, aware that their neighbors, even their family, may be among the perpetually condemned, Calvinist believers were psychologically isolated. Their distance from God could only be precariously bridged, and their inner tensions only partially relieved, by unstinting, purposeful labor. The result was innerworldly rational asceticism: rigorous, scrupulous, methodical work within a calling.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 70.

<sup>103</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xix.

In similar fashion to C. H. Becker, Weber advanced the argument that religious belief molded the character of economic activity. It is also important to keep in mind that the concept of predestination emerged almost a millennium and half after the ministry of Jesus Christ, a fact that demonstrates the cultural and, to some extent, sociological nature of religious beliefs and practices. Recalling the work of Durkheim, the core doctrine of Calvinism represented an accretion—fundamentally cultural in nature—that complicated the simplicity of Christianity’s underlying social structure.<sup>104</sup> In summation, both Becker and Weber were deeply concerned with the profound sociological impact on human behavior, particularly economic activity, which specific cultural ideas, often in the form of religious dogmas, could produce on entire civilizations.

In keeping with Weber’s views on culture, Becker makes the point in *Christianity and Islam* that “dissensions [in Christianity] persist even now because millions of people are unable to distinguish pure religion [the original teaching of Jesus] from the forms of expression belonging to an extinct culture [the Greco-Oriental culture of later Hellenism].”<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, he argued that Christianity and Islam emerged from the same cultural milieu: classical antiquity. Despite their common cultural heritage, there could be, in Becker’s estimation, no denying the increasing gulf between Christian Europe and the Islamic Orient. Weber’s argument, as previously noted, was that the Protestant ethic, an ascetic this-worldly outlook, engendered a pattern of behavior that, while not exclusively sufficient, was certainly necessary for the development of capitalist institutions. For Becker, on the other hand, it was the cultural experience of the Renaissance that set the West on a wholly divergent path to modern capitalism.

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<sup>104</sup> Pickering, *Durkheim’s Sociology of Religion*, 103.

<sup>105</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 35.

The sociology of religion, as practiced by Weber and Becker, emphasized the significance of culture in both the historical development of religious systems as well as in guiding human action. Despite their disagreement on the origins of European hegemony, both scholars provided an explanation that was fundamentally cultural. Karl Marx, on the other hand, offered an account of capitalism and Western dominance that was completely devoid of cultural analysis. Whereas Weber and Becker discounted the potential Islamic origins of capitalism on account of the Islamic ethic and the Renaissance, respectively, Marx dismissed what he called the Asiatic Mode of Production on geographic grounds. In “The British Rule in India,” first published in the *New-York Daily Tribune* on June 25, 1853, Marx described geographic conditions stretching from the Western Sahara to India as being uncondusive to the abolishment of the feudal system or, in some cases, slave society.<sup>106</sup> Again, Marx’s argument is that political, legal, and cultural development is predicated on changes to the economic base, and in the case of non-European civilizations, the climate—not to mention the material conditions that accompany it—prevented any meaningful changes to the mode of production in regard to both its means and its social organization.

Although Marx never fully developed his theory of history, its most rudimentary formulation can be found in *The German Ideology*. Co-written with Friedrich Engels in 1845, *The German Ideology* possesses all the basic components of the materialist conception of history, even if it lacks the more technical terminology that characterized Marx’s later writings. Rejecting the idealism of his mentor G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), who posited that human beings impose categories of understanding onto reality, Marx rooted the first principles of historical inquiry in the physical and empirical certainties of the real world. It was for this reason that Marx argued that the “first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human

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<sup>106</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), 1.

individuals.”<sup>107</sup> Moreover, these individuals “begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”<sup>108</sup> In other words, individuals construct and participate in a mode of production that encompasses both the means of production, which is to say the technology, labor, and eventually capital necessary for “[producing] their means of subsistence,” and the network of well-defined social relations that govern the interactions between individuals and property. The former is conditioned by the latter insofar that technology and labor can only be organized within the confines of an already established social order.

What is most notable about Marx’s conception of history—at least in regard to the present study—is its commitment to material causality. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851), a classical example of historical materialism in practice, Marx famously remarked that

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under the circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.<sup>109</sup>

For Marx, the inherited circumstances of humankind are fundamentally material, and as a result, the root cause of historical change must always originate with the means of production.

According to Bryan S. Turner, “traditional Marxism [maintains that] either the economic base is the cause of events that take place in the superstructure of law and politics or the struggle

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<sup>107</sup> Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 149.

<sup>108</sup> Marx, “The German Ideology,” 150. Emphasis mine.

<sup>109</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 595.



between social classes is the causal agent.”<sup>110</sup> The struggle between social classes over the means of production is, in Marx’s view, the primary mechanism through which human civilizations transition from one historical epoch to the next. Although contemporary Marxists have undoubtedly distanced themselves from the teleological pitfalls of this particular schematic, the central role of class conflict remains integral to Marxian analysis. More important to the current study, however, is Marx’s argument that changes in the superstructure are *caused* by changes in the economic base. In this view, historical changes in the organization of labor power coupled with technological innovations engender corresponding changes in political and legal systems. Although the base-superstructure model is a testament to Marx’s dialectical thinking, the superstructure is always junior partner to the economic base, i.e. the only true engine of historical change.

Conventional wisdom maintains that Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* represented a rejoinder to Marx’s historical materialism.<sup>111</sup> In Marx’s view, the seizure of the means of production by the bourgeoisie in European society marked the end of the feudal age and the emergence of the capitalist system. Any future transition from capitalism to socialism is contingent upon the working class wresting control of the means of production from the bourgeoisie. A key theme in Marx’s understanding of historical epochs is that an increasingly large number of people gain unfettered access to the means of production with each successive stage of development. Greater control over the means of production essentially allows individuals to exert greater control over producing the means of their own subsistence. Weber, on the other hand, rejected Marx’s material conception of history by suggesting that attempts to raise economic productivity in pre-capitalist Europe by increasing piece rates were unmitigated

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<sup>110</sup> Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*, 84.

<sup>111</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xii.

failures. Instead of “working harder and longer [to become richer],” workers in traditional societies stopped pursuing economic activities once they reached their customary wage.<sup>112</sup> For Weber, changes in the economic base alone were insufficient in explaining the emergence of not only an entirely unprecedented mode of production, i.e. capitalism, but also the proliferation of an entrepreneurial and distinctly modern mentality.

The debate between Karl Marx and Max Weber represents the crystallization of distinct and historically significant community of discourse. Ken Morrison framed their debate in terms of the birth of structural theory—a school of thought that sought to examine isolated social fields in order to understand human behavior. In addition to Émile Durkheim, Max and Weber are often cited as the founding fathers of modern sociology. Historians have classified Carl Heinrich Becker as both a traditional orientalist and a staunch imperialist, but it is my contention that Becker was participating in larger community of discourse. Becker’s Islamic *Kulturgeschichte* placed a special emphasis on culture as a framework for understanding human behavior, especially in regard to the historical development of Christianity and Islam. Becker, Marx, and Weber unanimously agreed on the overpowering nature of economic activity in the Orient. Marx described the Asiatic Mode of Production in terms of geographical determinism while Becker and Weber interpreted the Orient as the site of perpetual conquest. The more spiritual aspects of Islam, demonstrated by Becker to be primarily of Christian origin, were undermined and snuffed out in light of economic and material realities. Where these thinkers diverged, however, was on the relationship between the mode of production and the function of culture in early modern Europe. For Marx, base precedes superstructure in all cases, but Becker and Weber argued that culture, particular culture infused with religious significance, was the primary mover of men in Europe after the Renaissance and Reformation. Becker, for instance, attributed “the simplicity of

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<sup>112</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, xvi.

private dwellings in medieval times both in the East and West” to the aesthetic spirit of Christianity instead of the material limitations of feudalism.<sup>113</sup> He also interpreted the parallel historical development of Christianity and Islam as fundamentally similar expressions of Hellenic culture. Furthermore, it was the great cultural flourishing of the Renaissance, not the Industrial Revolution, which ushered in the dawn of a new capitalist age. *Christianity and Islam* exhibits deep affinities with Weber’s *Protestant Ethic*, and the texts stand united in their opposition to Marx’s historical materialism. On a final note, Becker’s *Christianity and Islam* represented the introduction of cultural analysis into oriental studies.

## 5 CONCLUSION

While other historians have noted Carl Heinrich Becker’s essential role in modernizing oriental studies, the purpose of the present study has been to examine the precise methods and intellectual tools that Becker employed in order to shift the emphasis of oriental studies from the ancient to the modern world. My central argument has been that Becker utilized the sociology of religion, a field most often associated with the works of Max Weber and Émile

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<sup>113</sup> Becker, *Christianity and Islam*, 55-56.

Durkheim, as his methodology of choice. My thesis also advanced the argument that *Christianity and Islam*, a text that has received relatively little attention from historians, represented Becker's finest achievement as a scholar. In *Christianity and Islam*, Becker conceived of religion as a complex cultural system that evolved over time, and his sociological and historical-minded approach represented a fierce rejoinder to the theological and ecclesiastical modes of thought that dominated oriental studies until the early twentieth century.

More importantly, however, *Christianity and Islam* demonstrated that Becker was a key intellectual at the turn of the twentieth century. Becker's work transcended the limitations of oriental studies by taking seriously the notion that religious belief possessed a history of its own. *Christianity and Islam* represents the formulation of Islamic *Kulturgeschichte*, a mode of cultural analysis that subverted the conventions and customs of traditional oriental studies.

The purpose of the present study has been to expand on the historiography of Carl Heinrich Becker

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,wider and historically significant implications.

At the heart of Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic* lies a paradox. In the work's conclusion, Weber writes:

As asceticism began to change the world and endeavored to exercise its influence over it, the outward goods of this world gained increasing and finally inescapable power over men, as never before seen in history. Today its spirit has fled from this shell—whether for all time, who knows? Certainly, victorious capitalism has no further need for this support now that it rests on the foundation of the machine. Even the optimistic mood of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems destined to fade away, and the idea of “duty in a calling” haunts our lives like the ghost of once-held religious belief.<sup>114</sup>

Weber's argument was that the Protestant work ethic, which was responsible for endowing work with religious and cultural significance and therefore instilling the spirit of capitalism in the minds of Calvinist believers, has long since been fundamentally undermined by the very same economic system it put into place. Capitalism, once fully developed, “obeys its own formal logic of production, accumulation, and exchange, and no longer requires any form of spiritual legitimation.”<sup>115</sup> In similar fashion, mature capitalism has eschewed the value-rationality (*Wertrationalität*) of Protestantism in favor of instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). Instrumental rationality finds its most powerful cultural expression in the form in modern science, and although science once represented the pursuit of God's eternal truths, it now “proceeds to denude all religious belief, [including those of Protestantism], denigrating them as irrational forms of superstition or myth regardless of their intrinsic rationality or value.”<sup>116</sup> Whereas Émile Durkheim believed in the moral nature of science and its positive impact on human progress, Weber was decidedly counter-Enlightenment. **[diological turn book]**

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<sup>114</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 121.

<sup>115</sup> Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalization versus Re-enchantment* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 20.

<sup>116</sup> Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory*, 21.

It's important to keep in mind that Marx considered culture to be a function of the superstructure. Culture, like political and legal infrastructures, acts as a mere reflection of society's material conditions.

In *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory*, Nicholas Gane argues that Weber's sociology of religion, as demonstrated in *The Protestant Ethic*, was merely a subset of his larger critique of modernity. As such, he considers "the work of Weber, like that of Nietzsche, [as identifying] in the general process of enlightenment a movement towards nihilism, [defined as the devaluation of ultimate values], in the West, and [as holding] scientific rationalization to be not a cure but a key contributory factor to this process."<sup>117</sup> The legacy of Protestantism, in Weber's view, was the introduction of the two most powerful modes of devaluation known to humankind: capitalism and modern science. Not only do both systems embrace an aggressive brand of means-ends instrumentality, but they're also relentless and totalizing in their disenchantment of the world. It should be noted here that Gane considers Weber's stance on the Enlightenment as the point of

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<sup>117</sup> Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory*, 2.

departure for both the Frankfurt school and the postmodern theorists Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard.<sup>118</sup>

If rationalization and disenchantment are at the heart of Weber's research paradigm, then Carl Becker's work represents the introduction of these themes to oriental studies. Becker, much like Durkheim, believed that he was conducting scientific research. Durkheim considered *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* to represent an *experimentum cruce*s from which to deduce the laws of religion. According to W.S.F. Pickering, "Durkheim felt that to concentrate on one society and focus on its religious institutions as a whole was a far superior methodological procedure than to follow the one then in vogue, the comparative method."<sup>119</sup> In this sense, Durkheim's version of the sociology of religion was fundamentally different from the one employed by Becker in *Christianity and Islam*.

Although Becker was never explicit in *Christianity and Islam* about the scientific weight of his findings, his personal letters to the Dutch orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936) in 1914 indicate a whole-hearted belief in the scientific nature of his work. He was, for instance, "terribly upset" by the accusation that he, along with his fellow Germans, was practicing "politicized science."<sup>120</sup> In Becker's view, not only did the comparative method render scholarship that was historical and sociological for its own sake, but it also produced useful knowledge of the Orient that could be put to use by the state. Becker's moral outrage at Snouck Hurgronje's accusation rested in the fact that he detected no conflict of interest between scholarly research and colonial politics.

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<sup>118</sup> For a discussion of Max Weber's influence on Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt school, see Ehrhard Bahr, *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 37-38.

<sup>119</sup> Pickering, *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion*, 102.

<sup>120</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 367.

In *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, Marchand argues that Martin Hartmann and Carl Becker represented a break from the orientalist tradition insofar that they renounced theology and philology in favor of “[putting] their knowledge to political use.”<sup>121</sup> They were, in other words, committed to German colonialism. Marchand’s interpretation of Hartmann and Becker suggests a relationship between oriental knowledge and colonial power, but perhaps an alternate reading of their scholarship might suggest a shift in oriental studies from value-rationality to instrumental rationality. The function of oriental scholarship aimed at theological, or even philological, ends must certainly have something to do with legitimating certain religious beliefs and practices, especially in regard to Hebrew studies. This sort of scholarship is, in other words, directed at affirming religious values. Becker’s *Christianity and Islam*, on the other hand, challenges many of these values by completely altering the method through which oriental scholarship had been traditionally conducted. By distinguishing between religious feeling and religious systems and subjecting the historical development of religious systems to the sociology of religion, Becker’s study was essentially devaluing, which is to say disenchanting, the religious beliefs and practices—at least as they understood them—of countless Christians and Muslims.

Although there’s a case to be made that *Christianity and Islam* is neutral on the topic of instrumentalizing oriental knowledge, Becker’s later scholarship and future political career leaves little doubt as to his views on the matter. The presence of instrumental rationality is most evident in his work on Africa and Islam. According to Gottfried Hagen, “Becker dismissed [Christian] missionaries’ fears about the spread of Islam in German colonies in Africa, arguing that Islamization was in fact inevitable, and would facilitate colonial rule.”<sup>122</sup> Becker’s reasoning was that Islam was closer than Christianity to “the natural forms of black thought” and that

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<sup>121</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, 356.

<sup>122</sup> Gottfried Hagen, “German Heralds of Holy War: Orientalists and Applied Oriental Studies,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, n. 2 (2004): 149.



scholarly knowledge of Islam, and therefore colonial power over Islam, was far more developed than their current understanding of African paganism.<sup>123</sup>

The scholarship of Martin Hartmann and, more notably, Carl Heinrich Becker, with its point of emphasis on the modern instead of the ancient Orient, represents a profound rupture in the history of oriental scholarship. The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate that such a cosmic shift would not have been possible without the invention and implementation of both a new methodology and a new way of thinking about the relationship between culture and history. My argument is that the sociology of religion, most famously developed by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, provided Becker with the necessary means of lifting the Orient out of the past and delivering it into the present. Additionally, I have used the historical materialism of Karl Marx as a point of contrast in order to explore Weber's—and by extension, Becker's—conception of culture, history, and human agency. Finally, I have demonstrated that by siding with Max Weber's views on culture, Becker also adopted the same germs of rationalization and disenchantment that persist throughout Weber's entire body of scholarly work.

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<sup>123</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, 365-366.

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