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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 25 April 2019

Critical Approaches to Pre-Islamic Arabia and Early Islam



Podcast with **Ilka Lindstedt** (6 May 2019).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/critical-approaches-to-preislamic-arabia-and-early-islam/>

Christopher Cotter (CC): *Given the way in which many introductory courses present the history of early Islam and pre-Islamic Arabia, we may be tempted to think that the historical facts are well established and the narrative uncontested. However this is far from the case. What evidence do we actually have from this period, and how may it challenge the conventional narratives that have become canonised in both sacred and academic histories? What misconceptions might be challenged by modern ethnographic work, by the application of Social Identity theories to ancient texts? And why might this matter for contemporary Islam, contemporary Islamic Studies or the Study of Religion more broadly. Joining me to day in Helsinki is [Ilka Lindstedt](#) who holds a PhD and title of docent in Arabic Islamic Studies at the University of Helsinki. He is currently University Lecturer in Islamic Theology at the Faculty of Theology. He's published studies on early Islam, Arabic historiography and Arabic epigraphy and recent edited volumes in English include the co-edited [Case Studies in Transmission](#) and the forthcoming Translation and Transmission in the First Millennium, both with Ugarit-Verlag. And you can see his [institutional website](#) or academia.edu page for more information. And we'll link to that on the website. So first off: Dr Ilka Lindstedt – welcome to the Religious Studies Project!*

Ilka Lindstedt (IL): Thank you very much.

CC: *So, broadly, we're talking about pre-Islamic Arabia and early Islam, today – which will obviously be something that's quite familiar to you. But to the broader Religious Studies community it might not be. So if we could start off, just broadly, tell me about your area of research and what kind of sources are you using? How do you go about doing such research and things like that? What are you interested in? And why?*

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IL: Thank you. So, I'm interested in late antique Arabia, pre-Islamic Arabia from the first century Common Era onward, up till the early Islamic period, let's say the eighth century, Common Era. So, the Prophet Muhammad lived in the sixth and seventh century. He died in 632, so that gives a sort of framework where we are operating. And I'm especially interested in approaching early Islam with Social Identity theories, formulated in Social Psychology, and how those can be used to study early Islam and pre-Islamic Arabia as well. And I try to use – as much as possible, that we have to hand – dated materials, contemporary materials. Especially, epigraphy is an important source-set that we have from pre-Islamic Arabia and the early Islamic era as well.

CC: *Excellent. You might want to . . . I actually had to look up what epigraphic sources meant before we spoke about this! So if you clarify for our Listeners what they are. And also, more of our Listeners are probably familiar with perhaps Biblical Studies because, you know, it tends to sit in Study of Religion departments in some way. I certainly did some Biblical Studies, back in the day. So it would be interesting to hear about how similar or different you might describe your work that might be done by a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, for example.*

IL: Yeah. So by epigraphic sources I mean inscriptions, and in this particular case especially, lapidary inscriptions. So inscriptions engraved in stone, you know, preserved in tens of thousands from pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia. And I would say that, in my study, I definitely use as much as possible approaches and methods developed in Biblical Studies. Especially, you know, the understanding that we should use contemporary sources as much as possible. Most people dealing with early Islam have been using Islamic era – much later – sources to study the life of the Prophet or pre-Islamic Arabia, for instance. So also the Social Identity approach is something that has been used in Biblical Studies, since the nineties especially, to study the New Testament. But also the Hebrew Bible and see how people in those texts . . . and how those texts categorise the world. Although one question that has been studied quite a lot in Biblical Studies is the question of the parting of the ways when Judaism and Christianity become different categories: when did people start to see them as Christians as opposed to Jews? And that question is something that hasn't been asked too much in Islamic Studies (5:00). So until the nineties very few people asked the question: when did Muslims actually start to categorise as Muslims, self-identify as Muslims? So that's kind-of a new question.

CC: *Excellent and we'll get to that towards the end of the interview. So before we start diving into the misconceptions that might be challenged by some of your work and others into pre-Islamic Arabia, we should get some of those misconceptions out there onto the table. Again, our Listeners might not just*

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know this basic narrative. But, what are some of the times and places in traditional narratives that we're talking about here, relating to early Islam and pre-Islamic Arabia? I know that I certainly have always thought that, you know, the Arabian Peninsula was full of nomads who all thought of themselves as Arabs, and Mecca was a really central key trading post, and they all came there and there are lots of deities in the Ka'bah and things like that. That's the narrative that I had. But I think that's not quite right. So, maybe, tell us a bit about the context and then we can challenge that with some of these sources that you've been looking at.

IL: So I guess the received tradition we have to start with, we could start with the birth of the Prophet Muhammad in the year 570 in Mecca, like you said. In the Islamic Era the narrative Mecca is portrayed as being a place where almost everybody was polytheist. So according to this Arabic narrative there might have been a couple of Christians or Jews living in Mecca, but there were only a few of them. They were few and far between. So ninety-nine percent of the people, according to this, seem to be polytheist. So that's 570 or so. And then in 610 the Prophet starts to receive his first revelations conveyed by the Archangel Gabriel, but coming ultimately from God. And at that time the Meccan polytheist aristocrat is not happy with the monotheist message that the prophet Muhammad is trying to convey in Mecca. So Muhammad receives very few converts, very few followers. One of them is actually his wife, Khadijah who becomes one of the first, or maybe the first convert to Islam. But still he has very few followers in those years, the 610s. And the polytheist aristocracy, as it's usually called in Western scholarship, tries to come after the Prophet and his followers and they even torture some of his followers. And this situation leads to emigration from Mecca, this is called the *Hijra*, the emigration from Mecca which happens in 622. And this becomes, later, the first year of the Islamic era, the Islamic calendar. In Medina, the situation becomes better. The Prophet rises quite quickly to the top of this city state, as we might call it, of Medina. And he becomes both a religious and political leader of Medina. So early Muslims of Medina and the polytheists of Mecca are at war during those years. And in the year 630, early Muslims are victorious and conquer Mecca. But still the Prophet stays in Medina, and actually dies there in 632. So that's sort-of the traditional narrative we have.

CC: *So before we challenge that narrative through some of the, I guess, written sources . . . what kind of sources do we have from around that period? You know, I know that there's more literary sources, there's these inscriptions. So maybe you could just tell us what kind of sources exactly, and then maybe provide some challenges to that narrative?*

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IL: So, up until very recently, scholars were using Islamic era Arabic literary sources. And we have quite a lot of them, so thousands and thousands of pages of historiographical sources, of different sorts of literary genres, written in Arabic. But that Arabic literature is actually quite late. So we usually say that it's born in the eighth century and starts to develop from that century onward (**10:00**). So at least a hundred years later than the Prophet. But still, most of the scholars have been using that source set to engage with pre-Islamic Arabia as well. And the life of the Prophet. But recently people have been turning their sight towards contemporary sources that we might have. And these are especially these inscriptions that I was mentioning. So from pre-Islamic Arabia, from the South and from the North, we have a vast quantity of epigraphic material actually. So from the South, from Yemen we have something like ten thousand pre-Islamic South Arabian inscriptions. And from the North we have even more, so something like fifty thousand or more are published now. And all the time, people doing fieldwork are finding more and more of these inscriptions. And many of them are yet to be published, even though they have already been recorded. So it's a vast quantity of material and written in different languages. So not all of it is in Arabic, or very little of it, or only a subset of this material is in Arabic. So that's something that we have from the pre-Islamic era. Then, from the Islamic era of sources we also have Arabic inscriptions. Not so many of them, but let's say from the first hundred years of *Hijra* or the Islamic era, we have something like a hundred dated inscriptions, and probably much more that are undated but we can maybe paleographically date to that era as well. So we have quite a few inscriptions that are actually produced in Arabia, preserved in Arabia and produced also oftentimes by people who are not part of the elite. So that's important to know this. So much of this material is actually graffiti, so stuff that the people were just writing or engraving in stone when they were *en route* to somewhere, and they were camping somewhere. So they spent an hour or so to carve their name and a message – simpler or longer – on stone. So that's a very important set of sources that has not been utilised very much.

CC: *And so what have these sorts of sources done, perhaps, to that traditional narrative that you laid out beforehand? Maybe a couple of key of examples of things that might challenge that?*

IL: Yeah. Especially the polytheist milieu of Arabia in the pre-Islamic era is something that has been challenged by these inscriptions. So, for instance, in Yemen we see quite clearly that up to the fourth century Common Era all of this epigraphic material is polytheist. So there are mention of many gods: *Almaqah*, for instance, who's a God associates with the moon; *Shamash*, associated with the sun. So this traditional polytheist milieu. But then in the fourth century, something happens quite drastically and we see in the epigraphic record that only monotheism is present in these texts and this continues

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up to the sixth century when the Prophet was born. And, in particular, it seems that the form of monotheism is Judaism that was adopted at least by the elite in Yemen, but probably also by the lay people to an extent, at least. So we don't have, from the fourth century up to the sixth century, we don't have any polytheist evidence from Yemen at all. So all the inscriptions that we have are either Jewish or Christian in nature. So they seem all monotheist and also Jewish or Christian identity. And then also in the North we see that Christianity, in particular, is advancing from the third century onward. And we have . . . we don't have so much material as from the South when it comes to late antiquity – say the third century onward. But everything that we have seems to point towards the idea that Christianity was spreading, and spreading fast. So actually, when we look at what we have from the sixth century, which is the century when the Prophet was born, we don't have a single text produced and preserved in Arabia that would be polytheist. So everything that we had is monotheist: either Christian or Jewish or something that we cannot actually pinpoint what it actually is. But then, maybe it didn't even matter to the people who were engraving those inscriptions! (15:00) But this is the case of course in [Hejaz](#), or Western Arabia, where the Prophet lived according to the traditional narrative, and also according to the majority of scholars. So from the Hejaz we don't actually have so much material, or material at all from the sixth century. So that's of course still a question mark: what's going on in the Hejaz in the sixth century? But in any case it seems that in parts of . . . in most parts of Arabia, Christianity and Judaism were spreading past.

CC: Absolutely. Maybe one more example here, before we get onto your social identity work. I mean, perhaps . . . I was quite surprised to hear that Mecca wasn't quite the big deal that we've been led to believe?

IL: Right, yeah. It's very interesting. This Islamic era sources – which, like I said, are all late – they seem to describe Mecca as a place which was a pilgrimage centre, which was, you know, a trade centre along the trade routes, maybe that criss-crossed Arabia. But when we actually look at pre-Islamic evidence – for instance: Greek literature, Greek geographical literature and also these inscriptions that we have from Arabia – none of them actually mention Mecca. None. And they do mention quite a few Arabian cities and towns. So for instance, they mention Medina – Yathrib, which was the old name of Medina – quite a lot of times. So it seems that Medina was an important . . . or was along these trade routes that started from Yemen and went to Syria and the Mediterranean. But Mecca, maybe, wasn't such a big deal. So it might have been a local centre but it's not mentioned at all in the extant evidence that we have from the pre-Islamic era. So that makes me think, at least, that Mecca wasn't that important in the pre-Islamic era.

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CC: *Obviously there might be various reasons that it then . . . it's obviously very important now, and became very important. So there may be an element of reading that into the past. So we've only got about ten minutes left. This always happens! So some of your other work then is taking quite a modern Social Identity approach. And specifically, what I've read anyway, was looking at, in the Qur'an, looking at the different group dynamics in there. Perhaps you could just quickly introduce what a Social Identity approach might be? And then how you've used that to analyse the different groups.*

IL: Yes. So the Social Identity approach was developed in Social Psychology since the 1970s by [Henri Tajfel](#) and his students, and later many more scholars. And the approach tries to look at social identity, especially. So not so much self-identity but social identity. Some of the group identities and affiliations that we have and possess and signal. And it makes a set of predictions, based on experiments and ethnographic research, about what group affiliation does and categorisation does in the group dynamics. So people have quite clearly noticed that this categorisation into the “in-group” that we affiliate with and the “out-group” which is the others. This sort of categorisation is very natural in us. And it usually and oftentimes leads to the fact that people are more helpful to their in-group members; they attach more positive adjectives to their in-group members; and they allow for different people in the in-group, so a sort-of heterogeneous view of the in-group. Whereas the out-group is usually seen as sort-of like a block, a monolith a homogeneous group of people. And sometimes it is . . . often times it is stereotyped in a way, or negative adjectives and attributes are attached to the out-group.

CC: *Yes. And you might have positive attributions biased towards an in-group: some behaviour exhibited by a member of your in-group that would be interpreted positively – and if the same behaviour is in the out-group it might have a different interpretation, based on the same dynamic (20:00).*

IL: Right, yeah.

CC: *OK. So how does one study that in the Qur'an? I mean it was, maybe, initially developed as a more contemporary ethnographic thing, so how might one study that in this ancient text? And then what have you found regarding different religion-related groups?*

IL: So I think the Social Identity approach gives a lot of insight into the ancient or pre-modern texts as well. So instead of actually asking . . . because usually, or sometimes, people have an approach to the Qur'an, and especially the polemic verses in the Qur'an, as signalling that there was some sort of clash

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between the groups. Whereas people that have been using the Social Identity approach in Biblical Studies have noticed that oftentimes these polemical verses, or polemical passages, in different texts they actually have to do with creation of the in-group identity and creation of this distinct identity. So it doesn't always have to be the case that there has been some sort of clash in the past. But it actually might have something to do with the present; that the text is trying to signal a distinction to the out-group and trying to make this difference. Whereas the facts on the ground were much more varied and much more of a grey area in how people were viewing themselves and the others. And also, like I said, up until the 1990s people didn't really ask, in Islamic Studies, the question: "When did Muslims start to view themselves as Muslims as distinct to something else- as distinct to Jews, Christians?" and so on. But in the 1990s Professor [Fred Donner](#), at the University of Chicago, posed this question. But it hasn't been studied still in depth. There hasn't been too many people actually trying to approach that question. But I think it is a very important question. And I think we should start with no preconceptions, and start with contemporary sources. Start with the Qur'an and then try to understand the Qur'an in the context of what we know of pre-Islamic Arabia, and then see in the dated material, such as papyri and inscriptions, how that identity evolves later. So when we actually look at the Qur'an we see that the in-group appellation that is used there for the in-group is "believers". It's not yet "Muslims" so that is something that seems to happen later. And not only that, but also there are a number of verses that seem to categorise Jews and Christians as part of the in-group, part of the believers. So that makes me think that their situation is not one where Islamic identity was born already at the time of the Prophet. It wasn't ready at the time, but it evolved later. And when we actually look at the inscriptions that we have that are later than the Qur'an, later than the Prophet Muhammad there we can see that it takes around 100 years before people start to call themselves Muslims or call their religion Islam. So it's only the 740s when we see this sort of categorisation happening, and also mention of distinctively Islamic rites that happens in the early 8th century, not before.

CC: But again, in a standard intro to Islam class, we'll maybe hear about these verses differentiating Islam from Christianity: "They say that God is three. He is not three he is one," and all those sorts of things. So there are some things in there which are maybe anti-Christian or anti-Jewish. How does that play into what you've just said about believers as a group?

IL: Yes, definitely. There's definitely polemics against Trinitarianism and against *shirk*, which means associating anything with God. So absolute monotheism is the central message of the Qur'an, definitely. And I would say that any Jew or Christian who wasn't willing to part with those associating

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tendencies wouldn't be accepted as part of the in-group (25:00). So Trinitarianism is definitely rejected in the Qur'an. But then, there are a number of verses which say that Christians are closest in love to the believers, and they are pious, and they pray, and they will get a reward in the afterlife. And then there are a number of verses that talk about the "People of the Book" in positive manner. And the People of the Book seems to include . . . while the Qur'an doesn't really spell it out who the People of the Book are, it seems to include at least Jews and Christians and possibly others as well. And so there are a number of verses that seem to suggest that those people in the People of the Book can be part of the in-group if they are willing to part with some of their views which are against the Qur'anic message, and if they are willing to accept the Prophet Muhammad as a Prophet, and the Qur'an as Revelation. Those are definitely sort-of identity signals that people . . . core values that people have to accept. But then, there are a number of others that are later Islamic developments. For instance, there is no conversion ritual mentioned in the Qur'an. The five daily prayers are not mentioned in the Qur'an. Prayer in general is, but the five daily prayers are not. So those sort of things. There are also two verses that explicitly say that Jews and Christians and the believers – and maybe others as well who believe in God – on the last day will get a heavenly reward. And those verses are then, in later Islamic traditions, understood as meaning "Jews and Christians that lived before the Prophet". But the Qur'an doesn't say that. And it seems that in the Qur'an the situation is the present tense. So it seems that the Qur'an actually promises, there, some of the Jews and Christians a heavenly reward and salvation, as such.

CC: So obviously I could probe much further but time is going to be our enemy here. So I would urge the Listeners to check out your webpage and dive into some of this. But as a final question: why does this stuff matter? I've often, in a sense As with, say, the historical Jesus studies, we can spend a lot of time working out what exactly was going on, what was happening at the time. But, in a sense, does it matter at all? Because the figure has taken on a life of its own, in a number of different ways. So why does this close study of these sources matter? And what's its relevance, maybe, for . . . I guess there's contemporary Islam, there's contemporary Islamic Studies, the Study of Religion more broadly?

IL: That's a good question. To an extent, I think it probably doesn't matter to a lot of people! And maybe people in academia have a tendency to over-emphasise the meaning of their research in the wider society! And, you're right: scholars who are working in historical Jesus studies, their studies are not probably so relevant to your average believer, your average Christian in say, Finland, or the UK, or South Africa, or wherever. So Jesus is something that matters . . . the Jesus figure that matters to them is probably different to what a scholar of historical Jesus would reconstruct. What I think has some

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sort-of intrinsic value here, is trying to look at the seventh century people or sixth century people who wrote their inscriptions: how did they see the world? And I think it sort-of gives value to their views, and tries to understand the world as they saw it. But when it comes to contemporary Islam or contemporary Islamic Studies of course, like I said, there's different verses dealing with the Jews, dealing with the Christians and others in the Qur'an. And those can be understood in different ways. And there are a number of people working inside the tradition as Muslims and as scholars who are approaching these same verses, and maybe drawing similar or the same conclusion that I am here (30:00). So for instance [Mun'im Siri](#), who has written a fine book called [Scriptural Polemics](#), tries to see how the Qur'an itself classifies different religions and Islam, and also probes how later and modern exegetes and modernist exegetes have understood these verses. And he seems to suggest that the Qur'an can be understood in pluralistic ways, and it can be understood as not being all the time in polemics with Jews and Christians and so on. So, of course, it might have contemporary relevance. But, you know, I'll leave it to the Listener.

CC: *Yes. But it's a good example of the fine line, in the Study of Religion in general, that we walk between not denying the uniqueness and boundedness of a tradition, but at the same time pointing out that these things are historical developments, and they're connected to their context. And some may perceive that as an attack or as denigrating, and others may see it as validating. And we're sort-of walking that line of saying "Things are more complicated than the common narrative might say." Just as a final question: what are you working on just now? I would hate it if someone asked me that (Laughs).*

IL: (Laughs) Yes! I'm actually, with a colleague of mine, we're writing a book about the Prophet Muhammad, and the narratives about him, and the interpretations of him both in the medieval era and today. This has still got to be finished though, so . . . ! (Laughs).

CC: *Excellent. Well, I'm sure some outputs will come out of that in English as well. And hey – you've now recorded an English language podcast – you might record a Finnish language podcast! So, Ilka Lindstedt, thank you so much for joining us on the Religious Studies Project!*

IL: Thank you.

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