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THE QURʾĀN IN HISTORY:
MUHAMMAD'S MESSAGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY[1]

Abstract

La tarda antichità fu un periodo di profondi cambiamenti che coinvolse l'Europa, il mediterraneo e il cosiddetto Vicino Oriente, dal IV-V al VII-VIII secolo. Questo paradigma è ormai ampiamente utilizzato negli studi islamici, dagli studi coranici, dove Angelika Neuwirth ha ampiamente scritto sul tema delle basi bibliche della rivelazione coranica come manifestazione dello scritturalismo tardo antico, agli studi storici relativi al Corano e all'Arabia preislamica, come nel libro di Aziz al-Azmeh *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, che riprende il filone di studi instaurato da Julius Wellhausen e Toufic Fahd. Sono pienamente d'accordo con la necessità di inserire l'Islam, la sua nascita e il suo sviluppo storico, religioso e filosofico nel contesto della tarda antichità, ma è necessario sottolineare quali temi hanno fatto dell'Islam una nuova religione rispetto al giudaismo e al cristianesimo. Questo è il tema del presente articolo che si articola nei seguenti momenti: 1) una breve rassegna critica della letteratura sulla tarda antichità; 2) il rapporto tra gli imperi – romano, bizantino e sasanide – della tarda antichità e il trionfo del monoteismo; 3) il concetto di *hanifiyya*. La conclusione è che il messaggio coranico trasmesso da Maometto ha diviso la storia in due parti: prima e dopo la venuta della *verità*.

*Late Antiquity describes a period of profound transformations that in-
volved Europe, the Mediterranean world and the so-called Near East, from
IV-V to VII-VIII centuries. This paradigm has now become widely used in
Islamic studies, from Qurʾānic studies, where Angelika Neuwirth has ex-
tensively published in the past on the subject of the biblical underpinnings
of the Qurʾānic revelation as a manifestation of late antique scripturalism,
to historical studies related to the Qurʾān and pre-Islamic Arabia, as in
Aziz al-Azmeh's book* The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*, which
takes up the trend of scholarship established by Julius Wellhausen and
Toufic Fahd. I completely agree with the need to put Islam and its histor-
ical, religious, philosophical birth and development in the context of the
Late Antiquity, but what is at stake is to emphasize which themes made
Islam a new religion with respect to Judaism and Christianity. This is the
focus of the present paper which deals with: 1) a brief critical survey of
the literature on Late Antiquity; 2) the relationship between the empires –
Roman, Byzantine and Sasanid – of Late Antiquity and the triumph of mon-
otheism; 3) the concept of* hanifiyya*. The conclusion is that the Qurʾānic
message conveyed by Muhammad broke the history into two parts: before
and after the coming of* truth.

Introduction: The paradigm of late Antiquity

The paradigm of Late Antiquity is now widely used in Islamic
studies, from Qurʾānic studies to religious studies. In an important
article, Angelika Neuwirth argued that the Qurʾān must be interpret-
ed historically in relation to the Arab, Semitic and Mediterranean
cultural environment in general which interacts in a broad *thought
world* and *epistemic space* (*Denkraum*) of Late Antiquity[2]. She also
criticised the tendency of modern scholars to reproduce the premod-
ern view of Islamic history as momentous but foreign and somewhat
outside the forces exerted by Late Antiquity on Western and Euro-

[2]   A. Neuwirth, *Locating the Qurʾān in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity*,
in A. Rippin, R. Tottoli, *Books and Written Culture of the Islamic World. Studies
Presented to Claude Gilliot on the Occasion of his 75th Birthday*, Brill, Leiden
2014, pp. 159-179, esp. 167.

pean history. Aziz al-Azmeh stressed the contextual process of the rise of Islam as an integral part of the history of Late Antiquity yet emphasising the indigenous character of the Arabs' transition from paganism to monotheism[3].

My interest, however, is to single out some peculiar elements and features of Islam. I agree with the benefit of placing the Islamic *kerygma* and its historical, religious, philosophical development in the broad framework of Late Antiquity, a period of profound transformations involving Europe, the Mediterranean world and the so-called Near East between approximately 250-750 C.E., but the issue I will deal with is to emphasize which aspects made Islam a new religion with respect to Judaism and Christianity. It is still useful to discuss the theses of those who, like John Wansbrough, regarded impossible to read the Qurʾān as a historical source. A scholar who writes under the name of Christoph Luxenberg challenges this thesis with a study of the language of the Qurʾān and posits under the Arabic text a Syro-Aramaic subtext, much of it derived from Syriac Christian lectionaries[4]. Gabriel Reynolds argues that the Qurʾān is an original work in literary and religious terms, but also a work which heavily depends on its audience's knowledge of the Bible and the traditions that developed from the Bible. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook consider the core of Muhammad's message to be little more than a reproposition of Jewish messianic themes[5]. These studies seek to analyse their influence on the origins of Islam, with a number of largely mutually exclusive hypotheses, but their approach has in common that they have attracted accusations in various ways of being orientalist efforts to rob Islam, Muhammad and the Qurʾān of

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[3] A. al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

[4] C. Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*, Hans Schiller, Berlin 2007[3].

[5] J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978; G. Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, Routledge, Abingdon 2010; P. Crone, M. Cook, *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977.

its originality giving it to Judaism and Christianity. Farid Esack defined the approach of some of these scholars as *voyeuristic*, claiming no confessional or ulterior motive in approaching the Qurʾān other than that of examining the material in the interest of scholarship, and argued that no reading of a text is innocent, even less if it is a holy text[6]. While such judgment sounds woefully ungenerous and belittles the work of these scholars and their very different theories and views, at the same time it shows how difficult it is still to conduct research on the Qurʾān without risking being exposed to criticism[7].

Reconsidering Late Antiquity in a critical way and discussing the related literature leads us to reassess Peter Brown's seminal work which brought Late Antiquity to the attention of scholars across the borders of disciplines[8]. He stressed a few points:

1) Paganism survived for a long time, until Hellenic pagan philosophy underwent a long-prepared *triumph of monotheism*. Emperor Julian remodelled the pagan *Weltanschauung* and used the term

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[6]   F. Esack, *The Qur'an. A User's Guide. A Guide to its Key Themes, History and interpretation*, One World, Oxford 2007[2], p. 9.

[7]   A survey of the Qurʾān reveals that the elements of Biblical tradition, whether Jewish or Christian, are modified and adapted to an original framework that is distinct from those of the Torah and the New Testament (D. Stewart, *Reflections on the State of the Art in Western Qurʾanic Studies*, in C. Bakhos, M. Cook, *Islam and its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, p. 5). From a theological point of view, that the Qurʾān contains many Christian or Jewish elements is obvious and of no surprise, being Islam according to the Islamic dogma the last monotheistic revelation receiving, transforming and correcting the previous monotheistic narratives. The contrary would have been strange. On the other hand, the sceptical Syriacist school, including John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook and Andrew Rippin, bestowed an evidently biased and unjustified credit upon external – Jewish and Christian – sources which are, obviously, prejudicial and mostly anti-Islamic and thus neither objective nor trustworthy sources, even less objective and trustworthy than the so much criticized internal – Muslim – sources. Fred Donner (*Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Darwin Press, Princeton 1998, 2-3, 22-24) gave a substantial contribution to demystify these assumptions.

[8]   P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity. From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, Thames & Hudson, London 1971.

Hellenismos to include all the theoretical and practical achievements of Neoplatonic philosophy (Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus), leading to monotheistic or henotheistic themes in his philosophical writings. This trend has continued in history at least until the X century, as the case of the philosophical city of Harran with its star worshippers demonstrates[9].

2) The Hellenism of Julian, Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus was totally pagan, but paradoxically it became the basis and the indispensable conceptual framework of Christian theology. Julian separated himself from Constantinian Christianity and embraced Hellenism, not properly paganism. Interestingly, Julian admired the same cosmic and celestial harmony which led later philosophers to theorize the Trinity.

3) Late Antiquity was an epoch of awe, growing superstitions and loss of meaning in the universal order as willed by the gods. Therefore, asceticism was considered a useful mean of escaping from the vanity of the world. In this landscape, redemption and salvation became fundamental: Christ was the prototype of the redeemed man. However, many contradictions arose from the harsh conflict between Chalcedonians or Dyophysites and anti-Chalcedonians or Miaphysites, and indeed from all Christological controversies. According to Peter Brown, emphasizing – as did Pope Leo I's doctrinal statement to Flavian of Constantinople – the humble and human element in Christ shocked the Greek reader, because it threatened to leave God's work of salvation unfinished and, in Brown's words:

> to condemn human nature itself to the position of an untransformable residue, a bitter dreg at the bottom of the unbounded sea of God's power.[10]

4) I believe that Christological controversies inoculate an insoluble contradiction within the very idea of the *oneness* of God. Islam

[9] Ivi, p. 72.
[10] Ivi, p. 145.

resolved this conceptual drama reaffirming the centrality of *tawhīd*, which the Umayyads placed front and centre in any state-commissioned public manifestations of their vast imperial power.

5) Moreover, in the culture of Late Antiquity, Brown continues:

> *A man was defined by his religion alone. He did not owe allegiance to a state; he belonged to a religious community ... John the Almsgiver [patriarch of Alexandria], sitting outside his palace and settling the disputes of the city of Alexandria according to the Law of God, is the direct anticipation of the Muslim* cadi.[11]

Following these largely sharable assumptions, Aziz al-Azmeh's book *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People* deserves particular attention. Al-Azmeh emphasized the common Semitic background of rituals and astral cults, drawing on Édouard Sayous's argument of the *sideral paganism* of the Arabs, *whose indestructible symbol remains the Black Stone of the Meccan Kaʿba*[12]. Moreover, he argues that Semitic religiosity involved:

> *the establishment of a deity in a 'house', and its designation as Lord of the House* (rabb al-bayt)*, the house being in some circumstances transportable. This bears comparisons with Israelite usage of the Tabernacle,* mishkan*, but it is also attested widely as, for instance, in a Thamūdic inscription at Madāʾin Sālih mentioning* mr'byt'*, as well as in poetry. The Meccan Kaʿba was, of course, the most famous of these houses, at least to posterity.*[13]

Even more important is al-Azmeh's discussion of the relationship between Judeo-Christianity and paleo-Islam. Quoting alleged Manichean clues in the Qurʾān (i.e., Q. 5: 116), the Marianist cult

[11]   Ivi, pp. 186-187.
[12]   A. al-Azmeh, *op cit.*, p. 215. E. Sayous, *Jésus-Christ d'après Mahomet ou les notions et les doctrines musulmanes sur le christianisme*, E. Leroux/Otto Schulze, Paris/Leipzig 1880, p. 21.
[13]   Ivi, p. 222.

of a Trinity consisting of God, his Son Christ and Mary, and the Docetist doctrine that Jesus was not crucified but replaced on the cross by an *eidolon* or *simulacrum* or, as the Qurʾān says, *only a likeness of that was shown to them* (Q. 4: 157-158, Arberry's translation), al-Azmeh holds that:

> *In Scriptural terms, what we have are echoes of folk* midrāshim *and of the two Testaments ... In the final analysis, the Qurʾān tells us more about Judeo-Christian ideas and motifs in circulation than the dogmas of Judeo-Christian groups can tell us about the Qurʾān. One must be careful not to conclude from the concordances noted by von Harnack and others that Muhammad was connected to any specific sect and be aware of the heterogeneity of the fragments he adopted.*[14]

Likewise, he continues saying that *Qurʾānic Biblicism did not amount to a Biblisation of the Qurʾān, but rather involved the Qurʾānisation of Biblical figures*[15]. Furthermore, he writes:

> *Borrowings and quotations are in fact adaptation to a new context of sentiments,* topoi*, stories, and ideas in circulation, and that it is not the availability of Biblical and similar material that accounts for their Qurʾānic presence, but the requirements of the new scripture in process of composition which led to appropriation.*[16]

Allāh's *genealogy* is the third point dealt with by al-Azmeh in the fifth chapter of his book. Here he is less convincing in my opinion because, although it is true that God in the Qurʾān is called in an almost sequential order first as *Rabb*, then as *al-Rahmān* and finally as *Allāh*, this is by no means evidence of an evolution from a vague

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[14]   Ivi, pp. 270, 274. On the Qurʾān and the Jewish *midrashim*, see F.E. Peters, *The Quest of the Historical Muhammad*, in "International Journal of Middle East Studies" 23/3 (1991), p. 296.

[15]   Ivi, p. 350

[16]   Ivi, p. 494.

divine entity (*al-Rabb*) to a monotheistic *person* (*Allāh*). First, the three names are not mutually exclusive in the Qurʾānic text and appear in different *sūra*s revealed at different times (bearing in mind also the practical impossibility of establishing a rigorous chronological sequence of the *sūra*s); secondly, as al-Azmeh argues, there was a period when Muhammad's disciples worshipped two gods together (*al-Rahmān* and *Allāh* at the same time) while later the two gods became the one God, Allāh. This thesis goes back to Nöldeke and to Jacques Jomier[17]. Their assumptions are intriguing, but without a solid basis. Verse 17:110 – *Say: "Call upon God, or call upon the Merciful; whichever you call upon, to Him belong the Names Most Beautiful"* – could simply mean that the same deity had two names and not that there were two deities. Indeed, it seems that in northern Arabia, a god, or God, was typically referred to as *the merciful*[18]. However, it is important that al-Azmeh recognizes that the Qurʾān contains a self-consistent way to monotheism independent from external conditioning of the Judeo-Christian environment.

1. *Critical outcomes*

Coming to the constructive part of this paper, five points are of particular relevance to demonstrate the rationale of placing the Qurʾān in Late Antiquity.

1) Different cultural and ideological heritages intertwined in Late Antiquity, mixing the Biblical heritage with the formation process of monotheism in the Alexandrian-Hellenistic environment and with

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[17]   T. Nöldeke, F. Schwally, G. Bergstrasser, O. Pretzl, *The History of the Qurʾan*, ed. and transl. by W.H. Behn, Brill, Leiden 2013, p. 99; J. Jomier, *Le nom divin "al-Rahman" dans le Coran*, in "Mélanges Louis Massignon", vol. 2, Institut français de Damas, Damascus 1957, p. 366.

[18]   A. al-Jallad, *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions*, Brill, Leiden 2015, p. 241; C. Robin, *Le judaïsme de Himyar*, in "Arabia" 1 (2003), p. 114.

the pre-Islamic (so-called *jāhilī*) *Weltanschauung* of Arabia. The case of Philo of Alexandria is interesting. At first glance, Philo's heritage does not seem to be present either in the apologetic quarrels between Muslims and Christians in VII and VIII centuries, nor in the process of formation of Islamic theology, the *kalām*, with the two main tendencies of Muʿtazilism and Ashʿarism[19]. However, if Philo is considered in the framework of late Neoplatonism, the perspective partially changes. Neoplatonism, marked in particular by Plotinus, greatly influenced Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*). Rather, we might ask whether Philo first theorized in Judaism a full monotheism whose origin was therefore philosophical. We know that Philo's mystical-philosophical translation of Judaism brings its monotheism in closer relationship with the Hellenistic and Persian astral religion, where the Sun represents the One God whose Logos radiates as the stream of light and is divided into different powers, represented by astral deities, in and through whom One God exercises his providence or government of the world[20].

2) Arabia was not that empty cultural wasteland that later Muslim historiography described for obvious apologetic purposes: not only were strong henotheistic or perhaps monolatric religious tendencies widespread (aside from Christianity and Judaism), but *jāhiliyya* itself was not merely a stereotypical and *wholly other* paganism, but,

[19] Zilio-Grandi does not quote Philo in her reconstruction of the interreligious polemics following the birth of Islam. Cfr. I. Zilio-Grandi, *Le opere di controversia islamo-cristiana nella formazione della letteratura filosofica araba*, in C. D'Ancona (ed.), *Storia della filosofia nell'Islam medievale. Volume primo*, Einaudi, Torino 2005, pp. 101-136; I. Zilio-Grandi, *Temi e figure dell'apologia musulmana* (ʿilm al-kalām) *in relazione al sorgere e allo sviluppo della falsafa*, in C. D'Ancona (ed.), *Storia della filosofia nell'Islam medievale. Volume primo*, Einaudi, Torino 2005, pp. 137-179. Nor did so P. González Casado, *Introducción a la literatura árabe cristiana,* Sígueme, Salamanca 2017.

[20] The key of this theory is Goodenough's claim that Philo's reinterpretation of Judaism adopts the Phytagorean-Platonic Hellenistic doctrines of kingship, especially in the teaching of the Ark of the Covenant. Cf. M. Vatter, *Living Law: Jewish Political Theology from Hermann Cohen to Hannah Arendt*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, p. 15.

in Neuwirth's words, *connecting the Islamic revelation to the wider context of formative Near Eastern traditions*[21].

3) Similarly, Neuwirth and others have pointed out that *Late Antiquity will not be taken as an epoch but as an* epistemic space*, a* Denkraum*, where battles are fought between neither political foes nor the contesting empires, but where textual controversies are staged between confederates and opponents from diverse theological realms*. The transfer of knowledge *was first of all a hermeneutical venture*[22].

4) In any case, monotheism in Late Antiquity developed in the context of the *one empire, one God* paradigm, from ancient Rome to Byzantium, from second Rome to Persia[23], with the overwhelming shadows of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

5) At the beginning of the seventh century, the messianic and eschatological expectations began to intensify within the Jewish communities of Byzantium, and as for the Christians of this era, the Jews also expected the imminent end of the world and the advent of the Messiah[24].

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[21] A. Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity. A Shared Heritage*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, p. 38.

[22] A. Neuwirth, *Locating the Qur'an … cit.*, p. 167; N. Schmidt, N.K. Schmidt, A. Neuwirth, *Denkraum Spätantike. Reflexionen von Antiken im Umfeld des Koran*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 2016.

[23] See O. Heilo, *Eastern Rome and the Rise of Islam: History and Prophecy*, Routledge, Abingdon 2016.

[24] A trace of the native North-Arabian prophetic tradition found in the early passages of the Qurʾān refer to or recount the mission of former obscure – and not at all certain – prophets (Hūd, Shuʿayb and others). Then there are reports about individuals who claimed to be prophets among the tribes in Arabia in the years following Muhammad's death, the *Ridda* prophets. The most prominent of these is referred to as Musaylima. Cf. D. Eickelmann, *Musaylima. An Approach to the Social Anthropology of Seventh Century Arabia*, in "Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient" 10 (1967), pp. 17-52; M.J. Kister, *The Struggle against Musaylima and the Conquest of Yamama*, in "Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam" 27 (2002), pp. 1-56; C. Gilliot, *Muhammad, le Coran et les "contraintes de l'histoire"*, in S. Wild (ed.), *The Qurʾān as Text*, Brill, Leiden 1996, pp. 3-26, esp. 24-25.

2. *Universalism of empires and the birth of monotheism*

It is important to emphasize even more that the final victory of monotheism in Late Antiquity was prepared for and aided by the universalism of the empires: Roman, Byzantine and Sasanid – and of course the earlier Hellenistic empire of Alexander the Great. Although I do not share Fowden's interpretation of Constantine as a *universal crusader*[25], undoubtedly the legacy of the classical and global empire of the first Rome and the universalism of second Rome and Persian empires paved the way for the homogeneity of Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world, in which monotheism found a truly favourable environment to thrive.

The category of *pagan monotheism*, used by scholars such as Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, stressed the fact that, in its process of universalisation and unification, Late Antiquity produced a complementary process of syncretism and hierarchization of the gods which integrated the multiple deities of the late Roman world into a single monotheistic pyramidal structure[26]. Certainly, in my opinion, it was more a henotheistic process than a monotheistic one: however, a clear tendency towards a sort of unification of divinity is detectable throughout all the Late antique Mediterranean cultural framework.

The concept of *one empire, one God* provided the political-theological framework for religious transformations. Giovanni Tabacco, for example, argued that in the ideology of the Byzantine empire

[25]   G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993, p. 96. It must be reminded however that the traditional biographical material on Muḥammad (*maghāzī*- or *sīra*-material) cannot be considered as authentic historical accounts. See H. Motzki, *The Biography of Muhammad. The Issue of the Sources*, Brill, Leiden 2000, pp. 99-116.

[26]   See P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Clarendon, Oxford 1999; and also S. Mitchell, P. van Nuffelen (eds.), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010.

theological monotheism and the monarchy correspond to each other in a broad unitary reality through the sacralization of power under the guise of Christianity. Biblical images were used to characterize the Christian emperor (Constantine in particular) – friend of God and new Moses, builder of a new allegiance between religion and politics[27]. The pristine roots of this ideology go back to Alexander the Great who embodied the idea of a cosmopolitan universal monarchical power[28].

Roger Arnaldez stressed that:

With Alexander the Great's empire a sort of cosmopolitanism was born and undoubtedly it influenced the consolidation of the monotheistic idea in the Greek environment. The world, the cosmos is tantamount to a big city. It is one, well-ordered in the unity of its Law. Who governs it is equally one, source of a perfect wisdom's order? It is the only One God.[29]

More recently, also Giovanni Filoramo argued that:

If we look at the religion of the first centuries of the [Roman] empire, we realize that it was characterized by the tendency to hierarchize the world of the traditional gods, submitting them to the command of a Supreme God (summus deus, theos hypsistos) *who, in his quality of absolute monarch, reigns over the world governing it through a bureaucracy of intermediate powers. A vertical dimension is added to traditional polytheism, characterized by a tendency towards a Unitarian concept of the divine.*

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[27]   E. Becker, *Konstantin der Grosse der* neue Moses. *Die Schlacht am Pons Milvius und die Katastrophe am Schilfmeer*, in "Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte" 3 (1910), pp. 161-171, esp. 167.

[28]   G. Tabacco, *Le ideologie politiche del Medioevo*, Einaudi, Torino 2000, pp. 3-4.

[29]   R. Arnaldez, *Un solo Dio*, in F. Braudel (ed.), *Il Mediterraneo. Lo Spazio, la storia, gli uomini, le tradizioni*, Bompiani, Milano 1987, p. 148.

Likewise, to Arnaldez, Filoramo points to the political theology of Hellenism:

The affirmation in the Hellenistic period of a unitary and hierarchical image of the cosmos ... led to the rising of a cosmic religion dominated by a deus summus, *who, tantamount to the Hellenistic monarchs, governs the harmony and order of the visible cosmos*.[30]

This is the fertile cultural soil in which monotheism grew. It is the culture ground of Late Antiquity which, as Angelika Neuwirth argued, produced the Qurʾān. This process is clearly explained by Walid Ahmad Saleh:

Muhammad was not only a product of his environment; like a classic revolutionary character, he was also capable of transcending his limitations. In a tribal pagan environment, he dared to preach a salvific religion, a high imperial cult – and monotheism was then the cult of an empire [the Byzantine] – and he wanted to end the barbarism of the Arabs. The Arabs were to be made similar to the peoples of the empire, the Rum, the Romans up to North, with a book and a part of the legacy of Abraham. It is not insignificant that Muhammad was rooting for the Romans in their wars with Sassanid Iran[31]. *It is also worth noting that Alexander the Great became part of the salvific history of the Qurʾān:* empire building, and monotheism are one. *Muhammad wanted to bring Rome to Arabia and, having been too successful, ended up taking Arabia to Rome*.[32]

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[30]   G. Filoramo, *Ipotesi Dio. Il divino come idea necessaria*, il Mulino, Bologna 2016, p. 121. It is worth remembering the voice of Santo Mazzarino, a prestigious historian of the Roman world, who, on the contrary, supported a fluid continuity between Roman culture and Christianity in Late Antiquity. Mazzarino's thesis cannot be shared because, on the one hand, he underplayed the creativity of the "pagan" culture of Plotinus or Porphyry or Apuleius who seem to be of no value in relation to Augustine or Origen, while, on the other hand, he underplayed the resilience of "paganism" whose survival is attested at least until the 8th century in the East (remember for instance the Qurʾānic Sabeans).

[31]   Q. 30: 1-5.

[32]   W.A. Saleh, *The Arabian Context of Muhammad's Life*, in J.E. Brockopp

In this framework, Muhammad's message was characterized by three interrelated elements:

1) the claim of a radical monotheism against the Christian Trinity, clearly considered as tritheism, and the claim of religious universality against Jewish ethnic exclusivity – the chosen people;

2) the belief that the long prophetic history, from Adam to the seal of the prophets, Muhammad, had come to an end;

3) the eschatological, albeit not messianic, approach of the Last Day, so assertive in the Meccan phase of revelation and still important in the Medinan phase, while the political *umma* grew and built a sort of Islamic state in Arabia.

3. *Islam as* furqān

Addressing the broader question of whether the Arabs of Muhammad's time and earlier were conscious that they were Arabs (*al-ʿArab*) and replying that no Arab aimed more at a religious function than at ethnical awareness, Peter Webb addressed the issue of *jāhiliyya*/*hanīfiyya*. He mainly worked on al-Masʿūdī[33]. Webb argued that the elaboration of the concept of *jāhiliyya* was a retrospective effort by 3rd/9th century Arabs to reject their own self-image in pre-Islamic Arabia by obscuring its polytheism. In other words, in Webb's opinion, there were many more *hanīfi*s in Mecca than is reasonable to assume. I believe there were probably henotheistic tendencies in Mecca and an inclination to worship one supreme God (*Hubal* or *Allāh*) was present when Muhammad began to preach, although it must be reiterated that any exaggeration in one way or another must be avoided.

(ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, pp. 21-38, esp. 38.

[33]   P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2016.

Once again Aziz al-Azmeh discussed the issue of *hanīfiyya* arguing that, even though there is little evidence that the early Muslims were designated as *hanīf* and that the term is perfectly understood without resorting to Syriac, there is no binding term by which the paleo-Muslims referred to themselves (others are *sābī* or *muhā-jirūn*)[34]. From a historical point of view, he is right in arguing that the paleo-Muslim community evolved over time and that this evolution was marked by conflicts. Muslim narratives are therefore reliable. However, what really matters is the evidence of the Qur'ānic text, which points to the definition of Islam as a natural religion.

Hanīf/hanīfiyya are well-known terms (for example, in Q. 6: 37 reference is made to Abraham, and in Q. 30: 30 to the natural religion of mankind). Abraham was neither a Jew nor Christian, but he was a pure monotheist (*hanīf*) devoted to God (*muslim*[35]). The idea underlining this surprising statement is that Islam is the natural religion: *Set your face to [the true] religion* (dīn)*, as a man of pure faith* (hanīf)*, the nature* (fitra) *God impressed upon men* (fātara ʿalay-ha)[36]*. Being *hanīf* and *muslim* at the same time, Abraham professed monotheism as the pristine and universal religion of humanity, beyond and before any religious denomination. From an Islamic point of view, prophetic history represents a continuous process of recovering the original monotheism which, through Abraham, father of all believers, passed to Moses, Jesus and finally to Muhammad and the Arabs, the last carriers of the universal message.

In Muhammad's Meccan *milieu*, *hanifiyya* alluded, *lato sensu*, to those religious souls who desired a more spiritual and transcendent idea of God. That Muhammad himself has been a *hanīf* before receiving the revelation and becoming a *rasūl* is an intriguing hypothesis. It represents a middle ground between the traditional and not always demonstrable Muslim bias that Muhammad, being the

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[34] A. al-Azmeh, *op. cit.*, pp. 363-365.

[35] Q. 3: 67. Obviously, the term *muslim* does not mean here the *historical* Muslim, but properly the natural monotheist.

[36] Q. 30: 30.

greatest of all prophets, must have always been a monotheist, and the stark assertion that he was previously a pagan.

The Qurʾān has the unique characteristic of being *self-aware* (as Daniel Madigan argued), that is to speak of itself as *this Qurʾān*[37], but above all because it claims to be a *furqān* that is a discriminating event[38], which cuts history in two: before and after the *truth*. Although the paradigm of Late Antiquity itself runs the risk of emphasizing the element of continuity at the expense of rupture and fracture, Peter Brown (a non-islamologist who recognizes his debt to Patricia Crone), acutely perceived that:

> *Muhammad cut the inhabitants of the Hijaz loose from the ties of tribal custom and threw them into the Fertile Crescent. His message developed as a protest against the Bedouin way of life ... The Arab tribal ideal had been wholeheartedly extrovert.*[39]

The Qurʾān breaks (*faraqa*) neatly the time of before and after Muhammad's revelation and Hegira[40]. The Hegira (*hijra*) – the migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina (622 C.E.) – was a physical and political act. First, the Qurʾān says:

> *And those who are wronging themselves, the angels will take them and ask them: Which was your condition? They will say: We were*

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[37] D. Madigan, *The Qurʾān's Self Image. Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001, pp. 101-105.

[38] For example, in Q. 25: 1.

[39] P. Brown, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 190.

[40] The history of the study of this term is long and fascinating. It started as one of the central claims of those – like Richard Bell in the fifties – who saw Cristianity as a central factor in the rise of early Islam. The debate on the term *furqān* has been reopened by two articles: F.M. Donner, *Qurʾānic Furqān*, in "Journal of Semitic Studies" 52 (2007), pp. 279-300 and U. Rubin, *On the Arabian Origins of the Qurʾān: the case of al-Furqān*, "Journal of Semitic Studies" 54/2 (2009), pp. 421-433. See also the recent W.A. Saleh, *A Piecemeal Qurʾān: Furqān and its Meaning in Classical Islam and in Modern Qurʾanic Studies*, in "Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam" 42 (2015), pp. 31-71.

oppressed on the earth. The angels will say: Was not God's earth wide enough so that you might have emigrated in it? The refuge of those people will be the Gehenna, an evil place indeed! Except for the men, women and children who, being oppressed, were not able to find a way and were not guided on the straight path. Perhaps God will pardon them because God is Merciful all Pardoning. But who emigrates on the path of God will find in the earth many places to stay therein, and who comes out from his home and emigrates towards God and Its Messenger and death overtakes him, his wage is a promise from God, because God is Forgiving Merciful.[41]

Tariq Ramadan strongly emphasized the conceptual and orthopractical breakdown of the Hegira:

Hijra is also the experience of liberation, both historical and spiritual. Moses had liberated his people from Pharaoh's oppression and led them toward faith and freedom. The essence of Hijra is of exactly the same nature: persecuted because of their beliefs, the faithful decided to break away from their tormentors and march to freedom. In doing so, they stressed that they could not accept oppression, that they could not accept the status of victim, and that basically the matter was simple: publicly speaking the name of God implied either being free or breaking free ... Hijra is the exile of the conscience and of the heart from false gods, from alienation of all sorts, from evil and sin. Turning away from the idols of one's time (*power, money, the cult of appearances, etc.*)*; emigrating from lies and unethical ways of life; liberating oneself, through the experience of breaking away, from all the appearances of freedom paradoxically reinforced by our habits – such is the spiritual requirement of Hijra.*[42]

Very interesting are the following Prophetic traditions, under the authority of al-Buhārī and Muslim (I quote from al-Nawawī):

[41]   Q. 4: 97-100.
[42]   T. Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 86-87.

The Commander of believers Abu Hafs ʿUmar Ibn al-Ḫattāb – God be pleased of him! – reported ... : "I heard the Messenger of God – pbuh *– saying: 'Indeed, acts are along with intention* (niyya) *... who [wills to] do his* hijra *towards God and His Messenger, his* hijra *will be towards God and His Messenger; but who [wills] to do his* hijra *towards this lower world, he will get it; if for [the love of] a woman, he will get married her. His* hijra *[will go] towards what he emigrated thereof.'" ... Reported ʿĀʾisha – God be pleased of her! – : "The Messenger of God –* pbuh *– said: "There is no more hijra after the conquest* (fath) *[of Mecca]. Only the* jihād *and the [right] intention [remain] ... No more* hijra *from Mecca because [after the conquest] it became* dār al-Islām*" ... Reported Saʿd Ibn Abī Waqqās ..., one of the ten men who were promised Paradise ... – God be pleased of him!: "The Messenger of God –* pbuh *– visited me in the year of the Farewell Pilgrimage ... I asked him: "Oh Messenger of God, shall I be abandoned by my fellows?". He answered: No, you will not be abandoned, on the contrary you will act for God's face in order to increase and perfection your rank [of moral nobility and piety], or, perhaps, you will be forsaken but in order that some people will be rewarded and other harmed. Oh my God get my Companions to perform their* hijra *and not to come back on their footsteps! The worst for Saʿd Ibn Hawla! The Messenger of God –* pbuh *– was grieved for him because he died in Mecca.*

Traditions clearly converge in stating that the Hegira was a choice that could have positive or negative results, whether that intention was good or bad. Who – Muhammad in the first place – has acted with piety and justice will obtain through the Hegira a good that will hamper the return to mistake. When the goal is achieved, the Hegira is no longer needed: Muhammad will stay in Medina and never come back to Mecca. Muhammad prayed to God that his companions would not come back to Mecca, complaining of those who had died without making the Hegira.

The Jewish Exodus has the same theological-political meaning[43]:

[For the Bible] coming out from Egypt does mean to leave the Land of oppression to enter the land of freedom. To be sure, freedom is not a biblical term and does not appear in the Exodus context. However, it is clear that the alliance with God at Mount Sinai is reported in the Bible as liberation from slavery to humans ... Leaving Egypt, Israel goes far away from a political system deemed to be false, oppressive and humiliating. From the point of view of the Bible and of the Exodus narrative, monotheism looks like a political movement of liberation from Pharaoh's oppression and of foundation of an alternative way of life.[44]

In the life of the Prophet, Mecca performs the same function as Egypt: it is the place where the Qurayshites (instead of the Pharaoh) exercise an oppressive power; therefore, it must be abandoned. The Hegira is the moment of the affirmation of Islamic monotheism against the polytheistic *jāhiliyya* of Mecca. The *exodus* of Muhammad produces a polarity between Mecca and Medina equivalent to the polarity between Egypt and the promised land in Judaism. In Islam, however, the point is not to return to a land that was said to have been previously occupied (Palestine by Jacob and his sons), but to a place from which one can begin to move forward and to spread the *message* (*risāla*) all over the world.

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[43]   Neuwirth's interpretation of the Exodus in the Qurʾān is a bit different. See: A. Neuwirth, *Locating the Qur'an* … cit., p. 177: *It is striking to note that Moses' exodus which is narrated in Mecca a few times (Q. 20 and Q. 26) is always presented as a punitive narrative – dramatic in view of the amount of violence involved – but completely devoid of its biblical political dimension. There are no Egyptian plagues needed, no catastrophes to endanger the entire state of Egypt, to move Pharaoh to let the people go. The exodus is depicted as the prophet Moses' salvation from vicious foes, an individual salvation which he shares only with his adherents. No nation building is at stake.*

[44]   J. Assmann, *Dio e gli dei. Egitto, Israele e la nascita del monoteismo*, il Mulino, Bologna 2009, p. 122.

Conclusions

In this article I have tried to show that it is useful for a correct interpretation of the Qurʾān and a fair assessment of Muhammad's message to fit them into the broad framework of Late Antiquity. However, Islam claims – and indeed it is – to be a *rupture* (*furqān*) in the religious history of monotheism. Much work remains to be done to clarify the formation of Islam and the Qurʾān in their historical developments. My remarks are simply preliminary steps on a long path that I hope to pursue in the future.

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