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The Global Phenomenon of Islam Through the Lens of Late Antiquity

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Islam resembles what was later to be called “the Western tradition” in so many ways – the intellectual efforts to fuse Judeo-Christian scripture with the categories of Greek philosophy, the literary emphasis on courtly love, the scientific rationalism, the legalism, puritanical monotheism, missionary impulse, the expansionist mercantile capitalism—even the periodic waves of fascination with “Eastern mysticism” – that only the deepest historical prejudice could have blinded European historians to the conclusion that, in fact, this is the Western tradition

DAVID GRAEBER 2007:340.

Any student of the Qur’an must notice the universal claims of Islam. “We have sent you only as mercy to humanity” (Qur’an 21: 107); Muhammad is called “*al-nabiyy al-ummi*” (“the prophet to all nations or gentiles” as opposed to “the illiterate prophet,” which is the doubtful reading favoured by many Muslims for dogmatic reasons) (Qur’an 7: 157, 158); and the Qur’an itself is a “revelation from the god of all the worlds” (Qur’an 69: 43). The history of Islam shows that the Muslims took this charge to heart. They spread their religion everywhere and by many means, not all of which violent. They also absorbed the practices, worldviews, knowledge, and even sacred history of the many “nations” they won over into the core of their religion’s cultural manifestations. Yet, until very recently, most scholarship on Islam in European languages treated it as an aberrant, even foreign tradition to the larger geo-cultural milieu in which it grew, especially after the foundational period of the seventh–eighth century, when the new religion’s acculturation to older cultures and religions in its immediate neighbourhood was so glaring to ignore.

Marshall Hodgson was the first world historian to formulate a global approach to the study of Islam in his *The Venture of Islam* (1974). He cast Islam as a historical force that evolved out of its birthplace in Arabia and prospered across geographic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and even religious boundaries. His framework was then

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called World History, a not-so-different device for seeing history through a universal prism than the current theoretical favourite “Global History.” His encompassing terminology – oikoumene, Islamicate, and even World History – may have become dated. But his geohistorical framework, the Nile-to-Oxus Region, and his interregional approach to world history still capture the truly global reach of Islam, which is at the same time a poorly theorised historical phenomenon and a hotly contested, and even opposed, actual reality. Here my focus will be on the historical foundations of the global phenomenon of Islam.

Two critical perspectives that emerged around the same time as the publication of Hodgson’s *Venture of Islam* have directly influenced the orientation and argument of subsequent inquiries of the globalising dimension of Islam. The first is the critique of Orientalism spearheaded by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Aimed at debunking the discursive representation of Islam during more than two centuries of active professional Orientalism, Said’s criticism paved the way for asking different questions of the historical archives, for alternative approaches to historical investigation, but most importantly for a narrative liberated from a binary structure that excluded Islam from any active role in the Western civilisational march from ancient Greece to Modern Europe. New generations of critical historians owe Said and the ensuing field of postcolonial studies the freedom to see Islam as a dynamic force with a direction and a sense of purpose within its changing global context, which extended significantly beyond but always included Europe.

The second, and more directly instrumental, scholarly development is the crystallisation of the concept of Late Antiquity, whose first formulation is variably ascribed to as early as Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89) or as late as the early-twentieth century heated debate between the two paragons of the Viennese school of art history, Alois Riegl and Josef Strzygowski, about the trajectory from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Still in flux, the current definition of a distinct Late Antique period is credited to Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971). Positing a recognisable historic period that stretched from the fourth to the ninth century and encompassed the debris of the Roman Empire in Europe and the Mediterranean as well as the lands of Byzantium and the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphates, Brown’s formulation gained many supporters but also irked some Western and Islamic purists. Several prominent historians and art historians bolstered the East-West Late Antique cultural framing proposed by Brown in studies of the transformation of art, architecture, and city form in the crucial period of transition between the fall of the Roman and the rise of the Islamic Empire. A number of historians of Western Europe questioned the usefulness of a concept that reaches from the Atlantic to include Persia, the old nemesis, and in many ways the conceptual historical other, of both Greece and Rome (James 2008: 29). On the other hand, several Western Islamic historians, most notably Patricia Crone and her several associates, who had developed a mistrust of early Islamic sources, paradoxically brandished these same sources to argue that the early Muslims were inattentive to if

not altogether ignorant of the “colourful characters of Late Antiquity” (Hoyland 2012: 1054). Late Antiquity, however, stuck around both as a historical period and an analytical tool, although its boundaries remain a subject of intense and exceedingly fruitful debate.

With Late Antiquity, Islam finally earned a front seat in the civilisational drive that saw Europe navigate its rough transition from the fall of Rome to the rise of the Holy Roman Empire. Shedding its old and reductive image as only an imitator and passive “caretaker” of the culture of the ancients, Islam now became an acknowledged, if somewhat disoriented, player in the historical configuration of the medieval world. This was a welcome development, but it still fell short of the interpretive potential of the Late Antiquity concept. Still largely missing are the Eastern geo-cultural factors that Islam brought to the mix – Arabic, Southern Arabic, Persian, Soghdian, Turkic, Indic, Manichean, Buddhist, and more – which reoriented (directionally as well as culturally) and effectively globalised Late Antiquity in ways that a standpoint centred on the Mediterranean could never achieve. Also missing are fields of inquiry, namely the theological and the epistemic, that for long resisted the possibility of an early Islamic entanglement with existing intellectual traditions in its birthplace first and the lands of its conquests later. Several contemporary scholars took it upon themselves to engage those thorny issues by casting Islam as an interlocutor of, even a dialogic challenger to, the preceding monotheistic religions, which populated Arabia and the Fertile Crescent during the Prophet’s mission, though this was precisely what the Qur’an insisted upon. But no one did it more persistently and more creatively than Angelika Neuwirth and Garth Fowden.

Neuwirth is the intellectual heir to a venerable German philological school that can be traced back to the nineteenth-century Biblical and Islamic scholars Theodor Nöldeke and Julius Wellhausen, whose work on the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, and early Islam paved the way for a comparative approach to the study of scriptures in the three monotheistic religions. Focusing her research on locating Islam’s constitutional book, the Qur’an, in the larger monotheistic milieu of Late Antique Arabia, Neuwirth argues in her article “Locating the Qur’an in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity” for its inscription within what she calls a “civilisational pedigree” of Biblical people, which she reminds us is usually “denied to the non-Biblical Muslims” (Neuwirth 2013: 194). Moving from the merely theological to the epistemic, Neuwirth proposes to treat Late Antiquity as “a purely epistemic concept, as a space in which diverse groups undertook to re-interpret the most variegated texts inherited from Antiquity – be they the Hebrew Bible, be they pagan poetry or be they philosophy in a new, monotheistic vein” (Neuwirth 2013: 192). From that angle, she was able to transcend earlier epistemological barriers that kept the Qur’an in its formative period on the fringes of that civilisational lineage to proclaim that

reception, in the Qur’anic case, does not occur only with later exegesis, *tafsīr*, but is already part of the text’s genesis itself. It is manifest in the live interaction between the proclaimer, the Prophet, and his diverse listeners, an exchange which has left

conspicuous traces in the Qur’anic text itself. Looked upon as the document of a process, a successive proclamation of divine messages, received and responded to by listeners, the Qur’an presents itself to us as a unique case of prophetic speech interspersed with exegetic, i.e. community-related comments. As such a polyphonic text, the Qur’an, in our view, can be considered as the “climax” of the Late Antique culture of debate. (Neuwirth 2013: 196)

Fowden, a trained classicist and an iconoclast of a civilisational historian, ranges farther and wider than anyone who studies Islam in its first millennium. His project, which has spanned three books so far with two more in the pipeline, aims at nothing less than to “overhaul the foundations of the debate about the role of Islam and the Islamic world” both as a “moral and spiritual competitor offering different norms of conduct and a variant vision of man and God” and a “challenge (made explicitly in the Qur’an) to the values espoused by the ‘Judeo-Christian’ civilisation” (Fowden 2014: 2). Notwithstanding its present-day crucial relevance, the project is squarely rooted in the “First Millennium, during which Christianity was born and matured, roughly in the middle of which the Prophet Muhammad received or conceived the Quran, and by the end of which Islam had matured sufficiently to be compared with patristic Christianity,” hence the title of the third book in the series *Before and After Muhammad* (Fowden 2014: 2). Coupled with this historical decentring of theological and ethical attributive certainties, Fowden extends his revisionist stance to the sacrosanct field of rationalism, whose evolution has long been associated with Western philosophy, with a few outliers on the other sides of the Mediterranean. In this last book, he deliberately confuses the historical and cultural boundaries to trace the emergence of “a coherent and profoundly influential Aristotelian tradition that did not become prominent until after the beginning of the First Millennium, matured among the commentators of fifth- to sixth-century Alexandria, and broke through the commentary stage to a new synthesis, less tied to the Aristotelian texts, around the turn of the millennium thanks to the learned but also innovative mind of Ibn Sīnā” (Fowden 2014: 12). Constructing a dialogic theological and philosophical continuum across time, culture, language, and religion thus allowed Fowden to go beyond the “apparently generous” Brownian span of Late Antiquity to propose a novel periodisation that rejects all Eurocentric exclusivity. In his “First Millennium” period, Fowden affords Islam

to reach a stage of intellectual and institutional maturation comparable with fully developed patristic Christianity, or capable of being used as an approach to the Islamic world we know today. If, then, we are to have the full benefit of studying early Christianity and Islam comparatively but not ahistorically, in other words within a firm sociohistorical framework, we need an alternative to the late antique paradigm (Fowden 2014: 48).

With Fowden we reach the end of the road for “Late Antiquity” as a sufficient corrective to the skewed global history with which we are still grappling today. What his “First Millennium” offers us is a way to rethink the impact of periodisation on our conception of history itself rather than to innocently continue to see it as the succession of mere chronological segments with fancy, albeit culturally specific, names.

The dynamic of history, to use one of Fowden's favourite Hegelian terms, irrespective of cultural/civilisational divide, is what prompted him to finally reject his teacher's truly cross-cultural period that nonetheless still unfolds according to the rhythm of a Eurocentric historical trajectory. Islam's efflorescence, or "intellectual and institutional maturation," was truncated within the confines of a 400-to-800 C.E. Late Antiquity as proposed by Brown and his followers. Fowden's pushing his period's closing to the end of the First Millennium permitted Islam to dictate the conclusion of an epistemic tradition – rational, monotheistic, legalistic – that it did not generate but it certainly appropriated, continued, and brought to brilliant fruition. This way Fowden remained true to his supraconception of an ancient history dynamism that connected the imperial projects of both Rome and Persia to that of the Islamic Caliphate until its dissolution into a "commonwealth" around the end of the First Millennium. His summary of that conception in the first book of his series *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (1994) deserves to be quoted in full:

I believe that late antiquity had a "dynamic" – a direction and even to a certain extent a sense of direction. Beyond the characteristically 'late antique' structural similarities among the Roman, Iranian, and Islamic empires, there was both a logical and chronological sequence to developments. An episodic and inconclusive concern in polytheist Rome with the relationship between the structure of the divine world and that of secular political authority became, in Christian Rome, the centerpiece of public doctrine. An analogous development was provoked by Iran's transition from Arsacid to Sasanian rule in the 220s. Mazdaism never became a universalist faith, and even Constantine's marriage of political and religious universalism failed to result in a coordinated expansion of Romanitas and Christianitas. But Muhammad's fresh attempt in the same direction definitely had its moment (Fowden 1994: 8-9).

And that moment, rooted as it was in an age-old universalist imperial project shared by both East and West, has taken history in a direction all its own. To limit it to the fourth-to-eighth century confines of "Late Antiquity" misses its own sequential progression and maturation after the high days of the Abbasid Caliphate. It is precisely during those centuries before the devastating Mongol Invasions in the early thirteenth century that Islam produced a collective episteme that synthesized and built upon the knowledge it absorbed from all the cultures with which it came into contact. That episteme bypassed all ethnic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries within the Islamic world from al-Andalus to Sind despite its political fragmentation and crossed over to inform and invigorate the emergent European awakening. That this lineage was ignored or obscured during the centuries of European triumphalism underscores the significance of the growing endeavour today to understand the role it played in the shaping of our interconnected world (thankfully pursued by many scholars in different fields).

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