



# The Islamic Origins Debate Goes Public

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## Abstract

A central part of modern secularization has been the de-theologization of the stories of religious origins. Islam is no different, even though this de-theologization tends to be obscured by contemporary fundamentalism. In Islam, the story of origins centers on Mecca, Medina, the prophet Muhammad, the early Muslim community, and the expansion out of Arabia. A few scholars at the end of the nineteenth century and many at the end of the twentieth century raised the question of whether this story should be considered a theology – that is, an apologia or justification – of origins rather than a history as traditionally understood. This article provides a survey of the Islamic origins literature produced by Middle East scholars in the last century.

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When *The New York Times* reports on a scholarly issue on its first page, the public knows it is time to catch up. On March 2, 2002, Alexander Stille, a writer and commentator on Italian political culture, published a 2000-word article titled “Scholars are quietly offering new theories of the Koran.”<sup>1</sup> In the article, Stille discusses the by now quite weighty scholarship of the past thirty years on the issue of Islamic origins. A predecessor of the *NYT* article was an article in *Atlantic Journal* by Toby Lester.<sup>2</sup> A successor was a short piece in *Newsweek International* by Stefan Theil<sup>3</sup> (2003), which the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan deemed to be so inflammatory that they confiscated the issue. A website<sup>4</sup> is devoted to the spread of Islamic secularization, and three anthologies present selections from the scholarship on Islamic origins.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, this scholarship comprises more than three dozen major monographs and another four score significant articles – hence its notoriety as noticed by the *NYT*.

This article will first outline the origins of Islam as they are currently understood. Secondly, it will sketch the development of Islam during the two caliphal dynasties of the Umayyads and `Abbasids. Thirdly, it will trace the growth of scholarship in modern Middle Eastern studies leading to the contemporary de-theologization of history.

## *History, theology, and Islamic origins*

Historians, committed to the study of manuscripts and archival documents, handle theological concepts – such as God, Creation, Revelation,

Prophecy, Resurrection, Second Coming, Last Judgment, Heavenly Kingdom, or Paradise – in purely descriptive terms, without committing themselves to their veracity. Curiously, however, when it comes to the origins of religious communities, the majority of scholars are as literalist or fundamentalist as many adherents of these communities themselves. Their accounts are dressed in secular vocabulary and argumentation, but otherwise are identical with the sacred stories that believers tell of their communities' origins.

Only a minority of perceptive scholars, who are aware of the symbolical, figurative, emblematic, or analogous meanings of theological concepts as well as sacred stories, treat the origins of religious communities as theology rather than history. The first, pioneering scholars who explored origins as theologies date to the second half of the nineteenth century. On their shoulders, today's scholars have amassed an impressive record. Rearguard battles are still being fought, however, and in the wider community views are changing even more slowly – if, indeed, they ever will. While religious fundamentalism no longer enjoys academic respect, secular fundamentalism is alive and well.

The following is a brief summary of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic origin theologies as they have appeared in the latest scholarship. What looks like the history of the ancient Israelites in bondage in Egypt, Yahweh's revelation in the burning bush, Moses' and the Israelites' migration to Sinai, Yahweh's gift of the Ten Commandments, further Israelite wanderings in the desert, the settlement in the Promised Land, the kingdom of David, and the periodic falling away of the Israelites from God is actually the theology of the Israelites' Exodus from paganism to monotheism. Archaeology tells us that the historical Israelites were Palestinian hill villagers, who were gradually evolving from village to state organization. The first to assemble the theology of the Exodus were prophets after the historical exodus of Israel into its Babylonian exile. Subsequent leaders, whom Persia permitted to establish the second kingdom in Jerusalem in the mid-sixth century BCE, completed the theology of the Exodus and assembled the books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, what looks like the history of Jesus and his followers in Galilee and Jerusalem is the theology of Jesus' preaching in Galilee and his Passover presence in Jerusalem. The authors of this theology were followers who were looking back from the vantage point of the Jewish defeat at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE. In order to survive against the Roman authorities who lumped them together with the Jews, the early Christians sought to differentiate themselves as much as possible from their rebellious brethren, while simultaneously protecting themselves from the temptations of Hellenistic acculturation. For them the Romans were a lesser evil, to be endured until Jesus' second coming in the imminent apocalypse of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, what looks like the history of Muhammad and the revelation of Islam in Mecca, the formation of the community in Medina, the

succession of the four “rightly guided” caliphs, the conquest of Roman and Persian lands, and the establishment of the Umayyad empire is a reworking of the Exodus symbol in an Arab environment. The vantage point, however, is not the Israelite humiliation of the Babylonian exile or the Christian humiliation by Roman authorities. Instead, it is the triumph of Islamic imperial succession over Rome and Persia between 690 and 1031 CE. Furthermore, the authors of this theology of triumph were scholars, who used it to wrest religious authority from the caliphs and reduce the latter to the status of outsiders to the religious community.

For the large majority of Muslims, as well as westerners interested in Islamic origins, the notion of a transposition of the Exodus symbol into a pagan Arab environment in Arabia is still too alien to fathom. Muslims hold on to seemingly historical origins presented to them as a vulgate by traditional theologians. Western scholars, writers, and television producers should know better, as evidenced by the *NYT* article, but continue to disseminate secular versions of the vulgate.<sup>8</sup> There is a good chance that this secular vulgate will cloud American involvement with Iraq for years to come.

The contemporary secular vulgate has largely grown out of the monumental work of the British orientalist Montgomery Watt.<sup>9</sup> The following is a brief outline of his two studies. According to Watt, the origins of Islam are closely connected with the rise of Mecca in the later 500s CE. The city grew and became wealthy thanks to its location on the spice trade route between the Mediterranean and India. At its center was the Ka`ba, a pagan pilgrimage center serving as a rallying point for the surrounding nomadic tribes. As it became larger and wealthier, social tensions crept into the city, pitting slaves against merchant clans. Muhammad, a descendant of the guardian family of the Ka`ba but growing up as a poor orphan, was the liminal personality destined to receive revelations and to become a religious–social reformer. The merchant clans, however, were unwilling to support reform. Muhammad, his family, and a handful of followers had to emigrate north to the oasis city of Medina.

In his new base of Medina, according to Watt, Muhammad incorporated his reforms into a constitution and legal system for the nascent Muslim community. Raids had to be employed in order to overcome the enmity of the Meccans. Two years before Muhammad’s death, Mecca surrendered: Muhammad had the Ka`ba cleansed of its pagan deities and he sent out messengers to convert the tribes of Arabia to Islam. After the Prophet’s death, a sequence of four caliphs – inspired by the example of Muhammad but cut off from revelation – overcame dissent and fired the religious zeal of the Arabs. Perhaps pushed by a drought during the 630s, large tribal armies assembled, to conquer Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. From its inception, so Watt suggests, the new Arab empire had its own religion, political structure, and legal system.

How would the history of Islamic origins look like if no recourse were taken either to the sacred or the secular vulgates? The point of departure

would have to be the Perso-Roman wars of 603–29, in which Sasanid Persia and Eastern Rome exhausted their last reserves in futile campaigns. Neither empire succeeded in destroying the other, and in the end the two had to negotiate the status quo ante. Mark Whittow discusses the effects of this war on the prosperous late-Antiquity Roman provinces of Palestine, Syria, Transjordan, and Egypt.<sup>10</sup> He emphasizes that during 603–29 an entire generation of Syro-Aramaic Christians and Jews grew up under Persian rule. A Jewish governor presided over Jerusalem, the nomadic Christian Arab confederations jockeyed for a role under the Persians, and intense apocalyptic fervor (accompanied by a substantial apocalyptic literature) gripped Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians in the villages, towns, and cities. The titanic struggle of the two empires seemed to presage the end of the world.<sup>11</sup>

The reader who is interested in getting a feeling for this fervor is referred to Harald Suermann, Andrew Palmer and co-authors, Robert G. Hoyland, or Margarita Vallejo Girvés, who have collected or translated many of the apocalypses and analyzed them.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, one chapter in Hoyland is devoted to a discussion of the Islamic origins' research of the past quarter century. This chapter replaces an older, rather polemically charged article by Judith Koren and Yehuda D. Nevo.<sup>13</sup> The two most important sources out of the apocalyptic background are the anonymous Greek anti-Jewish *Doctrina Iacobi* (c. 634–40) and the *History of Heraclius*, attributed to the Armenian bishop Sebeos (c. 661). They permit the conclusion, drawn by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in a path-breaking study, that the Arab prophet Muhammad and the Jews of Jerusalem made common cause in a campaign to restore the Temple in the latter days before the arrival of the Messiah and God's Final Judgment.<sup>14</sup> The Arab acquisition of Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt after 632 thus would not be a conquest by outsiders from afar in Arabia but the seizure of provinces from struggling emperors by insiders in the Fertile Crescent.

Exactly what kind of religion these insiders professed is conjectural. In the Negev, Nevo collected seventh-century inscriptions that profess a generic monotheism.<sup>15</sup> But he also discovered pagan sanctuaries built by Arabs during the same period of time. Crone and Cook discern "Samaritan and Abrahamic stepping stones to the religion of Muhammad."<sup>16</sup> In a later work, Crone hypothesizes a "nativist" reaction to "alien domination" at the root of the later rise of Islam.<sup>17</sup> A papyrus datable to 644 CE refers to an "exodus" (*hijra*) of the Arabs in 622 and Christian sources of the period frequently call the Arabs "emigrants" (*muhajirun*). Thus, it appears that Abrahamic descent and Exodus from the desert into the promised land were the earliest theological elements that identified the Arabs as they assumed control of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt.

Other scholars point to connections between the Christian Syro-Aramaic literature and the Koran. The first to devote extensive philological research in the 1970s to these connections was Günter Lüling, whose

pioneering, privately printed work was generally ignored.<sup>18</sup> Only now, thanks to two recent articles in English, are scholars becoming aware of the significance of his research.<sup>19</sup> A recent study by Christoph Luxenberg has had much greater impact.<sup>20</sup> He suggests that the Koran grew out of a *Qeryana*, an Eastern Christian lectionary or collection of scriptural passages used in the liturgy of the church year. Early seventh-century northern Arabs, so Luxenberg argues, were Christians but did not yet possess a written language and used Syro-Aramaic for religious purposes.

A century and a half later, so Luxenberg's argument continues, the first Koran scholars working in Baghdad no longer understood many originally Syro-Aramaic passages. In root structure, pronunciation, and script, many Arabic and Syro-Aramaic words are close, although their meanings often differ (cf., *become* in English and *bekommen* in German). The scholars interpreted these Arabic-seeming passages with the help of their own fully evolved literary or classical Arabic and, as a result, misread them. Luxenberg translates a select number of Koranic verses convincingly back into Syro-Aramaic. The ending of *Sura* 96, for example, assumed to be the oldest in the Koran, is rendered as "and so partake of the Eucharist."<sup>21</sup> If Luxenberg's Syro-Aramaic reading of the Koran is correct, one has to assume that parts of the Muslim holy scriptures began their existence in written form. Furthermore, if the Koran was indeed the outgrowth of a lectionary, its choppy, repetitive, and stylistically varied character becomes easier to understand.

### *The emergence of Islam in the Umayyad and `Abbasid empires*

The Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian texts provide a bare minimum of information about the Arab "emigrants" assuming control of Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Iran. They are outsider reports, however, often garbled and hostile. By contrast, no insider accounts written by Muslims can be indisputably dated before the beginning of the `Abbasid period (750), as Michael Cook has argued against Joseph van Ess, a pioneer in the search for the earliest Muslim texts.<sup>22</sup> The first biography (*sira*) of Muhammad and accounts of the Prophet's campaigns (*maghazi*) date to the middle of the 800s. They are highly selective arrangements of short reports (sing. *hadith*) on aspects of Islamic origins circulating at this time in the Islamic empire. As such, they are monumental achievements of Islamic theology, but histories they are not.

The reports, from which Muhammad's life and campaigns were digested, numbered into the thousands. During the ninth and tenth centuries, religious scholars collected and arranged them in convenient handbook format. The best known are by al-Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875), and both are easily available on the Internet. Neither author makes an effort to resolve contradictions among the reports, leaving them as each received them from his informants. Therefore, other

authors who used these reports for writing the biography of Muhammad and accounts of his campaigns had to be highly selective, leaving out what they considered, from their ninth- or tenth-century vantage points, to be unacceptable reports.

In three articles on Muhammad and his daughter Fatima, published in 1910–12, Henri Lammens enumerated some of the contradictions among the reports.<sup>23</sup> After him, scholars have labored hard to find their way through the labyrinth of contradictions, only to end up rejecting the same reports that had already been declared unacceptable from the ninth- or tenth-century vantage points. One scholar, Wilferd Madelung, offers an alternate route with his pro-`Ali rewriting of Islamic origins.<sup>24</sup> Either way, however, synthesis was achieved only through downplaying, or even ignoring, diverging reports.

Although Lammens pointed the way, it is only in the past few decades that the true extent of the contradictions has come to the fore. In a chapter published in 1982, G. R. Hawting investigates the reports on the origins of the Meccan sanctuary, the Ka`ba, and comes to the conclusion that whatever might have existed there prior to the 600s cannot be recognized from ninth- and tenth-century reports.<sup>25</sup> In his judgment, the existing reports document a much later discussion about how to relate a variety of Middle Eastern sanctuary traditions to the then evolving Meccan pilgrimage center. Similarly, Lawrence Conrad concludes in an article that whatever places might have existed in western Arabia around 570–1, it makes little sense to try to use contradictory reports written three centuries later to try to determine the birth year of Muhammad or to reconstruct the early history of Mecca.<sup>26</sup> Crone undertook the most systematic review of the available reports on Mecca in a book published in 1987.<sup>27</sup> She comes to the conclusion that Mecca was not the cosmopolitan hub of the long-distance spice trade between India and the Mediterranean, as generally assumed in the literature, but at best a modest center of local trade for the nomads of the region.

A similar dilemma between bare-bones contemporary sources from outsiders and contradictory later sources from insiders exists for scholars writing the history of the Arabs in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Iran after 632. On one hand, scholars continue to write histories based on the later Islamic sources.<sup>28</sup> These scholars make a few concessions to the Islamic origins debate, but on the whole sidestep the issue of history versus theology. On the other hand, thoughtful specialized studies have appeared, in which one learns a great deal about the pitfalls of theology disguised as history. For example, Albrecht Noth shows how early battle accounts are often written in a stereotypical way, so as to conform to later ideals about the proper Islamic way of fighting.<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Conrad dissects the reports on the conquest of Arwad, a small island off the Syrian coast, in order to demonstrate how different the actual expansion of the Arabs in Syria was from the received reports of spectacular conquests.<sup>30</sup> Few scholars doubt that

the Islamic traditions of the ninth and tenth centuries contain genuine historical as well as theological information dating back to the seventh century – the problem being that no one knows for sure how to separate history from theology.<sup>31</sup>

Firm historical ground is reached only at the end of the seventh century. During his long reign, the caliph `Abd al-Malik (685–705) transformed the Arab-ruled former Roman and Persian provinces into an Islamic empire. This caliph issued the first Islamic coins (690), on which he appears as the deputy of God on Earth. In an important book, Crone and Martin Hinds point out that all caliphs, Umayyads as well as `Abbasids, used this imperial title that implied legislative as well as executive authority.<sup>32</sup> `Abd al-Malik was a caesaropapist, just like his earlier Christian Roman and Sasanid as well as later Carolingian, Ottonian, and Hohenstaufen colleagues.

`Abd al-Malik also built the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as a monument to the glory of imperial Islam (691). He proclaimed the superiority of God's Islamic oneness over that of Christian trinity, and declared Arabic the new administrative language.<sup>33</sup> His successors built palaces in the Syrian desert, richly decorated with frescoes and mosaics.<sup>34</sup> One fresco depicts six defeated or vassal kings, among whom those of Rome, Persia, Spain, and Ethiopia can be identified.<sup>35</sup> In the eyes of the Umayyads, the Islamic empire was the last and the largest before God's Final Judgment.

In an empire in which Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians formed a majority, the Umayyads had a strong interest in promoting not only the imperial superiority of Islam but also its theological elaboration. Similarly, the empire consisted of provinces with very disparate legal traditions, including Roman provincial law in Syria and Zoroastrian law in Iraq and Iran, and therefore needed judicial unification. During the early imperial period (*c.* 690–730) caliphs and scholars engaged in lively discussions of religious doctrines and fiscal, military, or penal law. They appear as the authors of texts which, depending on their point of view, supported or opposed the cause of imperial religious and legal unity.<sup>36</sup> On the basis of philological arguments, however, some scholars view these texts as spurious and attribute them to anonymous authors one or two generations later. Whether one locates the “literary horizon” of Islam in the earlier or later 700s, all scholars are agreed that this horizon does not reach back into the pre-690 period.<sup>37</sup>

Joseph Schacht argues that the need for an imperially unified Islamic theology and law became acute in the generation after *c.* 750. The caliphs and religious scholars reviewed the corpus of provincial customs, Arab tribal traditions, memories of Muhammad, caliphal decisions, and judges' verdicts inherited from the Umayyads as the “raw material” from which they fashioned a “living tradition.”<sup>38</sup> Given that the Umayyad empire had undergone several internal wars over questions of dynastic succession, centralized rule versus provincial autonomy, tribal military organization

versus professionalization, or garrison service versus assimilation into local populations, the living tradition was a most heterogeneous assemblage.<sup>39</sup> The first religious scholars – for example, Malik Ibn Anas (d. 795) – composed their law treatises on the basis of the living tradition of their day.

Ignaz Goldziher, the great pioneer of research on Islamic origins, views the early law treatises as efforts at a systematic reorganization of the living tradition.<sup>40</sup> In his judgment, the authors of these treatises took the individual living traditions from the multiplicity of heterogeneous authorities, such as caliphs, early writers, provincial governors, or judges, and transferred their authorship backward to the so-called Companions of the Prophet in the mid-600s. These Companions were the first generation of Arab “emigrants” of the period after 622. Soon, even the Companions were considered too heterogeneous and nothing but the authority of Muhammad himself was good enough for what became reports about his prophetic practice (*Sunna*). By the mid-800s, no one could utter an opinion unless one asserted that Muhammad had already held it.

As this transfer occurred, the original late-Umayyad raw material embodied in the early `Abbasid living tradition gave way to the collections of prophetic reports referred to above. Everything authentic, imagined, invented, and fabricated was included. For authentication, traditionists devised chains of “trustworthy authorities” who were thought of as having transmitted the reports from the Prophet to the 800s. The early `Abbasid caliphs, who claimed the same divine right of making doctrine and law as the Umayyads, sought to curb the overflowing imaginative creativity of the religious scholars, which they increasingly regarded as inimical to imperial rule. During the so-called Inquisition (*mihna*, 833–49), they required all religious scholars employed as judges or jurisconsults to take an oath of allegiance to the doctrines of free will and of the createdness of the Koran. Implicit in these doctrines, defining a minimalist civil religion for the empire, is the use of reason (*`aql*) as the instrument with which to sort out (and to discard) prophetic reports inimical to caliphal power. The Inquisition failed when confronted with the dogged resistance of many religious scholars. In the two succeeding centuries, the caliphs lost ground to a steadily expanding body of tradition-minded scholars.

It was in the two-and-a-half centuries from c. 800 to 1050 that the traditionists produced the hundreds of great works on Koranic exegesis, legal theory, hadith collection, and theological history which were to define Islam and its origins until today. In 1031 the `Abbasids bowed to the inevitable, gave up their claim to the right to define doctrine and law, and renounced their support for the Mu`tazila. Only a minority of religious scholars continued to advocate reason, not tradition, as the principal criterion for the soundness of precepts in theology and law.<sup>41</sup> Hence the traditionist religious scholars became the guardians of religion, autonomous in their position *vis-à-vis* the caliphs. For them, theology and law covered all reality,

including politics, allowing for the conception of a largely self-governing community. The state became an outside entity responsible for military affairs only, bereft of legislative powers. Contrary to the widespread modern belief in the doctrine of the unity of state and religion, *dawla* and *din* divided into separate spheres, as Ira Lapidus shows in an important article.<sup>42</sup>

*The de-theologization of Islamic law and history in modern Middle East studies*

Like Goldziher, Schacht did not question the Meccan and Medinan origins of Islam. Although, in his judgment, Umayyad imperial politics, not the Koran, provided the point of departure for the formation of Islamic law, he took the historicity of the revelatory complex of Koran, Mecca, and Medina for granted. There are no hints in his studies of Islamic law, so it remains unclear whether he took this historicity to mean some sort of pre-legal, inner morality, with Muhammad as the model to be emulated. His more general writings on Islamic origins are so conventional that one wonders why he did not reflect on the incompatibility between his conclusions concerning legal history and his views of Islamic origins.

The first to present a systematic questioning of the historicity of the Meccan and Medinan origins of Islam was John Wansbrough, who thereby opened the path for a shift to an unencumbered study of “salvation history” or theology, the preferred term in this essay on Islamic origins.<sup>43</sup> Given that “tradition implies, and actively involves, historicization,” his nontraditional approach to the complex of Koran, Mecca, and Medina requires the disentanglement of secular and salvation history.<sup>44</sup> For this approach, Wansbrough uses the “instruments and techniques of Biblical criticism.”<sup>45</sup> They are applied without prejudice both to a “diffusion” of salvation history from Christianity and Judaism and to its independent “polygenesis” within nascent Islam. For Wansbrough there is no Islamic essentialism, and all three revelations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are open to modern, secular methods of analysis.

As investigations of Islamic salvation history, both books are studies of theology and thus not directly concerned with a secular reconstruction of Arab history during the 600s. Over half of *Quranic Studies* is given over to Koranic exegesis. *The Sectarian Milieu* is focused on the literatures of Prophet biography and campaigns, prophetic practice, and juridical dispute, which Wansbrough studies not for their “historicizing” tendencies or “facticity” but for the “structural features” of literary composition.<sup>46</sup> In fact, Wansbrough is skeptical about the possibility of any satisfactory reconstruction of the secular history of the Arabs in the seventh century. His review of *Hagarism*, the first such history by Crone and Cook, is less than enthusiastic.<sup>47</sup> In his judgment, the Muslims of the ninth century blocked all possibilities of “accurate” or “historical” reconstruction by “truncating” their own original notion of development. By replacing this notion with a

“retrofective interpretation of community origins,” the Muslims effectively ended up “not [with] history but nostalgia” for a Medinan paradise lost.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, Wansbrough’s two books are better known for their secular historical asides than their salvation-historical or theological conclusions. In fact, one is surprised to note how innocently many contemporary Middle East scholars express their annoyance with Wansbrough’s technical, form-critical nomenclature, as if ignorance of modern, secular exegesis of revelation were a virtue. Regrettably, for reasons of space this article cannot enter into a discussion of Wansbrough’s form-critical analyses. For such a discussion, the reader is referred to Rippin and Berg.<sup>49</sup> The following summary of Wansbrough’s work is limited to his historical asides.

*Quranic Studies* opens with the assumption of “an extensive corpus of prophetic *logia*” underlying the Koran.<sup>50</sup> These *logia* are viewed as *pericopes* or text clippings drawing from the traditional Judaeo-Christian stock of monotheistic imagery or “schemata of revelation.” In the course of an “organic development” of oral transmission (although written *Vorlagen* or prototypes are admitted), unknown persons must gradually have unified the clippings “by means of a limited number of rhetorical conventions,” creating a paraenetic or exhortatory scripture called the Koran.<sup>51</sup> The centers of this development were successively Jerusalem and Mesopotamia. In the latter region at the end of the eighth century, when the authorship of the Umayyad legal practice was transferred to Muhammad, the Koran began to assume what became its canonical character. Wansbrough posits a mutual influencing of scripture and prophetic practice or Koran and *Sunna* in formation during the ninth century, which created a western Arabian or Hijazi desert origin for Islam.

*The Sectarian Milieu* looks at the haggadic or narrative as well as halakhic or moral-legal elaboration of the “practice of the Muslim community” during Umayyad times.<sup>52</sup> By transferring the locus of this practice from the Umayyad empire back to Medina under Muhammad, the Muslims, in contrast to the Christians, created what appears at first sight to be a factual history of their origins. More specifically, these Muslims were a “pious minority,”<sup>53</sup> which gradually evolved into a “clerical elite (*ulama/fuqaha*).”<sup>54</sup> This elite elevated Islam from the surrounding sectarian milieu of the various Christian and Jewish groupings through the “neutralizing of Christian Trinitarian dogma by its reduction to a general concept of divine attributes, and of Jewish scriptural dogma by its abrogation on the grounds of malicious forgery.”<sup>55</sup> Between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, they transformed the Umayyad and early `Abbasid Islamic empires into a culturally Islamic community (*umma*), the most “single most distinctive property” of which was its “political autonomy.”<sup>56</sup>

Schacht and Wansbrough posed a formidable challenge to Middle East studies. Although the two authors paved the way for the growth of a sizeable community of Islamic origins researchers, as discussed in this article, resistance remained strong. Traditionist Muslims, such as Muhammad

M. Azami or Fazlur Rahman, as well as Western Arabists and Islamicists, such as Angelika Neuwirth, William A. Graham, R. B. Serjeant, or Alford T. Welch, expressed hostility or even engaged in polemical attacks, summaries of which can be found in the works of Herbert Berg and Harald Motzki.<sup>57</sup> Even more scurrilous were the invectives hurled by other reputable Western scholars against Schacht, Wansbrough, Crone, or Cook, collected with glee on a website of Muslim apologetics.<sup>58</sup> However, by now the worst of the polemics seems to be over, and the fact that the origins of Islam discussion has gone public in a peaceful way is indicative of a return to a more scholarly decorum.

A small group of continental European scholars has recently embarked on an ambitious effort to narrow the gap between the beginnings of the Arab expansion and the beginnings of Islamic scholarship (c. 632–780). G. H. A. Juynboll, Harald Motzki, and a few others represented or cited in Motzki have subjected Schacht and Wansbrough to sharp criticism for their tendency to exaggerate the gap.<sup>59</sup> They have marshaled a number of strong arguments in favor of a shorter period, extending only from the Arab expansion to the construction of the Dome of the Rock (632–91). Even they, however, cannot ignore the difficulty of identifying texts from the period of `Abd al-Malik and his immediate successors (c. 690–730), although they labor hard to dispel Cook's skepticism and confirm van Ess' optimism. Most importantly, like their predecessors, they cannot overcome the gap of the two generations between 632 and 690, much as they seek to play down its importance.

Thus, the challenge continues to find a convincing answer for the gap, perhaps with the help of Luxenberg's new study, before more than a bare-bones history of Islamic origins can be written. This *history*, needless to say, has no bearing on the *theology* of Islamic origins: understanding the history of these origins is categorically different from believing in the truth of divine Revelation. A person who distinguishes between the two, of course, would not be a fundamentalist who believes in the literal truth of Revelation. This person would be a believer in the symbolic truth of Revelation; that is, in the figurative role that the concept of an exodus from a pristine origin plays for the organization of life in a modern world. The fundamentalist belief in a once real Mecca with a full-blown moral–legal system is both mythical and utopian. It is mythical because this Mecca is an invention of the ninth and tenth centuries, and utopian because no state power or religious authority can ever be so pervasive as to be able to enforce the Islamic moral–legal system. Unfortunately, the utopian fallacy rarely stops fundamentalists from their totalitarian impulse.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A. Stille, "Scholars are quietly offering new theories of the Koran," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2002, A1 and A19.

- <sup>2</sup> T. Lester, "What is the Koran?" *Atlantic Monthly*, 283, 1999, pp. 43–56; available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jan/koran.htm>
- <sup>3</sup> S. Theil, "Challenging the Qur'an," *Newsweek International*, July 28, 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society, 2003; <http://www.secularislam.org/>
- <sup>5</sup> Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book* (Amherst, N.Y., Prometheus Books, 1998); Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (Amherst, N.Y., Prometheus Books, 2000); Ibn Warraq (ed.), *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (Amherst, N.Y., Prometheus Books, 2003).
- <sup>6</sup> S. Ahituv and E. B. Oren, *The Origin of Early Israel – Current Debate: Biblical, Historical, and Archaeological Perspectives*, Irene Levi-Sala Seminar, 1997 (Beer-Sheva, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1998).
- <sup>7</sup> R. Coote and M. P. Coote, *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990).
- <sup>8</sup> For example, K. Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York, Random House, 2002); PBS (Public Broadcasting System), *Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet*, 2002; available at <http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/muhammadand.shtml>
- <sup>9</sup> M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953); M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956).
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