

**Seeing the Origins of Islam in  
Historical Perspective**

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The University of Chicago

First Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture

Indiana University

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## **In Memoriam: Celebrating the Lifelong Contributions of Two NELC Scholars**

Universities as educational establishments devoted to the production and dissemination of knowledge, if and when aiming to carry these heavy responsibilities conscientiously, contribute to the real and permanent good in this world, and are the true philanthropic institutions-- the *sadaqah jariyah*. Small numbers of teachers and researchers in these learned institutions manage to leave powerful legacies of scholarship through their publications and, more importantly, a *silsilah* of accomplished pupils. Even smaller numbers succeed in leaving behind the most eternal and valued of societal capital: a personal reputation, a good name. As Shaykh Muslihuiddin Sa'di of Shiraz has sagaciously said:

*Sa'diya mardī nekunaam Namirad hargiz*

*Murda aanast ke naamash ba neku-i nabarand*

(Oh Sa'di, a person of good name shall never die;

Dead are those whose names are not uttered for good deeds!)

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures (NELC) at Indiana University, during its short history of less than fifty years, often faced with considerable challenges, was blessed by the leadership and services of two remarkably dedicated scholars, teachers, mentors and leaders-- Professors Wadie Jwaideh (the founder and long-time Chairman of NELC) and Victor Danner (Professor and Chairman of NELC, as well as Director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program). These two scholars of Middle Eastern history, religions, languages and literature were the pioneers of their fields at Indiana University. NELC owes much to both of them for their many contributions.

We have just recently left behind a period of administrative chaos, which briefly even threatened the very existence of NELC as an academic unit on our campus (1999-2000). We are however very pleased to have regained our academic strength and administrative credibility, and are determined evermore to keep NELC and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies as an important part of IU's mission for promoting international education in the United States. We are especially pleased to be able to celebrate the accomplishments of our former colleagues through the annual Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture in Arabic and Islamic Studies and Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in

Islamic Studies. Both of the inaugural lectures were presented during the academic year 2002-2003, and we are delighted to publish them together in a single volume, *In Memoriam*, to honor our colleagues and to share their cherished memories with you.

The Memorial Lectures in this volume were made possible with the generous support from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences (COAS) of Indiana University, members of Jwaideh and Danner families, their close relatives, students and friends around the world. Last year's lectures and the two planned lectures for this academic year (2003-2004) are funded by Indiana University with help from Dean Subbaswamy of COAS, for which I am personally grateful.

It is our hope that these lectures will continue for decades to come and with your generous help future generations will continue to benefit from the latest social sciences and humanities research and analysis on the Middle East. Indeed, we have established separate Jwaideh and Danner Memorial Lecture Funds administered by the Indiana University Foundation to insure future funding for these important memorial lectures.

Dr. Alice Jwaideh's enthusiasm and dedication, widely supported by other members of her extended family and combined with equally important organizational support and financial contributions from our colleague Professor Suzanne Stetkevych and Dr. Robert Olson of University of Kentucky, were critical to the creation and success of the Jwaideh lecture fund during the past year. We are gratified by the generosity of many who have made donations to the Jwaideh fund and we are happy to gratefully acknowledge them in this publication.

Many members of the Jwaideh family honored us by their presence at the inaugural lecture. We were also pleased to have Professor Robert Olson of the University of Kentucky at Lexington – a former student of Professor Jwaideh and one of the foremost authorities on the history and politics of the Kurdish people, a topic of considerable importance to the intellectual work of Professor Jwaideh, who shared his memories of his mentor.

We had asked Professor George Makdisi to present this Jwaideh inaugural lecture, and he had enthusiastically accepted our invitation. Much to our deep sadness his untimely death (September 2002) robbed us the opportunity to hear him. We then turned to Professor Fred Danner who kindly accepted our invitation at rather short notice. I personally would like to thank him for presenting the first Jwaideh Memorial Lecture at Indiana University (November 4, 2002).

Dr. Mary Ann Danner-Fadae and Dr. Zaineb Istrabadi were instrumental in establishing the Victor Danner Memorial Lecture Fund. We are also grateful to Mary Ann for persuading Professor Huston Smith to present the

inaugural Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies. We were very fortunate and most grateful to have Professor Huston Smith, a widely admired scholar and a most generous spirit to help us launch this lecture series in Islamic Studies. Professor Richard Miller, Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at IU, and his colleagues graciously assisted us in welcoming Professor Smith to our campus. Dr. Zaineb Istrabadi, one of Professor Danner's accomplished students and a member of our faculty remembered her mentor fondly, and many from the Bloomington community and beyond joined us in this celebration. We offer our warmest thanks to all for their assistance in these endeavors.

It is my hope that through the publication of these lectures, we are able to perpetuate the legacies of great teachers, true scholars and inspired guides. Indeed, it is the hope of immortalizing the memories of such exemplary colleagues and their good name and reputation that, with your generous help, we will be able to undertake presenting these two Memorial Lectures for years to come.

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The Victor Danner Memorial Lecture in Islamic Studies

## Foreword by Dr. Robert Olson

Welcome to the first inaugural lecture in the Professor Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture Series. Alice, Dara, Albertine, Tarik, distinguished Professor Fred Donner, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is good to be back at Indiana University. Upon arriving at IU, I always headed for Goodbody Hall. There truly is some good and something bodily organic about it — a kind of *ummatul muminin* — a community of believers in learning. I always walked to the end of the corridor, knowing that I would find Professor Jwaideh there, busy as usual, but somehow finding the time to chat for an hour or two.

I am delighted to speak on behalf of Professor Jwaideh, *mu'allimuna al-akbar*. I first had Professor Jwaideh in 1965. I was studying at the time in the Uralic and Altaic Studies Department. At some point I realized that I could not make a living out of knowing twenty words in Mongol, fifteen in Hungarian, five in Finnish and two in Chuvash. I put my Central Asian language dictionaries in my backpack and headed to the history department to study Middle Eastern and Islamic History under Professor Jwaideh.

What an exhilarating time it was to be a student in the mid-1960s at IU. We were a motley crew, I guess now we would qualify for a multi-cultural group: Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Africans; Sunnis, Shi'is, Christians, Bahais, Isma'ilis; some *kafirs* and a few *munafiqun*. Some of us Western types had just returned from being Peace Corps volunteers in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, East and West Africa. Dr. Jwaideh relished the diversity.

We always called him Professor or Dr. Jwaideh. But behind his back we would call him *Shaykh al-Islam*, *al-Ra'is al-Akbar*, *al-Imam al-Akbar*- and when we got close to taking our doctoral exams we didn't refrain from using the term *al-Mahdi*. Professor Jwaideh always knew they were our expressions of admiration.

And he did deliver us. I remember vividly my first seminar on Medieval Islamic History. It started at 7. At 9:30 I looked at the clock. There was a break at 10:00. At 12 one person left. At 12:30 Dr. Jwaideh left. Most of us still did not want him to go. Some of us ended up with a seminar topic and some not. But what a *tour d'horizon* of medieval Islamic history and its sources it was.

I was two years into my program before I learned that Professor Jwaideh was the leading authority on the origins of the Kurdish nationalist movement. We learned so much about the topics of a particular seminar, we couldn't believe that he was also an expert on the nineteenth century history of the Middle East, let alone on medieval and modern Arab literature, and that one of his first loves was nineteenth century Russian literature.

Professor Jwaideh was a modern contemporary man. But I think that he did have a few doubts about a system of education in which every semester, students would take three or four different courses from various faculty. I think some of us learned the worth of the system of being a *murid*, *khalifah* or *talib* of a Khoja Efendi. But the worth of the system is in the person of the *Adab*. Professor Jwaideh knew that such a relationship inspired love, that love inspired learning, and learning understanding.

Some years ago a young American anthropology student interviewed Ayatollah Shari'atmadari and explained to him the most current anthropological theories and methodologies. Shari'atmadari listened patiently for two hours and then replied: "Bu fikirleri çok yakşı, fakat pişmiş ve pişmamış mı? (Shariatmadari was an Azeri, so they were speaking Azeri Turkish): These ideas are very good, but are they cooked or uncooked?" Most of the dissertation topics selected by Professor Jwaideh with his students were "cooked." Having directed some 30 to 40 doctoral theses in seven or eight different fields, and having many of these theses or parts of them published, attests to their "cookedness." One of the most difficult tasks of a professor, especially over a period of 30 to 35 years, is to advise candidates to select Ph.D. topics that are durable, contributive published works of scholarship. Professor Jwaideh could do this. It was due to his comprehensive, integrated knowledge of not only Middle Eastern and Islamic history and its sources, but of non-Arabic and Western sources as well. All of us who were his students or knew him as a colleague, friend or family member are grateful and enriched.

This is why I am delighted to be present at the first Professor Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture and why, with your generous contributions, we will continue these lectures indefinitely.

Professor Jwaideh would be pleased to be at the lecture tonight. He would grieve that George Maqdisi is not with us. He was a deep admirer of George's work. He would be delighted that Fred Donner is here. I remember one night discussing Fred's, *The Early Islamic Conquests* kept us up to 2 o'clock in the morning out at Denny's on Walnut Street. Professor Jwaideh would be delighted that Fred was giving the first lecture in his memory. We all do so wish that Wadie were present tonight to hear it.

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## Seeing the Origins of Islam In Historical Perspective

The story of Islam's beginnings has long fascinated Western observers — not just Western scholars, for as we shall see, the field of people interested in Islam's beginnings is considerably broader and includes many writers whose motivations the modern scholar, in particular the historian, would characterize as dubious.

One of these dubious motivations was the desire to learn about early Islam in order to engage more effectively in *religious polemic* against it. The long tradition of Western polemics against Islam, reaching far back into the Middle Ages, has been studied in some detail,<sup>2</sup> and I have no intention of trying to summarize it here, but I do want to make a few observations about it. To start, we must always remember that the first Western writings about Islam belonged to this polemical tradition of anti-Islamic tracts. Although, in a sense, all of Islam was grist for the polemicists' mill, the period of Islam's origins was of particular interest to them. The origins period, after all, included the story of the life of Islam's prophet, Muhammad, in the seventh century C.E., and of how he received the revelations that are codified as the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. So a close look by the polemicist at this period, in the course of which he hoped to reduce to a shambles Muhammad's claims to prophecy, and to ridicule the contents of the Qur'an, would naturally offer the greatest hope of delivering a propaganda death-blow to Islam.<sup>3</sup>

The polemical tradition also is noteworthy for its sources of information. In discussing the beginnings of Islam, including the life of the Prophet Muhammad, it often relied for its information on the writings of Middle Eastern Christian authors, who of course had their own peculiarly critical attitude toward Islam.

By the late nineteenth century, religious tracts against Islam were beginning to be eclipsed by work on early Islam that was in appearance, and often in fact, much more scholarly in its approach and less polemical in its intent. By "scholarly" I mean that it tended to use better sources — for example, Arabic sources from the Islamic tradition itself, and earlier, rather than later ones. Some of this scholarship, such as the classic works of Goldziher and Wellhausen,<sup>4</sup> was quite "objective;" other works, while using the sources carefully, remain committed to reaching a specifically religious judgment on Islam as a faith. For example, many literary studies of the Qur'anic parallels in Jewish or Christian writings seem to have had as their goal a reductionist analysis of Islamic scripture, to show (at least by implication) that the Qur'an was "really" only a derivative, warmed-over version of familiar Jewish and Christian motifs.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a number of Christian and Jewish writers of the early twentieth century seem to have engaged in a kind of friendly competition between themselves to see which faith should get the honor of

having provided more material for the Qur'an. My two favorite entries in this category are the near-contemporary books by Richard Bell and Charles Cutler Torrey, the former called *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* and the latter *The Jewish Foundation of Islam*.<sup>6</sup> Obviously they can't both have been right, but just as obviously, they both agreed on the validity of the reductionist approach to Islam's origins.

The tradition of outright anti-Islamic polemic is fortunately much less evident today than it was in medieval times, but it still hangs on. An interesting example has recently been studied by the anthropologist Daniel Varisco: it takes the form of a comic book entitled *The Prophet*, written by Jack Chick, a very successful (and very conservative) Protestant publicist. It tells in simplified, illustrated form the story of Muhammad's preaching and the rapid early spread of Islam, which it exposes as a Papal conspiracy, obviously very damning in Chick's eyes, concocted to mislead "true Christians"--who I suppose are, in Chick's view, the alleged early medieval counterparts of Chick's own Protestant denomination.<sup>7</sup> It is easy to dismiss such productions as the ravings of an extremist fringe, but we must remember that tens of thousands of copies of Chick's *The Prophet* have apparently been sold or distributed free of charge to churches for the edification of their young, so that its message may be far more widespread than that presented by sober academic works. The point here is that the long tradition of anti-Islamic polemic is obviously still alive and well, and has doubtless contributed to how many in the West view Islam, even if only unconsciously.

A second kind of dubious motivation for the study of early Islam in Western scholarship is the pursuit of what we might call *cultural polemic*. By this I mean efforts to denigrate Islamic *culture* as fundamentally flawed. Invariably, this involves an attempt to isolate various characteristics of Islam or Islamic culture that are considered "essential," that is unchanging and unchangeable, along with an emphasis on the fundamental and unalterable "otherness" of Islamic from Western culture. (Of course, I need hardly stress that this effort to "essentialize" the non-Western other also involves an implicit "essentialization" of Western culture as well.) This cultural polemic can be understood as a secularized version of the religious polemic we have just considered, and in some writings the two are intimately intertwined. Being secular, its target also shifted: Islam was no longer the only thing between its crosshairs; now "Arabs" or "the Oriental mind" (even Oriental Christianity) were similarly criticised, it being understood that there was a lot of overlap between "Islam" and "Arabs" or "Orientals." An interesting example is an article entitled "Espagne préislamique et Espagne musulmane" by the noted Spanish historian Claudio Sanchez-Albornoz,<sup>8</sup> in which the author presents the thesis that everything of importance in Spanish culture is attributable to



pre-Islamic cultures, particularly that of the Roman empire. Despite 800 years of Muslim presence in Spain, nothing in Spanish culture is attributable, according to Sanchez-Albornoz, to "Oriental influence." One can sense, when he uses it, the heavy negative overtone the word "oriental" carries for him. It is an amazing act of denial; one must conclude that Sanchez-Albornoz had never heard *flamenco*, considered the history of Spanish property law, or noticed the many toponyms and loanwords of Arabic origin in Spanish—including the obvious one in his own last name (from Arabic *al-burnus*, "hood", "cloak").

Usually, this emphasis on the "otherness" of Islam is accompanied by implicit or explicit assertions of the inferiority of Islamic to Western culture. Such writings could thus serve, among other things, to justify Western domination and manipulation of the Islamic world. This is one of the main points of Edward Said's now-famous book *Orientalism*.<sup>9</sup> I will admit that I have grave reservations about a number of things Said said in *Orientalism*, but I think that he was definitely on the mark when he pointed out the intellectual nexus that sometimes existed between Western colonial domination and a certain trend of essentializing Western scholarship on Islam. The essentializing cultural polemic went far beyond the circle of those who had direct or indirect ties to colonialism; it was not infrequently practiced by those who simply seem to have believed in the superiority of Western culture over all others. Gustave von Grunebaum, for example, in his many learned works on Islam, reminds us repeatedly that Islamic culture, despite its richness, simply cannot measure up to Western culture, particularly to the achievements of the matchless Greeks. I sometimes wonder how, as a mere Viennese raised in the early twentieth century, von Grunebaum was able to live with himself.

As with Western religious polemic against Islam, the cultural polemic tended to place disproportionate emphasis on the beginnings of Islam, and probably for the same reason: from the perspective of the polemicist, that was the point at which "Islam" (whatever that term might mean in this context) was most vulnerable. This emphasis on early Islam is also a consequence of the fact that "essential" is usually equated with "original." Since an "essence" is not subject to change over time, it must have been present from the start, and is indeed most readily detected by examining foundational phenomena, before any accretion of later, incidental, merely historical features.

The impact of this essentializing tendency in Western studies of Islamic culture and history is still with us — and not merely in works by authors who might be stigmatized by some as "Orientalists." It is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the way many books about various phenomena or institutions in the Islamic world are still constructed — books with titles such as "Women in Islam," "Politics in Islam," etc. Many books on "Women in

Islam," for example, begin with a chapter on the status of women in the Qur'an and hadith, and then follow this with a succession of chapters that discuss the actual situation of women in particular times and places, the majority of them overwhelmingly modern times and places. Is not the implication of this arrangement that the first chapter provides the key to the "essential" Islamic attitude towards women, which will in some way be particularly valuable in understanding a subsequent discussion of, say, women in the Ottoman empire or in modern Istanbul? Yes, the Qur'an's dicta certainly might be directly relevant in the case of *some* Ottoman women or *some* women in modern Istanbul, depending upon their own degree of religious observance, and that of their husbands, families and friends; but an historian, at least, would assume that many other factors might be equally relevant, indeed far more relevant for some women, yet they are passed over in silence. For example, in the case of Ottoman or modern Turkish women, why are the Qur'an and the traditions of Islamic law seen as indispensably relevant, but not the traditions of women's place in society among the nomadic Turks of the Central Asian steppe, distant ancestors of the modern Western Turks? Or among the Byzantines, whose territories and culture the Ottomans absorbed? Or among the Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, and other peoples of Anatolia, who along with the Turks contributed to the amalgam that constituted the population of the Ottoman Empire or modern Turkey? Presumably, the answer must be that these things are left out because they are not considered (whether consciously or not) "essentially" Islamic. The absurdity of the approach can be best appreciated, perhaps, by trying to apply it to our own culture: could we take seriously a book about "Women in Western Culture" that began with a chapter of quotes from the Old and New Testaments, and then offered studies of specific groups of women in fifteen different cities in Europe and the Americas?

Here I cannot resist making a passing observation that the preceding discussion may already have engendered also in your minds. When one reads the works of many recent and modern Muslim apologists, at least as far back as the *salafī* reformers of the late nineteenth century such as Muhammad 'Abduh and his disciple Rashid Rida, one senses oneself to be also in the grips of an essentializing discourse on Islam and the encroaching West, only with the moral valences reversed. In many cases, I think, they too conceived of Islam and the West as having distinctive (and perhaps incompatible) "essences." It is, of course, possible that this essentializing perspective in some Muslim apologetic is a natural reaction to the essentialist-based attacks on Islam by Western polemical writings, whether religious or cultural. But we may also observe that the intellectual tradition that shaped the thought of 'Abduh and Rida and their counterparts, Sunni Islamic law, itself presents a powerful argument in favor of the existence of an "essential Islam" — or "Islamic essence," if you prefer — an essence that inheres in the

eternal, uncreated, unchanging Word of God (i.e., the Qur'an) and in the words and deeds of His Prophet, which along with the Qur'an provided for Sunni jurists the fundamental sources for the elaboration of law and society. Could it be that Western "Orientalists" imbibed their essentializing perception of Islam and its culture from the Islamic sources themselves, at least in part? I do not pretend to be able to answer the question here, but I do think that the matter deserves further consideration.

I do not mean to indict *all* Western scholarship on early Islam, although I will admit that the picture I have drawn so far is bleak. Fortunately, awareness is now quite widespread of the kinds of deficiencies and misperceptions involved in the polemical and essentializing approaches to the study of Islamic civilization, and much recent work has been better at avoiding at least the more obvious pitfalls of those approaches. However, the preponderance of such polemical and essentializing discourse in the earlier tradition of Western writings raises another question: is there any reason why the historian today should pay particular attention to the period of Islam's origins? Is not the extraordinary focus on the origins period itself largely an artifact of the polemical and essentializing discourse, as we have already seen? This being so, and since early Islam has been studied so much already, shouldn't historians just try to correct the more egregious errors about early Islam conveyed by the earlier literature, and concentrate their efforts instead on chapters in the history of the Islamic community that remain far less well known to us?

In fact, as an historian I think there is good reason to pay special attention to the period of Islam's beginnings. This is because there are a number of aspects of the rise of Islam that defy ready historical explanation. In particular, historians struggle to explain the combined *rapidity* of Islam's appearance and expansion as both faith and empire, and the *permanence* or *durability* of that expansion. To tick off just some of the subordinate questions subsumed in this puzzle:

1. What were the driving factors underlying the expansion? Exactly what were the first Believers hoping to achieve? What caused people to join the movement? Religious zeal, national or ethnic solidarity, economic gain, and climatic change, among others, have all been posited as key factors, but serious objections have been raised to each of them.

2. How did the early Muslims manage to defeat the armies of the day's two "Great Powers," the Byzantine and the Sasanian empires? After all, the first Muslims, who came from Arabia, had no tradition of statecraft or of army organization, no evident advantages of tactics, and probably inferior equipment; and the center of their

movement, western Arabia, is almost devoid of the kind of economic resources that are usually needed to start and sustain a great military expansion or state integration. Yet expand and found an empire they did.

3. How did the early Muslims keep the expansion going, even after major lulls during the two civil wars (656-60 and 680-92)? Did the motivations for expansion change palpably during the first century A.H?

4. How did the early Muslims maintain their control over the vast populations of non-Muslims they are said to have conquered? After all, within 100 years of the death of the Muhammad in 632, the Muslims had spread from France to India, an area in which the Muslims were probably only 1% or 2% of the population at first. How did they themselves avoid being assimilated or acculturated by the 99%, and manage to begin the process whereby most of the 99% eventually embraced Islam? This is all the more puzzling in view of the fact that the populations "absorbed" had religious and literary traditions of long standing, whereas the Arabian Muslims, when they began, had a brand-new religion and no tradition of written literature at all.

Islamic tradition itself developed answers for at least some of these questions. These were cast in the form of a rich historiographical tradition elaborated by Muslims during their first three or four centuries. A very superficial summary looks something like this:

1. Arabia on the eve of Islam was sunken in polytheistic barbarism, and this was the context into which Muhammad was born and in which he lived.

2. The Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 C.E.) received revelations from God — written down in time as the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. The religious ideas that Muhammad brought were revolutionary in the Arabian context: monotheism, obedience to God's law, individual responsibility for one's behavior before God, last judgment, an afterlife in heaven or hell. The Muslims were filled with religious zeal to spread the truth, to create a God-guided community of Believers who would be saved on resurrection day.

3. The community expanded successfully because the early Muslims were paragons of faith and because God supported it and gave it victory on the battlefield.

4. The later empire was a direct descendant of the original God-guided community of Muhammad's time; its leaders, the caliphs, were in a sense Muhammad's successors and ruled the empire as centralized autocrats on the model of the prophet, guided by the Qur'an and the example of the prophet (his words and deeds).

Western scholars have reacted to this traditional Islamic origins story with curious ambivalence. On the one hand, most Western scholars (almost all non-Muslims) rejected what they saw as the legendary and supernatural

elements of the story, and its salvation-historical implications in theology and politics, that Muhammad was a prophet and that the Muslim community was favored by God to rule the world. On the other hand, the externals of the origins story have been largely taken over unchanged by Western scholars. This was part of the process of trying to write about early Islam in a more scholarly manner, by relying on the earliest available sources from the Islamic tradition itself. The result, as Patricia Crone has noted, is that when we read about the beginnings of Islam in most modern textbooks, we find a secularized English-language version of the same story provided by the medieval Arabic chronicles.<sup>10</sup> Thus our textbooks offer us descriptions of the paganism of pre-Islamic Arabia as the intellectual and social context in which Muhammad was born; they tell how his preaching brought monotheism to Arabia; one finds descriptions of the course of Muhammad's life and preaching, but either with silence on the validity of Muhammad's claim to be a prophet, or with bland statements that equivocate on the exact nature of his prophetic status--for example, statements like, "Muslims believe Muhammad to have been a prophet," or "Muhammad believed himself to be a prophet." Similarly, one finds descriptions of the rapid course of the conquests through which the Believers acquired a vast new empire from Spain to India, but without the notion that God's support for the Believers had any role in the process; rather, the "causes" are identified with a variety of secular factors, such as the supposed periodic expansions of Semitic peoples from Arabia,<sup>11</sup> or a desire for booty on the part of the warriors, or the exhaustion of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires because of their long wars against one another. The externals of the Islamic origins story were retained, but without what we might call its spiritual or theological core.

This strategy of adopting the externals of the Islamic origins story, while rejecting its theological implications, is surely better than the straightforward anti-Islamic polemics of earlier years. At least an effort was being made to derive evidence from the earliest and best-informed sources available. But as historians scrutinized these sources ever more closely, hitherto unsuspected complexities and contradictions, or the impact of hidden religious or political or legal agendas, gradually became clearer, creating among Western scholars a climate of nagging doubt, or positive skepticism, about the reliability of the whole Islamic historiographical tradition. The dilemma of the historian is that, problematic as these sources are, they provide virtually our only information about the beginnings of Islam; contemporary documents are extremely few in number, as are reports originating outside the early community of Believers, and neither alternative source is easy to evaluate when they do exist. In fact, over the past quarter-century a few authors have adopted the position that the sources are so much a retrospective fiction

that we should simply throw them out as historical evidence. (I am thinking here particularly of John Wansbrough.)<sup>12</sup> In their view, historians will never be able to reconstruct how Islam really started, and should simply stop trying and do something else.

I suppose this could be the end of my talk today. I am afraid, however, that I must disappoint you and go on a bit longer. This is because I think that so skeptical a view is in fact unwarranted. We must start with the traditional Islamic origins narrative, but as historians we must ask what aspects of this narrative really make sense of the full historical context in which Islam first appeared. Much of recent Western scholarship on early Islam has signally failed to do this — perhaps because most of the students of the subject have not, in fact, been trained as historians, but rather as specialists in languages and texts, and so have not in most cases really tried to think about the Islamic origins narratives historically. In the final part of my talk today, then, I would like to point out briefly some aspects of our understanding of Islam's origins that, when one considers the actual historical context in which Islam first arose, seem to me to warrant further scrutiny and serious reinterpretation.

(1) First, Muhammad was, of course, raised in Arabia.<sup>13</sup> I think, however, that the traditional Islamic origins narrative — and hence the usual view of Islam's beginnings among Western scholars — overemphasizes the Arabian environment, and particularly the degree to which it was a society committed to "paganism." The traditional origins story did this in order to provide a suitably dark background against which the light of Islam and the brilliance of Prophet could shine more brightly. Considering the extent to which, as we now know, Christianity, Judaism, and Magianism had penetrated the whole Near East by 600 C.E., including Arabia, it seems likely that Late Antique monotheism must be included in the proper historical background against which Muhammad's teachings should be viewed, not merely Arabian paganism. When we do so, however, Muhammad's preachings appear in a different light. Most of the central religious ideas enshrined in Muhammad's teachings (as found, at least, in the Qur'an) were well-known in this area already: to name a few, prophecy, revealed scripture, last judgment, afterlife, heaven and hell. The Qur'an's emphasis on piety, and various details of the prayer ritual, suggest that the almost ascetic piety of Late Antique Syrian Christianity may have been an important contributor to Qur'anic and early Islamic piety. This continuity is often played down, because the later Islamic tradition itself wishes to deny it in order to make the Prophet's message — Islam — seem more completely revolutionary in the Arabian context. We must, then, try to view the origins of Islam not against a narrow Arabian background, but against the broader background of religious currents in the Late Antique Near East.<sup>14</sup> Doing this not only promises to make the rise of

such a set of religious ideas more historically plausible, it frees us, as historians, to concentrate on the important task of trying to understand how Muhammad reshaped, reinterpreted, pruned, added to, and shifted the emphasis within various "borrowed" concepts, added to them, and combined them with his own original insights to create a new synthesis that found an immediate and powerful resonance in the souls of millions. Whether we see this synthesis as the product of Muhammad's personal genius, or as God's revelation expressing itself through his genius, is a choice one makes on the basis of one's belief, and is not a matter accessible to historical analysis.

(2) Western scholars, who have long been aware of the religious implications of the traditional Islamic origins story, have, I think, overreacted in their effort to neutralize those religious implications. They may have done this either because, as adherents of faiths other than Islam they wanted to draw Islam's theological fangs, or because as people of a secular mentality they found any religious explanation unacceptable. Whichever the reason, the secularized version of the traditional Islamic origins story that resulted focused overwhelmingly on material factors in the rise of Islam — things such as the conquerors' presumed desire for booty, the effect of a presumed climatic change in causing emigration, the unleashing of latent powers in Arabian society by the introduction of a new level of hierarchical social organization, etc. The irony, then, is that the rise of Islam, which all Western scholars will freely admit to be a religion, is insistently explained by many of them as the product of non-religious factors almost exclusively. This is, however, little more than a form of reductionism. Western scholarship has simply — unbelievably — failed to do justice to the role of religion in the rise of Islam. As historians we must, I think, acknowledge that Islam was first and foremost a *religious movement*. That is, we must admit that religion can be a significant factor in shaping history. Once again, we can note that this acknowledgement has nothing to do with the question of whether one wishes to believe that the religion at the heart of this movement has divine sanction or not; that is a question of faith, not of history.

(3) Having acknowledged that religion can be a powerful force in society and in history, and that Islam was a religious movement, we must move on to the next question, which is: what was the exact character of this religious movement? For our present purposes, we may note that the Islamic tradition's own answer makes two main claims about this. The first is that the movement was conceived from the start as a new religion, that is a distinct confession, separate above all from polytheism ("paganism") as well as from older monotheisms such as Christianity and Judaism. The second claim is that the central ideas driving the movement were monotheism, prophecy, righteous behavior, the last judgment and afterlife, and submission to God's will and to the new regime. Although

these two claims have been taken up by most Western scholarship, when we consider them in light of one another they seem somewhat incompatible, perhaps even contradictory. That is, it is difficult to see how a movement that presented itself as decisively new and different could be constructed around religious concepts, such as monotheism and prophecy, that were so thoroughly familiar in the Near Eastern context in which they arose. And, since there is no significant evidence in the Qur'an or anywhere else suggesting that the movement ever deviated from the central concepts just mentioned — monotheism, etc. — I think it is worth considering the possibility that Muhammad and the first generation or so of his followers did not originally see themselves as beginning a completely new religion — a new confession — to be imposed on the many monotheists of the Near East (i.e., on the Jews and Christians). Rather, they called them to a revival of true monotheism and to a spirit of pious dedication to God that were implicit in Judaism and Christianity, but which, in their view, many Jews and Christians had lost sight of. In short, Muhammad's movement may have begun as a stringently pious effort at monotheistic reform, calling Jews and Christians to live by the law of the Torah or Gospel, even as it called former pagans to live by the Qur'an. As I have tried to show elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> there survives some evidence that the early Believers were quite ready to include pious Jews and Christians in their community of Believers. This evidence suggests that the original boundaries were drawn not between Muslims on the one hand, and Christians, Jews, and others on the other hand (as they would later be). Rather, the crucial early distinction was between true Believers in the oneness of God, the Last Day, and righteousness on the one hand, regardless of one's outward confession or denomination, and on the other hand all those who either did not share the basic beliefs, or who did not live up to the exacting standards of pious behavior that the Believers demanded.

I would like to make perfectly clear here that I am *not* proposing that Muhammad began his career as a Jew or Christian, or that his movement was an offshoot of Judaism or Christianity. But I do think that Jews and Christians were part of Muhammad's target audience, and that those who responded favorably by agreeing to live by their law were, at first, reckoned among the Believers. This broader, more inclusive quality of the original movement is something that later Islamic tradition is at pains to conceal, since by the end of the first century A.H. the definition of "Believers" had been narrowed to become synonymous with "Muslim," which seems to mean those who observed Qur'anic law. But I think a vestige of the community's early openness to pious Jews and Christians can be found in later Islamic law's granting of protected status to Jews and Christians as "peoples of the book." The presumption of an early openness to the community might also help explain the Muslims' success in conquering and



imposing their rule over vast areas and their (largely Jewish or Christian) populations. For the Arabian conquerors were not imposing a new religion on the populations of the Near East, but merely trying to establish a righteous political order, one in which Believing Jews and Christians could, and did, play an important part.

(4) Another problem posed by traditional interpretations is the amazing dynamism of the movement, depicted as a rapid conquest by the Muslims of vast areas of the Near East. It is not immediately apparent how the Believers' movement generated such zeal, given that many of its central ideas were already widely known.

A key to this puzzle lies, I think, once again in the broader Near Eastern cultural context in which Islam arose. This suggests that Islam may have been a kind of apocalyptic movement — that is, a movement that preached that its message was urgent because the End of the World and Last Judgment were near. Apocalyptic concepts had wide currency in the Late Antique Near East, and there can be little question that such ideas were familiar also in Arabia. Apocalyptic eschatology can be traced in the Qur'an, as can a form of realized eschatology — that is, the notion that the righteous regime being established by the Believers was, itself, the very kingdom that would usher in the Last Judgment. It seems to me that such ideas were precisely the kind that, under the proper circumstances, could have galvanized many early Believers to drop "everyday life" and embark on their conquests. The fact that later Islamic tradition is at pains to deny this apocalyptic beginning (just as with Christianity) means we must read the tradition carefully, looking for survivals of early formulations.

(5) Western scholars of 19th and early 20th century were so steeped in nationalist ideology and the racist outlook that underpins it that they could not see the world except through the nationalist lens. Western theories of Islam's origins reflect this in the way the expansion of Islam is usually called the "Arab conquest." It is true, of course, that most of the early leaders and many troops of the expansion movement were Arabians, that is people from various places in Arabia, but I would suggest that there is a significant difference between saying "Arabian" and saying "Arab." It is far from evident to me that there was any clear notion, at the time of Islam's rise, of an "Arab", or, if there was, that the leaders in the Believers' movement would have wanted to be identified as such. The evidence is complex and ambiguous, but suffice it to say for the present that words related to "Arab" seem to be related sometimes to a kind of linguistic identity (*'arab* vs. *'ajam*, or non-Arabic speaker), sometimes to a nomadic lifestyle (*a'rab.*, meaning "nomad"), and not infrequently seem to be used as a virtual pejorative. The whole concept of "Arab," as projected back to early Islamic times, is therefore problematic, but I find no hint that in Muhammad's day that the word *'arab* articulated the kind of collective political identity that we associate with the

modern word "Arab." It is possible that an "Arab" identity developed as result of the Arabian Believers' experience of empire, but the exact nature of this identity still needs to be sharply defined. The problem is that many modern scholars (both Western and Muslim incidentally) routinely conceive the history not merely of Islam's beginnings, but of whole subsequent period of empire and beyond, in national terms — the "Arabs" attack Constantinople, etc. Such careless usages are deeply-rooted in the literature on early Islamic history and will be difficult to eradicate. Perhaps, however, we can best begin this process of eradication by focusing on the actual quality of the early Believers' movement and calling its partisans what, to judge from early inscriptions and from the Qur'an, they generally wished to call themselves — Believers (not Muslims yet, and certainly not Arabs!).

These are, then, some of the ways in which we must try to rewrite (yet again) the story of the rise of Islam. We must free ourselves from religious and cultural polemic, from "essentializing" reductionism, from facile nationalist projections, and from the salvation-historical objectives of the Islamic sources themselves, even as we use these sources in our reconstruction. In this way we may be able to see these events more clearly in the context of the religious, social, and political realities of the Late Antique Near East. If we succeed in doing so, Western studies of Islam's origins written during the 21st century can indeed be different from those of the 20th century and before, even though the sources on which we must rely remain essentially the same ones known and used for the past one hundred and thirty years.

Fred M. Donner

Endnotes:

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Notably in the classic work by Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960).

This may in part explain the imbalance in Western studies of the Islamic world, which as the historian Marshall Hodgson noted several decades ago, is noticeably weak in the study of the "Middle Periods" — with correspondingly greater emphasis on the recent period, and on the early (origins) period.

For example, Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (2 vols. Halle: Max Niemayer, 1889-90); English

translation by S. M. Stern and C. R. Barber, *Muslim Studies* (2 vols., London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967-71). Julius Wellhausen, *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1902); English translation by Margaret Graham Weir, *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1927).

An early landmark in this kind of literature — whose reductionist outlook is made clear already in its title — is Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Muhammad aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (Bonn: F. Baaden, 1833) — literally, "What did Muhammad pick up from Judaism?" It was translated into English by F. M. Young under the title, *Judaism and Islam* (Madras, 1898; reprint New York: Ktav, 1970).

Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926); Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1933).

The website for Chick Publications advertises this comic as follows: "Learn how the papacy helped start Islam, only to have this new daughter rebel against her...Muslims have been saved by reading this book."

*Révue Historique* 237 (1967), 295-338.

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

Patricia Crone, *Slaves on horses. The evolution of the Islamic polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 13.

What my esteemed teacher at Princeton, John H. Marks, once piquantly characterized as the theory of a "bubbling well of Semites somewhere deep in the heart of Arabia."

John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977); idem, *The Sectarian Milieu* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978). A good summary of Wansbrough's theories in English — because Wansbrough's prose is sometimes almost impossible to understand — is Andrew Rippin, "Literary Analysis of *Qur'an*, *Tafsir*, and *Sira*: the Methodologies of John Wansbrough," in Richard C. Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 151-63.

Some justification for my "of course" can be found in my *Narratives of Islamic Origins* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998).

G. R. Hawting, *The idea of Idolatry and the emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) makes the case for the importance of viewing Islam's origins in a monotheistic context, rather than a strictly pagan one. He seems to follow Wansbrough in suggesting that this implies an origin outside Arabia, however, a move which I deem unnecessary.

"From Believers to Muslims: Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," *Al-Abhath* (Spring 2003).

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