

CHAPTER 32

EARLY ISLAM AS A LATE ANTIQUE RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION

His [Henri Pirenne's] thesis that the advent of Islam in the Mediterranean sealed the end of Late Antiquity remains valid.

—(Herrin 1987, 134)

We have expended a good deal of energy, both scholastic and intellectual, on taking seriously the obvious fact that the formation of Islamic civilisation took place in the world of Late Antiquity.

—(Crone and Cook 1977, vii)

At first sight, the developments in the seventh-century Middle East seem very new. They do not seem to fit into the world of Late Antiquity as we know it. A man named Muḥammad, described by seventh-century Christian sources as a military leader, a legislator, and a monotheist preacher (Hoyland 2000), persuaded a number of his own people in west Arabia to form a community (*umma*) united in “belief in God and the Last Day,” to dissociate themselves from those who would not follow them by making an exodus (*hijra*), and finally to make war (*jihād*) on their opponents to bring them over to their cause or to make them submit (Cook 1983). The movement snowballed until it

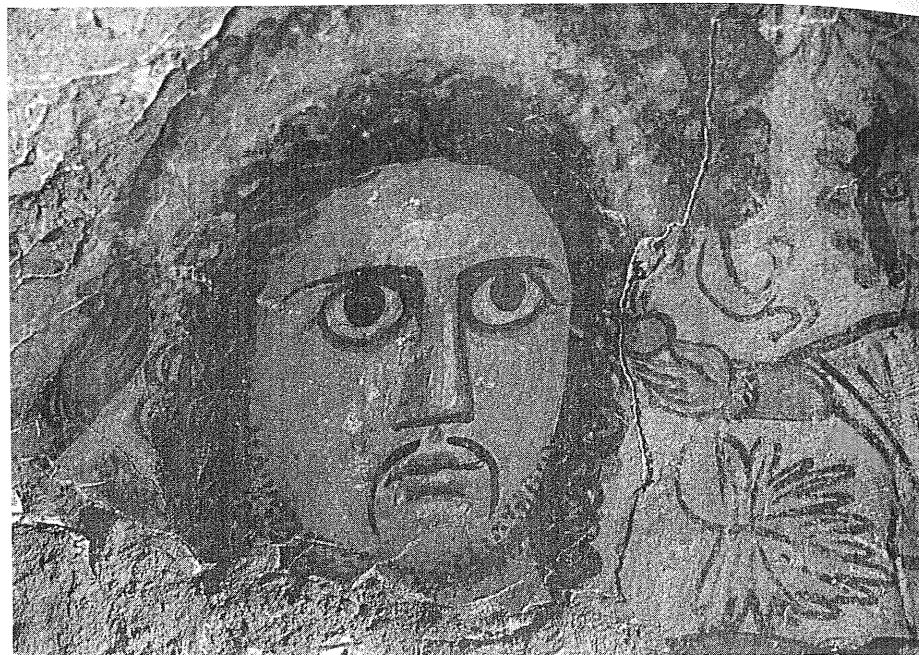


Figure 32.1. Wall Painting, Qaryat al-Faw, possibly third century C.E. or earlier (Riyadh National Museum. © Saudi Commission for Tourism & Antiquities). See also color plate section.

engulfed Arabia, and eventually the Arab armies of Muḥammad and his successors (called caliphs), in a series of lightning campaigns, swept away the old empire of Iran and wrested the southern and eastern provinces of the Byzantine empire from its grasp (Kennedy 2007). The kinsmen of the third caliph 'Uthmān, the Umayyads, governed the ever-expanding Muslim Arab world until 132 A.H./750 C.E. (Hawting 2000), and under their rule, new cities sprang up to house the new troops, new sacred buildings (mosques) were erected for their worship, the teachings of Muḥammad were proclaimed in inscriptions written in a new language and new script (Arabic), and so on. And this sense of discordance with Late Antiquity's rhythms is reinforced by the Muslim sources for this early period, which speak principally of internal quarrels among the Muslims, names of holders of high office, and battles against amorphous external foes; the colorful characters of Late Antiquity are no more than faceless taxpayers and occasional rebels. So in what sense can we consider early Islam a late antique religion, or should we call it such at all (Robinson 2003)?

It is helpful when considering this question to look a little at the history of the idea of Late Antiquity. One might start with Henri Pirenne (1937), who, though negative about the effects of the Muslim conquest, is actually a positive influence in that he extended the life of Roman civilization. Gibbon was wrong; not all was lost with the Germanic invasions; rather, urban life and

the culture that went with it continued until the Muslim invasions. This extension of Rome's dominion was given very concrete realization with the publication of A. H. M. Jones's *The Later Roman Empire* (1964), which offered a very thorough and detailed account of the history and institutions of the Roman realm up until 602. The focus and interest of both scholars were firmly rooted in the Roman sphere of things, and other cultures and peoples only got a look when they affected Rome—so Iran features only when it launches incursions into Roman territory. Nevertheless, the door had been pushed ajar, and this laid the ground for it to be thrown open a few years later by Peter Brown, with his *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971a), an incredibly rich and influential work that gave birth to the discipline of Late Antiquity by virtue of its evocative and sensitive portrayal of this, in his view, vibrant and exotic period. Late Antiquity as an explanatory model was thus devised in reaction to the Gibbonesque model of decline and fall and wariness toward the barbarians at the gates, so it stresses inclusivity, welcomes diversity and difference, and irons out change and rupture by appealing to the *longue durée*. Under this model, it is relatively easy to slip in Islam as another facet of the kaleidoscope world of Late Antiquity, as indeed Peter Brown does very nicely. And in Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Hagarism* (1977), Islam becomes a *mêlée* of Jewish, Christian, and Manichaean ingredients, the ultimate late antique concoction.

This approach has been applied to a whole variety of phenomena across the fourth- to eighth-century Middle East, constituting a veritable "Late Antiquity to early Islam" industry, spawning numerous conferences, workshops, seminars, and collaborative volumes. All are responding to the fact that the Middle East in the fourth century looks very different in the eighth century. A particularly graphic example is provided by changes in cities: straight streets to winding alleys, temples to churches and mosques, wide open public spaces to tightly packed industrial and commercial complexes, and so on (Kennedy 1985; Whitton 1990; Liebeschuetz 2001). The question is what it all means, and here is where the difference of views is evident, ranging from decadent decline to exciting evolution. The emergence of Islam is omnipresent in this debate, representing for the advocates of a long Late Antiquity the consummation of changes already under way long before. However, the traditional Muslim model would argue that Muḥammad and the Qur'ān usher in a new age, one that erases all before it, one that generates its own concepts and principles, one that neither needed nor heeded foreign elements and alien wisdoms. And the clash of civilizations model of Samuel Huntington and others has impelled a number of late antique historians to emphasize that the Muslim world was very different from its predecessors, to be less shy of speaking of confrontation and conquest, and to cut off Late Antiquity before the emergence of Islam, seeing it as the straw that broke Late Antiquity's back and pushed the Middle East into the medieval age.¹

In what follows, I shall first adduce a few examples of ways in which early Islam might be seen as conforming to the late antique model and then return at the end to the question of whether it makes sense to see early Islam as a late antique religion.

THE PROBLEM OF THE SOURCES

The creation of the past which was achieved through this creation of [an Arabic historical] tradition tacitly excluded all outsiders to Arabia. Jews and Christians, Persians and East Romans were allotted "walk-on parts," but little more. The immensely rich but inward-looking Arabic historical tradition virtually ignored the intimacy and the complexity of the relations between the Arabs and the other cultures of the Near East.

—(Brown 2003, 301)

Before proceeding, however, I should add a cautionary note, namely, that tracing the development of the early Islamic religion is a very difficult task. The source material tends to give the impression that Muḥammad and his companions brought forth Islam complete and that later scholars merely codified and interpreted it. Moreover, many Western scholars would argue that the numerous accounts we have of the life of Muḥammad and his companions are a late distillation of an oral history that has been much transformed and distorted in the course of its transmission and, more important, that alternative versions have been edited out (Humphreys 1991, 25–68; see also Shoemaker, chapter 33 in this book). This means, as one critic has put it, that "one can take the picture presented or one can leave it, but one cannot work with it" (Crone 1980, 4). Such a situation has had the effect of polarizing the study of early Islam into two camps: traditionalists who accept the picture and revisionists who reject it (Nevo and Koren 1991). In the hope of breaking the deadlock, attempts have been made to rely solely on non-Muslim sources (Crone and Cook 1977) and archaeological evidence (Nevo and Koren 2003), both of which, though yielding important insights, are too scanty to provide a credible alternative vision (Hoyland 1997; 2006). This situation has been made worse by recent political events such as September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq, which have tended to engender and heighten tensions between the civilizations of the West and the Middle East and to push scholars into either being apologists for Islam (supporting the traditional account) or polemicists against Islam (opposing the traditional account). Yet though a detailed depiction of the evolution of early Islam over its first two centuries is not yet possible, its general outlines are clear

enough (and confirmed by non-Muslim and archaeological evidence) to be able to permit some assessment of the question of Islam's place in Late Antiquity.

RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS AND UNIVERSALIST VISION

The Islamic empire was implicit in Late Antiquity.

—(Fowden 1993, 138)

Although one of the most important features of the late antique model is to stress continuity, the period before the advent of Islam was nevertheless one of great upheaval and transformation. In the first place, the loose territorial empires of the Romans and Parthians had given way to the integrated ecumenical empires of the Byzantines and Sasanians (Garsoïan 1983; Howard-Johnston 1995). Their close proximity, the result of Rome's shift to the east in the second century, and the assertiveness of the Sasanian dynasty of Iran, in comparison with their complacent predecessors, led to confrontation (Greatrex and Lieu 2000). Inevitably, such emulation between states of similar standing engendered large-scale political, social, and cultural change. Both moved toward greater administrative centralization and absolutist government, to the detriment of civic autonomy in Byzantium and of the provincial nobility in Sasanian Iran. In the second place, the ruling elites no longer remained indifferent to the beliefs of the masses. Indeed, the emperors of both realms, now sharing their creed with the majority of their subjects, evinced an interest in the promotion of religious uniformity within their lands, intervening in matters of religious dispute among their subjects.

Thus the religions of Late Antiquity tend to be intricately linked with power. Christianity provides the most visible illustration, the conversion of Constantine the Great ensuring an intimate connection that became ever closer. But Judaism, too, won over ruling elites in various times and places, most famously the Himyarite dynasty of south Arabia (Robin 2003; 2004), which in the sixth century instigated a persecution of the Christians in their land. The reason for this was that the latter were loyal to the Byzantines, who supported the Ethiopians, who had territorial ambitions in south Arabia, another example of the enmeshing of religion and politics at that time (Shahîd 1979; Munro-Hay 1991, esp. 85–92). Zoroastrian clergy were keen to court the overlords of Iran and to emphasize how much religion and politics were twins, each reinforcing the other (Huyse 1998). And Manichaeism, though ultimately unsuccessful, tried hard to enlist the support of states: the prophet Mani himself visited the courts of three successive Persian emperors.

Seen in this light, early Islam looks very much like a child of Late Antiquity. Muḥammad was not just a preacher, but leader of the Muslim community of Medina: its legislator, military director, and arbiter in all matters of religion. His successors, who led the young Muslim community to capture and rule the Middle East, were termed "commander of the believers" and "deputy of God" (Crone and Hinds 1986). Disagreement over the powers and conduct of such leaders led to a number of civil wars, the upshot of which was a split in the Muslim community between those who believed that the leaders should combine political and religious power (eventually crystallizing into the Shī'ī sect) and those who preferred a separation of powers (eventually crystallizing into the Sunnī sect), handing matters of religion over to scholars and government to secular rulers (sultans). But this was still in the future, and in early Islamic times a majority felt that the community was best served by a leader who combined both powers, the only source of dispute being the election and identity of such a person.

The eyes of the rulers of Byzantium and Iran were not only on their own lands but also on those beyond, for indeed one of the appeals of Christianity to Constantine and his successors was its universalism. This made the emperor the representative of God over all mankind, in whose name the message could be carried via military campaigns to the whole world. Zoroastrianism was closer to Judaism than Christianity in that it was chiefly the religion of a nation and evinced little sensitivity to the problem of the clash between orthodoxy and heresy that so affected Christianity, and it was therefore more tolerant than the latter in the face of religious difference. Yet the Sasanian emperors did urge some conformity (enacting calendrical and liturgical reforms, outlawing images in favor of sacred fires), suppressed overt dissent (e.g., Mazdakism), were usually hostile to missionary efforts by Christians, and occasionally struck a more universalist note (e.g., Shapur II asks a Christian martyr: "What god is better than Ahuramazda? Which one is stronger than Ahreman? What sensible human being does not worship the sun?"—cited by Shaked 1994, 91).

Again, viewed against this background, it becomes evident that Islam did not, initially at least, "seal the end of Late Antiquity," but rather continued one of its most salient features. The expansionist aims of Justinian, Khusrau II, and other late antique emperors were pursued with alacrity by the youthful Muslim state. And via the bold and dramatic visual statement of the structure and location (on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem) of the Dome of the Rock, as well as via the inscriptions upon it, the caliph 'Abd al-Malik proclaimed that "the true religion with God is Islam" and felt justified in remonstrating the Jews and the Christians for their lax monotheist views. Evidently, the Dome of the Rock was meant for them as well and was not just a Muslim monument (Raby and Johns 1979; 2000). This echoes the Qur'ān's appeal to Jews and Christians to return to the original message of God given to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, subsequently corrupted by later generations,

but brought again pure by Muḥammad. This is what lies behind the quotation from Fowden cited previously, a sense that Islam is the fulfillment of Late Antiquity's dynamic, by virtue of its achievement of politico-religious universalism.

AUTONOMOUS RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Large Christian groups, Chalcedonians quite as much as Monophysites, were prepared to forget ancient loyalties to their cities. Religion provided them with a more certain, more deeply felt basis of communal identity. Even when they lived in villages and cities where their own church predominated, they had come to see themselves first and foremost, as members of a religious community. They were fellow-believers. They were no longer fellow citizens.

—(Brown 2003, 189)

The arrival of the Arabs merely cut the last threads that had bound the provincials of the Near East to the Roman Empire.

—(Brown 1971a, 187)

Wansbrough considers the Qur'ān . . . to be a product of what he has aptly called the "sectarian milieu" of interconfessional and political polemics. In this arena . . . Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Believers, or proto-Muslims, bounced ideas and claims off one another until . . . all groups had clearly defined their theological, ritual, and sociological boundaries.

—(Donner 1998, 69)

The drive toward greater integration and conformity on the part of the state, which intensified during the sixth century as a result of an escalation of the conflict between the two superpowers, provoked those sectarian groups jealous of their own independence to establish a certain distance between themselves and imperial culture. Gradually, and especially in pluralist Iraq, they transformed themselves into communal organizations with their own schools, law courts, places of worship, religious hierarchy, and so on. They were effectively socio-legal corporations ordered along religious lines, and this is one of the most salient features of Late Antiquity (Morony 1974; Fowden 2001). It was within this environment that Islam grew up, and it willingly continued and even extended these trends. It divided up the world primarily along religious lines, seeing only believers (*ahl al-islām*) and infidels (*ahl al-kufr*). The latter were generally left—indeed, expected—to manage their own affairs and to conduct themselves according to their own laws and beliefs (Edelby 1950–1951;

Fattal 1951; Goitein 1970). The only major demand made of them was that they pay a special tax (*jizya*) to demonstrate their twin shame of having been conquered and having rejected the true religion and its prophet Muḥammad. This laissez-faire attitude was noted of the Muslim conquerors by a north-Mesopotamian resident, John bar Penkāyē, writing in the 680s: "Their robber bands went annually to distant parts and to the islands, bringing back captives from all the peoples under the heavens. Of each person they required only tribute, allowing them to remain in whatever faith they wished. . . . There was no distinction between pagan and Christian, the faithful was not known from a Jew" (Mingana 1907, 147/175, 151/179). For their part, the early Muslims preferred to distance themselves from the conquered population, living in separate garrison towns and eschewing the customs and practices of others (Kister 1989). But their possession of wealth and power meant that the conquered peoples would inevitably seek them out, whether to win their support in internal conflicts, earn a share in their privileges and riches, or simply to seek a living in their employ. So the garrison towns became cosmopolitan cities in which Muslims and non-Muslims interacted in a variety of different ways.

In return for paying their taxes, the non-Muslims received a guarantee of protection (*dhimma*) with regard to their lives and property and the right to practice their faith without hindrance (Ayoub 1983). Since certain Qur'anic verses (e.g., 22:17, 98:1) distinguish between possessors of a Scripture sent by the one God (*ahl al-kitāb*) and polytheists (*ahl al-shirk*), some Muslims argued that only the former qualified for protection, whereas the latter should be fought to the death. But as the Muslims pushed further east, vanquishing such peoples as the Zoroastrians and the Hindus, any initial objections were soon brushed aside, and the category of people qualifying for protected status (*ahl al-dhimma*) expanded to comprise pretty much all non-Muslims. Thus Muḥammad ibn al-Qāsim (d. 96/715), the first Muslim general to conquer an Indian town and to face the problem of what to do with its population, ruled that their holy places were "akin to the churches of the Christians and the synagogues of the Jews and the fire-temples of the Zoroastrians" (Baladhuri 1866, *Futūḥ* 439). And this judgment formed the theoretical basis for subsequent Muslim tolerance of Hindus and their worship. The only major exception to this principle involved non-Muslim Arabs, who, whether the pagan Arabs of Muḥammad's Arabia or the Christian Arabs of the Fertile Crescent, were sometimes the target of Muslim missionary efforts.

Besides the requirement to pay taxes and abide by their own laws, there were a number of rules for social conduct that non-Muslims were expected to observe. These most famously appear listed in the so-called Pact of 'Umar, which purports to be a letter sent at the time of the Muslim conquests from the Christians of Syria to the caliph 'Umar I, requesting protection and promising observance of certain obligations. The document has provoked much discussion regarding both its authenticity and its significance. Earlier scholars tended to consider it a late invention and as an indication of the discrimination and

isolation endured by non-Muslims of later times. More recently, it has been argued that the list does reflect the conditions of the earliest period of the conquests and that its contents were intended for the benefit of the Muslims rather than for the detriment of the non-Muslims (Noth 1987). Faced with a massive majority population of non-Muslims, the conquerors instituted measures to erect boundaries between themselves and the conquered peoples to prevent their assimilation after the fashion of the Germanic conquerors of Rome and so many Central Asian conquerors of China. For example, one item on the list concerns the belt known as the *zunnār* (cf. Gr. *zônê*). Since Christians wore such a thing before Islam, it is evident that the initial aim of the prescription to wear it was not to humiliate Christians, but rather to make it possible to distinguish them from Muslims. By this and many other measures, the Muslims thus made themselves into a distinct religious community.

Wansbrough's term *sectarian milieu* (1978) could be applied to the late antique and early Islamic Middle East in general, for groups of numerous different persuasions devoted a considerable amount of time to defining their own doctrinal stance and refuting that of others. This is reflected in the very high number of disputation texts produced in this period (Cameron 1991; 1994; 2003). These would be disseminated by religious leaders of confessional communities whose task it was to reinforce allegiance to their respective communities. Islam was born into this sectarian milieu and, from its very beginnings, would seem to have embraced it. A large proportion of the Qur'ān is devoted to discussions with and polemic against Jews, Christians, those who ascribe partners to God (*mushrikūn*), and hypocrites. The inscriptions on the aforementioned Dome of the Rock are much preoccupied with admonishments to the Jews and Christians, in particular urging the latter "not to say three; refrain, it is better for you; God is only one god." And Muslim scholars argued heatedly among themselves about such issues as determinism versus free will, the relationship between revelation and reason, the ingredients of right belief, the relative weight to be given to faith and good works, the nature of the caliphate, and membership of the Muslim community (in particular, whether evil deeds voided your membership, so making you an infidel and your life forfeit). Over time, this resulted in the emergence of a mainstream position, who came to be called Sunnis, and those who refused to accept this mainstream position, most famously Shī'īs and Khārijīs, were labeled heretics by the Sunnīs. The Sunnī position was then strenuously asserted by an array of creeds and heresiographies that aimed to show Sunnīs as the one saved sect and all other groups as damned (Wensinck 1932; Van Ess 2002, 17–44; 2006).

The disputes between the different monotheisms also gave rise to a very substantial literary production. The roots of these controversies between the Muslims and their subject peoples went back to the late seventh and early eighth centuries, when Islam first began to present itself on coins and other media as "the true religion," so challenging other faiths. But the literary

manifestation of the debate only gathered momentum once Arabic, established as the administrative language of the empire by late Umayyad times, had become accepted as the international medium of scholarship. The presence of a lingua franca enabled the debate to cross sectarian lines, as did the universal deployment of dialectical reasoning based on categorical definitions, and also the proliferation of converts and apostates, which meant that there were many with a genuine knowledge of two religions and with a real will to champion one over the other. But also, quite simply, there were matters that needed debating. Islam prompted questions that had not previously arisen, such as what were the attributes of a true prophet (a question scarcely considered by pre-Islamic Christian and Jewish authorities) and how could one recognize an authentic Scripture, and one can observe these and other questions being broached in an original way (Griffith 1979).

THE QUR'ĀN AND LATE ANTIQUE PIETY

The Qur'ānic emphasis on piety and morality thus informs and dominates each of the . . . different forms of Qur'ānic material. . . . Qur'ānic piety continued these late antique traditions of piety.

—(Donner 1998, 72)

In this quotation, Donner argues that we should view the Qur'ān as a late antique text on account of its firm emphasis on piety, a piety that had its roots in deep-seated trends and currents in Late Antiquity. By this, he means the way in which the Qur'ān, whether it is imparting a story, law, or admonition, always couches it in the language of obedience and disobedience to God, of carrying out his will and doing good works or rejecting his message and acting wickedly in the world. Donner sees this as being fully in tune with Late Antiquity's preoccupation with religion and piety. He extends this "concern for piety" to the early Islamic community at large, and it is indeed striking how much early Islamic inscriptions are focused on demonstrations of piety and how much their content is related to Qur'ānic and wider monotheistic ideas of piety. The religious devotional vocabulary of these early inscriptions is inspired by and suffused with the lexicon of the Qur'ān. For example, the three most common wishes of these texts, particularly the graffiti, are to ask for forgiveness (*gh-f-r*), seek compassion (*r-h-m*), and make a declaration of/bear witness to the faith (*'-m-n/sh-h-d*), each of these a prominent theme and root in the Qur'ān: *gh-f-r* 234 times, *r-h-m* 339 times, *'-m-n* 767 times (i.e., *āmana*/believe 537 times and *mu'min*/believer 230 times), and *sh-h-d* 199 times (including *shahīd*/witness 56 times).

Commonly, especially in the case of graffiti, an inscription consists of a collage of phrases assembled from different verses of the Qur'ān, it presumably being considered that creative citation and handling of the Qur'ān was acceptable. For example, the text from Medina, "my Lord, Lord of the heavens and earth and what is between them, there is no God but He, and so I adopt him as a protector" (al-Rāshid 1993, no. 21), is put together from Q 26.24 (or 37.5, 38.66, 44.7, 38) and 73:9, with a small amendment to personalize the quotation ("I adopt him" rather than "you adopt him!"). And the text "I believe that there is no god except Him in whom the children of Israel believed, (believing as) a Muslim *ḥanīf* nor am I among the associators" quotes verbatim part of Q 10.90 and then adapts a statement about Abraham (3.67) to suit the inscriber (Donner 1984, W1).

There are two other ways the Qur'ān plays a role in early inscriptions that are worth mention. One is brief allusion to a Qur'ānic topic, and this has the effect of clearly indicating one's allegiance to and membership of the community of those who understand the reference. A nice example is a short graffito found in the Ḥijāz on the Syrian pilgrimage route, dated 83/702 (Hamed 1988, III.238), that states simply: "I believe in what the residents of al-Ḥijr denied" (*āmantu bi-mā kadhdhaba bi-hi aṣḥāb al-Ḥijr*). This refers to Q 15.80: "The residents of al-Ḥijr denied the messengers," that is, the ones sent by God to exhort the people of al-Ḥijr to heed God's message. This graffito is clearly a profession of faith but decipherable as such only to those familiar with the Qur'ān.

A second way of using the Qur'ān is to engrave on one's chosen, usually highly visible, rock face a single unadapted verse of the Qur'ān, with no additional verbiage, bar one's name and a date. Onto a basalt rock face south of Mecca, for example, there have been etched, in a fine imperial Umayyad hand,² two verses of the Qur'ān, 4.87 and 38.26, both by a certain 'Uthmān and dated 80 A.H./699 (Fahmi 1987). What are we to make of this practice? Donner focuses on the religious content of these texts, observing that "the Believers at first seem to have had little interest in leaving for posterity any reference to tribal ties, politics, confessionalism, or systematic theology, all of which paled into insignificance in comparison with their need to prepare for the impending Judgment through proper piety" (Donner 1998, 88). This, however, does not take into account that inscriptions are not mere statements of fact, but are public declarations intended to portray a particular image of their commissioners, thereby to obtain respect, status, prestige, and the like via a display of virtue (however that might be construed in the pertinent culture) and, if well engraved, a display of wealth, for to hire a good stonemason was expensive.³ However, Donner is right inasmuch as the very etching of a Qur'ānic verse was evidently perceived as symbolic of pious action and perhaps as a reminder or call to others of the word of God, without any need for further comment or elaboration. It was presumably also a declaration of religious allegiance in a world where one's Scripture was a badge of identity.

HOLY PERSONS AND HOLY PLACES

Under Islam, monasteries and their holy men continued to fill a niche in the landscape and society of the late antique Middle East. Only now, the visitors who passed through the monastic complexes included Muslims. . . . For many early Muslims it seems that Christian practices and beliefs acted as stimuli along the way to the formation of a distinctively Islamic way of holiness and asceticism.

—(Fowden and Fowden 2004, 162)

Probably the single most popular topic of late antique studies has been the tendency of Christianity and Judaism to locate spiritual power in particular persons, who then serve as objects of veneration, models for imitation, or intercessors with God, holy men in the terms of Peter Brown (1971b). Though the Qur'ān is strongly monotheist, insisting on a concentration of the sacred in the godhead, early Islam nevertheless allowed a certain degree of seepage, which in later times became a flood. In particular, visiting tombs and shrines of holy people (*ziyāra*) and seeking out those exceptional, blessed people who are close to God (*walī*) were intrinsic features of medieval Islam (Meri 2002).

Assuming one can believe the general tenor of what one reads in the later sources, then there are a number of different contenders for the role of holy man in early Islam (Robinson 1999). First, there are the fiery rebels against the centralizing and nepotistic use of power by the Umayyad dynasty, whom we know as Khārijīs. They are portrayed as Zorro-style bandits living a life of asceticism, raiding, and revolution on behalf of their version of Islam and Islamic rule. A good example is Salih ibn Musarriḥ, who was a thorn in the Umayyads' side in Mesopotamia and fought on a platform of, so we read, "fear of God, abstinence in this world, desire for the next, frequent remembrance of death, separation from the sinners, and love for the believers" and preparedness "to fight against . . . the oppressive errant leaders" (Morony 1984, 475–476). Salih was perhaps a holy man after the fashion of the Prophet Muḥammad, marrying piety and military activism in God's way, but it was inevitably one that the authorities tried to suppress, especially when they were its targets, and they might well be responsible for the promulgation of the idea that jihad is, in postconquest times, of the heart and mind.

Second, there are the various 'Alid leaders, that is, those who were of the family of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (perceived by many to be owed loyalty because of his marriage to Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima) or those who led movements on behalf of this family. Examples of the former include Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafiyya

and 'Abd Allāh ibn Mu'āwiya, and of the latter, Bayān ibn Sam'ān, Abū Manṣūr al-'Ijli, and al-Mughīra ibn Sa'id. Such figures not only combined piety and activism but also were alleged to have possessed prophetic powers, tapping into a different aspect of Muḥammad's holy-man qualities. The teachings attributed to them often seem to draw on Zoroastrian and/or Gnostic ideas, such as the transmigration of souls (*tanāsukh*), indwelling of God's spirit (*ḥulūl*), dualism of light and darkness, the existence of a chosen elite, and elaborate cosmologies and creation myths (Tucker 2008). Such teachings seemed, however, highly suspect in the eyes of the religious mainstream, who labeled those who held them to be *ghulāt*, "extremists," and the possession of supernatural powers among 'Alids became restricted to a defined series of imams in the direct line of Fātima and 'Alī.

These two types of holy man seem rather distant from the classic type so beloved by fans of late antique religious history. However, there is a third type in early Islam who seems much closer to the late antique spiritual hero, namely, the more pluralist, end-of-the-world-fearing kind, who believes, as allegedly did the most famous exponent of this type, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, that one should make this world a bridge over which one crosses but on which one does not build (Mourad 2005). Mālik ibn Dīnār al-Sāmī, a preacher and ascetic in late-seventh- to early-eighth-century Basra, would frequent monasteries and is reported to have conversed about ascetic practices with a monk and to have replied to the monk's query about whether he was a follower of the Qur'ān that indeed he was, but that that would not deter him from sitting at the feet of the Christian master. Khālīd ibn Ma'dān, another late-first-century A. H. ascetic, advocated going hungry and rebuking the soul so that one might perchance see God. And indeed he himself died fasting, and from his habit of doing 10,000 rosaries per day, his fingers still kept moving after his death, so reported the washer of his corpse. Numerous such figures are encountered in the annals of the early Islamic world (Mourad 2004; Avdinli 2007), and it is with them that we are closest to the heroic holy men of Late Antiquity who spent decades perched on columns or lodged up trees, engaged in constant prayer and devotion and dispensing wisdom and miracles to their throngs of admirers and petitioners. Not surprisingly, it is this sort of holy man that proponents of the long Late Antiquity highlight, and, indeed, examples of this type continued to be found in the Muslim Middle East, but officially there was a toning down of their sacred powers. The official version, the *walī Allāh*, "friend of God," performed miracles privately rather than in public (*karāmāt* versus *mu'jizāt*), received inspiration and insight rather than revelation (*ilhām* and *firāsa* versus *wahy*), and their asceticism is moderate and measured. Or perhaps we should see them as different types: other-worldly ascetics, who reject this earthly existence and minimize their interaction with it, and inner-worldly ascetics, who work to remedy the injustice of this world while minimizing what they take from it for themselves (Cooperson 1997).

APOCALYPTICISM

His (Muḥammad's) fundamental doctrine . . . is that the times announced by Daniel and Jesus having now come, Muḥammad was the last prophet, chosen by God to preside, together with Christ, returned to earth for that purpose, at the end of time, over the universal resurrection and the Last Judgement.

—(Casanova 1911, 8)

Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity all shared a teleological view of history, and consequently, all produced their fair share of visionaries to interpret the significance of events and to depict the end of times. At the approach of some significant date or on the occasion of some momentous disaster, eschatological speculation could become apocalyptic. Thus when it was the 500th anniversary of the Incarnation, supposedly marking the 6,000th year since Creation, "the end of the world was awaited as never before"; and when in 557, Constantinople was shaken by a series of tremors, "immediately fantastic and fallacious pronouncements began to circulate, to the effect that the whole world was on the point of perishing. For certain deceivers, behaving like self-inspired oracles, prophesied whatever came into their heads and terrified all the more the populace who were already thoroughly disposed to be terrified" (Magdalino 1993, 5–6, citing the sixth-century writers Simplicius and Agathias). The great war between Byzantium and Iran in the years 603 to 628 spawned much apocalyptic agonizing, for it seemed to reflect the final battles spoken of in the book of Daniel and in the New Testament, and Heraclius was portrayed as a redeemer-like figure, come to save Christianity and to hand it over to the Messiah himself (Reinink 2002).

Early Islam would seem to have caught this spirit, and indeed the very earliest teaching of Muḥammad was suffused with such a mood, if we can judge from the Qur'ān, which devotes much space to a depiction of the events preceding the Day of Judgment and of the day itself. It seems worthwhile giving an example to demonstrate the vividness and drama of the description: "When heaven is split open, when the stars are scattered, when the seas swarm over, when the tombs are overthrown, then a soul shall know its own works" (82.1–5). This mood continued for several decades, and numerous apocalyptic predictions survive that infer from the trials and triumphs of the early Muslim community the date of time's end. Their greatest worry was whether they would manage to hold on to their acquisitions from their conquests. And at certain key times—such as during their various civil wars, when it looked as if they might lose all, and during their siege of Constantinople in 717, when it looked as if they might gain all—these fears and hopes found their voice in a veritable explosion of apocalyptic sentiment. The battles with their enemies, chiefly the Byzantines, were identified with the *malāḥim*, the final wars at the end of the world that

would eventually, after many setbacks, conclude with the Muslim capture of Constantinople and the appearance of the Antichrist. This construction aided the Muslim warriors in weathering any reverses, for they could see that they would ultimately triumph, and it gave added meaning to their efforts, since it was no ordinary war they were fighting, but Armageddon itself (Cook 2003).

In their turn, the Muslims and, in particular, their stunning military victories stimulated apocalyptic fervor among the conquered peoples as they grappled to understand the swift pace of change. Christians viewed Arab rule as the time of testing before the final peace, when the churches would be renewed, the cities rebuilt, and the priests set free from tax. To the Zoroastrians, it was the age of adversity that closed the millennium of Zoroaster and preceded the millennium of Ushedar, in which the Good Religion would flourish. In both cases, the ousting of the Muslims and regeneration of the religion was to be achieved by a savior figure, whether an idealized Christian emperor in the image of Alexander the Great, Constantine, and Jovian or the warrior Bahram coming from India with an army and a thousand elephants to destroy Iran's enemies. Apocalypses thus offered an interpretation for historical change, thereby rendering it more meaningful, and hope for redemption in the near future, thereby encouraging steadfastness (Hoyland 1997, 26–31, 257–335).

GREEK THOUGHT

Islam . . . builds upon and preserves Christian-Antique Hellenism. . . . A time will come when one will learn to understand late Hellenism by looking back from the Islamic tradition.

—(Becker 1924–1932, 1.201)

Those scholars of Late Antiquity and of medieval Europe who ponder about when the late-antique era ended and the medieval began, can infer from my book that at least as far as the history of metaphysics is concerned, the decisive moment occurred around 1001, in the Samanid library in the city of Bukhara in the Central Asian province of Transoxania, far outside their traditional area of focus.

—(Wisnovsky 2003, 266)

These two quotations point to the feature that most induces Classicists and Byzantinists to see in early Islam a continuation of Late Antiquity, namely, the continued study of the Greek language and Greek scientific texts. Indeed, thousands of texts were translated from Greek into Arabic in the course of the eighth through tenth centuries C.E. So extensive was this activity that modern

Western scholars have labeled it "the translation movement."⁴ The appellation is well deserved in that the activity was not sporadic or haphazard, but, to a substantial degree, thorough and systematic. Thus almost all nonliterary and nonhistorical secular Greek works that were available throughout the Byzantine empire and the Middle East were translated into Arabic. A variety of factors lent impetus to this movement. The Arab conquests created a single empire from Morocco to India, which promoted greater movement of goods, people, and ideas across this vast region. Not much more than a century later, the language of the conquerors, Arabic, had established itself as the official language of this empire, further accelerating the flow of ideas. A military encounter between Arab and Chinese forces at Talas in Central Asia in 136/754 resulted in the knowledge and spread in Islamic lands of paper, which was much cheaper and easier to make than papyrus and so lowered the price and raised the availability of the written word. These and other factors were crucial for creating an environment conducive to the translation movement, but perhaps the most direct stimulus was the transfer of the Muslim seat of government from Syria to Iraq in 132/750 and the building of the new capital of Baghdad in 145/762. This placed the 'Abbasids, the dynasty that had carried out the transfer, in the heartlands of the former Sasanian Persian empire. Whereas in Damascus, only a provincial and in any case semi-Arabized city of the Byzantine empire, the Muslim Arabs had been able to withstand pressure to assimilate, in Baghdad they felt very strongly the pull of Persian ideas and style of government (Ahsan 1979; Kennedy 2004). One feature of this was an interest in alien wisdom. So just as the Persian emperors Ardashir, Shapur, and Khusrau I sent to India, China, and Byzantium for books and had them translated into Persian, "such as those of Hermes the Babylonian who ruled over Egypt, Dorotheus the Syrian, Phaedrus the Greek from the city of Athens, famed for its science, and Ptolemy the Alexandrian," so 'Abbasid caliphs did the same, "modelling their conduct on that of the past Sasanian emperors" (Ibn al-Nadīm 1872, *Fihrist* 239; Mas'ūdī 1866–1874, *Murūj* 8.300–301). The caliph Manṣūr (r. 136–158/754–775), for example, had translated for him "books by Aristotle on logic and other subjects, the *Almagest* by Ptolemy, the *Arithmetic* (by Nichomachus of Gerasa), the book by Euclid (on geometry), and other ancient books" (Mas'ūdī 1866–1874, *Murūj* 8.291).

One might say that this has nothing to do with religion. However, given the sectarian milieu into which Islam was born and its parvenu status, its practitioners spent an enormous amount of time right from the beginning in defining and delimiting their faith vis-à-vis other faiths. For this purpose, Greek logic was extremely important:

Mahdī (r. 158–69/775–85) devoted all his efforts to examining heretics and apostates. These people appeared in his days and publicly proclaimed their beliefs during his caliphate on account of the wide dissemination of books by Mani, Bardesanes, and Marcion, which were translated from Old and New Persian into Arabic. . . . In this way Manichaeans increased in number

and their opinions came out into the open among people. Mahdi was the first caliph to command the theologians who used dialectic disputation in their research to compose books against the heretics and other infidels we have just mentioned. The theologians then produced demonstrative proofs against the disputers, eliminated the problems posed by the heretics, and expounded the truth in clear terms to the doubters. (Mas'ūdī 1866–1874, *Murūj* 8.292–93)

This translation movement was not, however, merely imitative. Once the Greek corpus had been absorbed and digested, Muslim scholars felt competent to challenge and respond critically and creatively to the Greek tradition. Thus Ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī (d. 313/925) penned *Doubts about Galen*, Ibn al-Haytham (d. 430/1039) *Doubts about Ptolemy*, and Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) his *Eastern Philosophy*, which is an exposition of his doubts about Aristotle. It is with this in mind that Wisnovsky makes his slightly tongue-in-cheek remark, cited earlier, about the end of Late Antiquity, for Muslim scholars spent a good three centuries working through the Greek scientific patrimony, translating it, and commenting on it, before moving beyond it. If this process of absorption of the Greek scientific heritage by Islamic civilization is still part of Late Antiquity, then it is true that only by the late tenth or early eleventh century C.E. did Late Antiquity finally come to an end.

A SOLUTION: LATE ANTIQUE ARABIA?

The relevance of the geographical region of central Arabia to that emergent definition of what we have come to know as the religion of Islam is highly questionable; Islam (in its clearly defined and developed form) had its formative developing period outside the Arabian context and, while the initial impetus for the religion is clearly tied to the Ḥijāz in Arabia, the character the religion adopted was molded by more widespread Near Eastern precedents than would appear historically possible within the narrow isolation of Arabia.

—(Rippin 2005, 10)

In recent decades, there have been two approaches to conceptualizing the rise and formation of the religion of Islam: either as a child of Late Antiquity, conceived and nourished wholly by the late antique world, or as a force that was formed outside the late antique world (in Arabia) from outside (Arabian) ingredients and only entered that world once it was fairly well developed and so was only marginally influenced by it. The latter view, the “out of Arabia” approach, is the traditional Muslim one, and it is accepted by a good many Western scholars as well. However, the former view, the “born of Late Antiquity” approach, is

gaining ground at present. Not surprisingly, it has been very popular with late antique historians, since it widens the scope of their field to include a new geographical region, a new religious phenomenon, and a greater span of time (Cameron 2002). Indeed, it was adopted already by the architect of late antique studies, Peter Brown (1971a, 189): "The preaching of Muḥammad and the consequent rise of a new religious grouping of the Arab world—the religion of Islam—was the last, most rapid crisis in the religious history of the late antique period. . . . We know just enough about the Ḥijāz in the early seventh century to see how this sudden detonation fitted into the culture of the Near East. . . . The caravans of the Meccan merchant-adventurers had come to permeate Byzantium and Persia: Muḥammad himself had once made the trek to Syria. . . ."

An increasing number of Islamic historians are also now backing this perspective, putting forward the argument that the emergence of Islam has to be set in a wider Middle Eastern context and to be seen as the result of a long process (Kennedy 1999; Conrad 2000). Of course, most, including many Muslim thinkers past and present, would accept that the early Muslim conception of their prophet and their faith evolved over time, resulting in a different conception from that of later Muslims, but these revisionist scholars would go much further. To allow Islam to be properly integrated into the late antique world, they deem it necessary to break totally with the Arabian past. For example, they have postulated that Mecca was not Muḥammad's birthplace or the Ḥijāz Islam's home (Crone and Cook 1977, esp. 21–23; Crone 2005), that there was no Arabian paganism for Muḥammad to fight and fulminate against (Hawting 1999), that the Qur'ān was not compiled in the seventh century (Wansbrough 1977) or written in Arabic (Luxenberg 2000), and even that Muḥammad himself and the conquests he initiated were a later invention (Nevo and Koren 2003; Popp 2007).

Most of the impetus for such radical theories stems from a belief, already articulated by Russian Islamologists in the 1930s (Ibn Warraq 2000, 44–49), that a major world religion could not have been born in such a remote corner of the Middle East, but rather must have been nourished more fully within the heartlands of the late antique Middle East. Its practitioners worry about the fact that "in its equation of the origins of Islam with the career of Muḥammad and its detailed depiction of Muḥammad's life in Mecca and Medina, Muslim tradition effectively disassociates Islam from the historical development of the monotheist stream of religion as a whole. Islam is shown to be the result of an act of divine revelation made to an Arab prophet who was born and lived most of his life in a town (Mecca) beyond the borders of the then monotheistic world" (Hawting 1997, 24). The solution, they say, is to relocate the origins of Islam to the Fertile Crescent: "We need to rethink more drastically our ideas about when and where Islam emerged," for "it is easier to envisage such an evolution occurring in those regions of the Middle East where the tradition of monotheism was firmly established."⁵

But does Arabia play no part at all in all this? Did it not contribute any ingredients to the formation of Islam? For Julius Wellhausen, one of the most famous of all Islamic historians, it is in the "rough-hewn pieces of paganism"

that we can most clearly see Arabia's contribution to Islam, such as "the processing around the Ka'ba and the kissing of the black stone, the running between Şafā and Marwa, and the rituals at 'Arafa" (Wellhausen 1897, 68–69). South Arabianists have long pointed to the numerous common traits to be found in Islamic and pre-Islamic south Arabian rituals. The south Arabian expiation texts from the first to third centuries c.e., for example, seemed to Ryckmans (1975, 457) to "prove that the Islamic laws of ritual purity were already in use in pagan Arabia and that it is there, rather than in Judaism, that their origin must be sought." And this approach has been pursued by other scholars, notably Serjeant (1962), who cast Muḥammad as a holy man in charge of a sacred enclave, such as were commonly found in south Arabia, and de Blois, who has tried to elucidate various passages in the Qur'ān by reference to attested Arabian parallels. Certainly, the references in the Qur'ān to the irrigated lands of Saba' (Sheba) destroyed by a flood (34.15–17), the raiders on Mecca coming from Yemen with elephants in their ranks (105), "the people in ditches" burned in the fields of Najran (85.4–7), and the subjects of the dynastic rulers of Himyar known as the *tubba'* (44.37, 50.14) suggest that the Ḥijāz was influenced by its southern neighbor. Indeed, new finds of inscriptions in Yemen are making it clear that a substantial body of religious vocabulary is common to the Qur'ān and the epigraphic record of south Arabia, most famously the three "daughters of God" (cf. 53.19–20) and the name Muḥammad, but also a variety of religious practices and regulations (Ryckmans 1975; Robin 2001; see also Robin, chapter 9 in this book).⁶

If we endorse the validity of these Arabian contributions to Islam's formation, would this mean that the "out of Arabia" theory trumps the "born of Late Antiquity" theory? It seems to me that there is a way out of this dichotomy, namely, to accept that Arabia by the time of Muḥammad was already a part of the late antique world. To some degree, of course, Arabia had been exposed to the attention of empires ever since the domestication of the camel made its vastnesses crossable and made those of its inhabitants who could ride camels useful as either merchants or soldiers. Not only do we have the records of great emperors—such as the Assyrian king Esarhaddon and the Persian rulers Cambyses and Artaxerxes, who all crossed north Arabia to march on Egypt; the Babylonian monarch Nabonidus, who made the north Arabian oasis of Tāyima' his base for ten years; and Caesar Augustus, who sent his general Aelius Gallus to march down the west coast of Arabia to conquer its southern corner (Hoyland 2001, chapter 2)—but also we have a few documents from locals. For example, from the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180 c.e.), two inscriptions in north Arabia reveal to us that the Roman empire already influenced communities even in this region: the first, in Greek and Nabataean Aramaic, commemorates the construction of a temple in honor of the emperor by a military detachment from the tribe of Thamud at Rawwafa (between Hegra and Tabuk in northwest Arabia); the second, in Latin, relates how the community of the people of Hegra (300 kilometers

north of Medina) restored the Nabataean covered market under the supervision of 'Amr son of Hayyān, the headman of the community (*primus civitatis*). This influence increased as the cold war between Byzantium and Iran warmed up in the fourth to sixth centuries, and the two powers fought to bring peripheral regions into their orbit. Religion was an important factor in this struggle, and we see missionaries peddling their messages and rulers instigating persecutions in Arabia as well as elsewhere.

Probably our best witness to these influences in sixth- to seventh-century Arabia is the Qur'ān. It has long been known that it bears the imprint of numerous late antique texts. However, it has usually been discussed in terms of borrowing and originality, what Muḥammad took from the Jews and the Christians (Geiger 1902; Bell 1926; Torrey 1933; Luxenberg 2000).⁷ This is, however, unhelpful, in part because it strikes a polemical note, which muddies the issue, and in part because it misses the point. By the time of Muḥammad, stories like the sleepers of Ephesus; the lives of figures like Adam, Abraham, Alexander the Great, and Jesus; and issues like the extent of God's oneness and justice were all part of late antique common knowledge. The Qur'ān is not borrowing, but creatively using this common knowledge for its own ends and giving its own take on current religious problems. The vast majority of the religious texts that have survived from this period were written by official religious authorities and so give us the party line, the strict version of their creed. The Qur'ān, however, gives us an insight into the unofficial world, which was much more flexible and pluralist. Scholars tend to assume that where the Qur'ān offers a version of a story or a doctrine that does not conform to the official version, then either the Qur'ān and/or Muḥammad has got it wrong or it reflects the views of some heretical sect that has survived in Arabia. More likely, it is just that it gives us a hint of the broad array of narratives and beliefs that existed below the level of canonized and codified texts. The Qur'ān is in many ways the ultimate late antique document and provides us with a means to link Arabia, the origins of Islam, and Late Antiquity. This has been illustrated by a number of interesting recent studies that have put the Qur'ān in dialogue with late antique texts (Reynolds 2006; Griffith 2007; van Bladel 2007; Mourad 2007). This has yielded useful insights, which is in the end the only real reason for us to consider the question at all of whether early Islam fits within Late Antiquity.

NOTES

1. Good examples of this clash-of-civilizations approach in the field of Late Antiquity are Heather 2005 and Ward-Perkins 2005.

2. It is the same script as is used for the coinage (with long upright strokes for the letters alif and lām) but differs from the so-called Hijazi or *mā'il* (slanting) style. Some consider the latter older (e.g., Déroche 2003, 258), but they could be contemporary.

3. And possibly also to demonstrate political allegiance; in general, individuals' inscriptions tend to adhere quite closely to the phraseology of imperial inscriptions, and it is possible that the verse about the caliphate of David was chosen to demonstrate support for 'Abd al-Malik's decision to publicize his caliphate on coins.
4. Most recently by Gutas 1998 in his very informative monograph, though in calling it "the Graeco-Arabic translation movement," he undermines its universalism. For a recent and excellent study of the translations and translators, see Endress 1997. A representative and readable selection of the material translated from Greek is given in Rosenthal 1975.
5. Hawting 1999, 13; cf. Wansbrough 1978, 99: "The elaboration of Islam was not contemporary with but posterior to the Arab occupation of the Fertile Crescent," and Bashear 1997, 113: "The proposition that Arabia could have constituted the source of the vast material power required to effect such changes in world affairs within so short a span of time is, to say the least, a thesis calling for proof and substantiation."
6. A nice example is the practice of intercalation (*al-nasf*), which is forbidden by the Qur'ān (9:37) and which has turned up in a South Arabian expiation text with the same significance as in the Qur'ān, namely, moving sacred festivals from their prescribed time (de Blois 2004).
7. In particular, one finds this approach adopted in Web sites, which tend to have apologetic or polemical aims; see, for example, www.islamic-awareness.org and www.answering-islam.org, which are nevertheless very informative.

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