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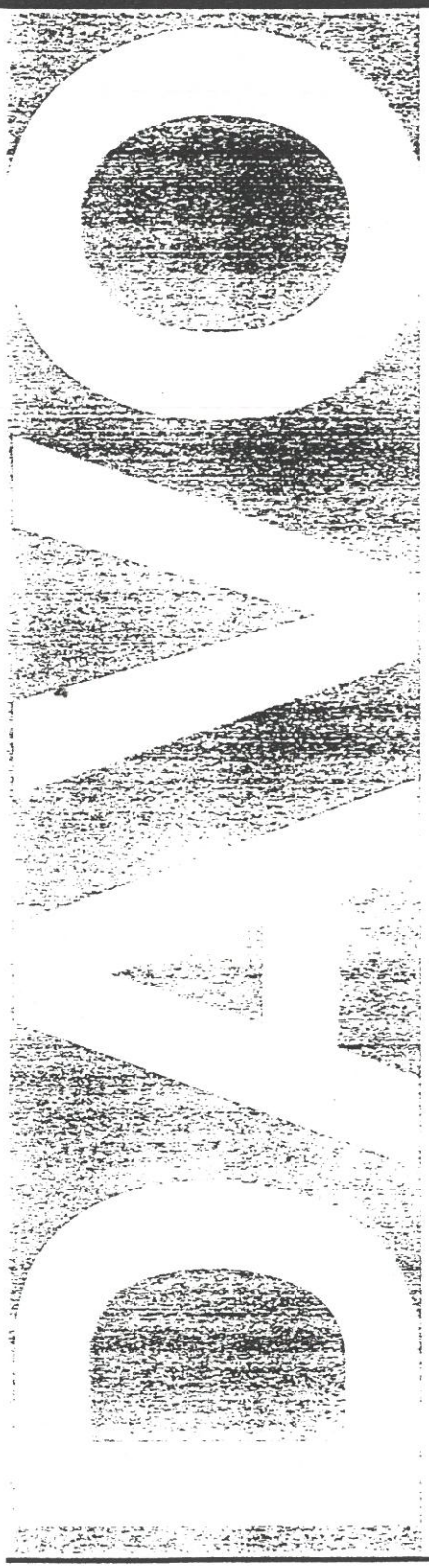

Göttingen

DAVO Congress 2001

6–8 September 2001

Mainz

First World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies 2002

8–13 September 2002

German Middle East Studies Association
for Contemporary Research and Documentation

4 Allgemeine Themen
General Issues

4.1 Discussing "Study of Islam"
by Sebastian Günther

Remarks on Gudrun Krämer's article "*On Difference and Understanding: The Use and Abuse of the Study of Islam*", DAVO Nachrichten, Nr. 12 (August 2000), pp. 57-60.

Reading Gudrun Krämer's article is both enlightening and enjoyable. The article offers thoughts and suggestions without claiming to provide ultimate solutions for the questions discussed therein. In several ways, she addresses issues that many scholars may face when scrutinizing the situation of the study of Islam in the West. Only the awareness of the problems as they really are will prepare the study of Islam for the challenges it encounters.

"How do we study Islam, and how should we do it?" This question heading G. Krämer's article is important to every non-Muslim scholar dealing with Islam. It does not really matter how s/he understands her-/himself: as ("reformed") Orientalist, Arabist, Iranist, Ottomanist, or Islamicist, or "Western" specialist in Middle Eastern Studies.

In September 2000, I gave some of my students at the University of Toronto copies of G. Krämer's paper. The majority of the nearly fifty students in the course *Civilization of Islam* are Canadians of Middle Eastern and/or Muslim backgrounds. It was not really surprising to observe that some Muslim students expressed reservations about the study of Islam conducted by non-Muslims. A variety of pro's and con's in this regard was voiced. The major argument was that some Western publications on Islam (in English) seem to misrepresent Islam and show, according to these students, bias rather than an objective approach. Admittedly, they supported their arguments with examples from recent Western publications.

However, it is worth noting that the students attempted to deal with these controversies on an academic level. Eventually, the discussion made it possible for them to realize that the disregard shown by some Muslims for Western contributions to the study of Islam is due to a lack of information about them. The students became aware of the important steps made by scholars from Europe and North America in discovering, preserving, editing and studying texts from the (classical) heritage of Islam. It was also acknowledged that there has been an increasing number of projects of cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. This interaction was perceived as a substantial step towards the understanding of Islam. It was concluded that misconceptions or misinterpretations of Islam (issued whether in publications or the other media) must be addressed and discussed openly. Gudrun Krämer's article was an excellent promoter for such a debate.

There are some other thoughts with regard to this article that I would like to mention briefly.

1. The expression "Oriental Studies" has been used for decades to address an entire branch of scholarship. Many university institutes and periodicals still have the word "Oriental" as part of their official name.

In my view, misconceptions and misinterpretations do not disappear by simply replacing old labels with new ones. This can be applied as well to the old term "Orientalist" and the new term "specialist in Middle Eastern Studies". Rather, the many fresh and alternative attempts recently made by specialists in the field, combined with solid scholarship, seem more appropriate to show that Oriental Studies, or Middle Eastern Studies, have moved on to meet new challenges, without renouncing important parts of their history as fields of scholarship.

In this regard, it is rather unfortunate that G. Krämer's article pays attention to an argument that advises readers not to use the term Orientalist since the Arabic word *mustashriq* (Orientalist) could possibly make Middle Easterners misunderstand it as *mushrik* (polytheist). Frankly, I do not think that any Middle Eastern Arabic speaker would confuse these two terms. If this were so, would we then not have to expect in a similar way the mix-up of *sharq* (East, Orient) and *shirk* (polytheism)?

2. A second thought concerns the terms "culture(s) and "civilization(s)". As known, some specialists argue for the use of these terms in the plural; others maintain that the singular is more appropriate. However, one may recall that the transition from "culture" (and "civilization") to "a culture" (and "a civilization") was first made in the social sciences after about 1920. It was a reaction against ethnocentrism and an attempt to emphasize cultural relativity.

Yet, the fundamental development of the modern concepts of "culture" (and "civilization") took place already in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Especially in the nineteenth century, there was a strong tendency among English and German philosophers to understand the two terms "culture" and "civilization" as (interchangeable and) representing "a complex whole". In other words: "culture" and "civilization" were conceived as abstract terms. They were understood as the sum of human values, regardless of the geographical, ethnic, religious, ideological, social, intellectual, moral, etc. origin or nature of particular components.

The use of "civilization" in the singular still has its advantages. It seems to gain significance again with regard to the theory of "the clash of civilizations". If there is only one presumed (world) civilization, one is required to determine more precisely what is "clashing". One may realize that it is particular individuals or groups (in their turn representing certain political, societal, economic or religious interests) that possibly

collide, rather than entire "civilizations", "cultures" or "religions" that cannot peacefully coexist.

In a city like Toronto (in which more than fifty percent of the population comes from backgrounds that indicate "visible minorities"), discussions of issues like this can be part of every day life and politics.

3. With regard to the suggestion made by some scholars of using the term Islam in the plural, one could simply respond that we would then have to use Christianity and Judaism in the plural as well. The beliefs and life styles the latter represent are, by no means, less diverse and widespread than Islam's.

Nevertheless, if Middle Eastern Studies are to be integral parts of modern academia, every possible effort should be made to combine critical scholarly approaches with a respectful view on the "other". This eventually provides the grounds for fruitful discussions with scholars studying Islam from the perspective of "insiders". It also makes it possible to present the results and insights gained in research studies on Islam, so meticulously done by many non-Muslim scholars, in a Muslim environment. One can take it for granted that these studies will receive recognition and acceptance. Of course, the latter is not the only concern of non-Muslim scholars dealing with Islam. However, it would add to the meaningfulness of their academic work.

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4.2 Bringing Middle East Studies into the Twenty-First Century

by Barry Rubin

People in Middle East studies – as well as international affairs in general and other disciplines – have not yet begun to make the transition to make full use of new media. While technical knowledge holds back many people, much of the problem is psychological and creative in nature.

Let me suggest an eight-point program (additional suggestions are welcome) to use new technologies to improve our research, studies, teaching, analysis, policymaking, and understanding of the Middle East. Most or all of these ideas are applicable to other areas of international relations and area studies.

It is also necessary for funding agencies to rethink how their monies can be most effectively used. Amounts that have been paid for individual books -or even papers- and conferences could have 100 times more impact if applied to some of the new approaches discussed below.

1. *Equality for internet publications with printed media*: Internet publications that meet the existing criteria should have equality in being indexed and being used for academic rank and tenure decisions.

There is no intrinsic reason why a publication should not be treated differently simply because it is not produced originally on paper. Now with adobe acrobat (.pdf) and other systems, such publications can be printed on demand in a way indistinguishable from journals printed exclusively on paper.

2. *Internet book publishing*: Today it can take up to one year just to work through the reviewing process and gain acceptance for a book, as well as another year to be published. The resulting books usually sell for $30 to $50, putting them out of range for almost everyone except libraries (whose resources must be reaching their limit). It isn't as if anyone is becoming rich in this process, on the contrary, academic presses are often losing money.

We must work out acceptable ways to publish via the internet, both on a for-sale and free basis, so that authors will receive the proper credit and academic benefits. We should also be very aware of the possibility of creating "living books," monographs, and papers, which can be updated as events, new sources, and the author's own interpretations develop. Such materials can also benefit from criticism so as easily to correct errors or alternative interpretations.

3. *The use of teleconferencing and computer telephones for research, meetings, and discussions*: We now have access to low-cost, easy-to-use teleconferencing and voice-conferencing systems that allow us to erase geography in our daily work. These will come into increasing use in the coming years, especially as high-speed internet connections (such as ISDN, DSL, and cable modems) become more widespread. Some specific applications of these systems are discussed in the following points.

4. *New styles of research and academic projects*: Currently, the basic project is along the following lines: organize a conference, have people write papers, pay for travel and hotel expenses, meet 1-3 days, publish a book. In addition to this traditional structure, however, there are new options or adaptations.

An international team can be assembled to study a topic in which all exchange materials or smaller groups of partners work on a paper together. When impossible to meet face-to-face, they can meet now by teleconferencing after the papers are completed for a discussion on a higher level than would otherwise occur. The monies saved could be used to pay the researchers. The resulting book or individual papers can be published traditionally or on the internet.

5. *Big online archives and research tools where people know how to find them*: We need a system of documentary collections and other materials that can be readily used by researchers. Of course, a vast array of items are already available but they need to be made more useable by the creation of reliable, well-known focal points that can serve as gateways on individual topics to be utilized as guides with systematic outlines of available materials.

6. *Specialized seminar groups on every topic*: Those interested in any subject, no matter how specialized, can organize mediated, membership discussion groups involving experts from anywhere in the world. Such seminar groups can be set up in a matter of minutes and can function as superb fora for exchanging ideas,