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“Sectarianism in Islam and Muslim Communities”

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**ABSTRACT**

“Modern Islamic Scholarship between Sectarian  
History and Histories of Sectarianism”

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This paper examines historical inquiries carried out by several contemporary Arab *‘ulamā* on issues of Sunnī-Shī‘ite controversy. I argue that their work is shaped by a tension between their self-conscious adoption of critical historiographical methods, on the one hand, and by their adherence to particular sectarian outlooks, on the other. This argument is based on a case study of the work of five scholars, three Shī‘ites and two Sunnīs, whose careers span the twentieth century and who all wrote on the topic of Shī‘ite hadith narrators included in the Sunnī hadith canon. These scholars identified with a range of vocations, ranging from the traditional *‘ālim* to the university professor to the learned lay merchant, and their respective approaches to the issue naturally differed according to their confessional identification. Nonetheless, all of their works are characterized by the tension described above, with the result that the Sunnī and Shī‘ite discussions of these narrators both have certain blind-spots that are essentially mirror images of one another. Shī‘ite authors tend to flatten the distinctions between the range of early Shī‘ite sentiments and affiliations in an effort to locate them all within a broad genealogy of Imāmī Shī‘ism, and Sunnī authors tend to overlook or dismiss the possibility that some of the leading lights of the early hadith milieu were moderate Shī‘ites. This presentation closes by locating these studies somewhere in between sectarian polemic and inter-confessional historical inquiry, and raises the question of how the latter approach might come to predominate over the former.