Introduction

In broad terms this work is concerned with the religious setting within which Islam emerged. More specifically, it asks what it means if we describe the primary message of the Koran as an attack upon polytheism and idolatry. It questions the commonly accepted view that the opponents attacked in the Koran as idolaters and polytheists (and frequently designated there by a variety of words and phrases connected with the Arabic word *shirk*) were idolaters and polytheists in a literal sense. This introduction, directed primarily at non-specialists, aims to elucidate these issues and to indicate some of the starting-points of the discussion. A reconsideration of the nature and target of the koranic polemic, together with a discussion of why and how it has been commonly accepted that it was directed at Arabs who worshipped idols and believed in a plurality of gods, will have some consequences for the way we envisage the origins of Islam.

Muslim tradition tells us that, insofar as it is a historically distinct form of monotheism, Islam arose in central western Arabia (the Ḥijāz) at the beginning of the seventh century AD as a result of a series of revelations sent by God to His Prophet, Muḥammad.[1] The immediate background, the setting in which Muḥammad lived and proclaimed his message, is known generally in tradition as the *jāhiliyya*. That Arabic word may be translated as 'the age, or condition, of ignorance' although the root with which it is connected sometimes has significations and colourings beyond that of 'ignorance'. The word is sometimes used, especially among modern and contemporary Muslims, in an extended sense to refer to any culture that is understood to be unislamic,[2]

[1] The expression 'Muslim tradition' refers to the mass of traditional Muslim literature, such as lives of the Prophet (*sīra*s), commentaries on the Koran (*tafsīr*s), and collections of reports (*ḥadīth*s) about the words and deeds of the Prophet. Such works are available to us in versions produced from about the end of the second/eighth century at the earliest. From that time onwards the number of them multiplied rapidly and they have continued to be written until modern times. The tradition is extensive and, within certain boundaries, diverse. The Koran is a work *sui generis* and is usually regarded as distinct from the traditional literature.

[2] Muḥammad Quṭb, brother of the better-known Sayyid (executed 1966), published a book with the title (in Arabic) 'The *Jāhiliyya* of the Twentieth Century' (*Jāhiliyyat al-qarn al-ʿishrīn*, Cairo 1964). In it he defined *jāhiliyya* as 'a psychological state of refusing to be guided by God's

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but more narrowly refers specifically to the society of the Arabs of central and western Arabia in the two or three centuries preceding the appearance of Islam. It is not normally used to include, for instance, the civilisation that flourished in south Arabia (the Yemen) in the pre-Christian and early Christian era, or the north Arabian polities such as those based on Palmyra or Petra (the Nabataean kingdom) which existed in the early Christian centuries.

The characterisation of the *jāhiliyya* is a recurring theme in Islamic literature. The word itself, with its connotations of ignorance, indicates the generally negative image that tradition conveys of the society it sees as the background and opposite pole to Islam. Although it has to be allowed that there is some ambiguity in Muslim attitudes, and that certain features of the *jāhiliyya*, such as its poetry, could be regarded with a sense of pride,[3] in the main it was portrayed as a state of corruption and immorality from which God delivered the Arabs by sending them the Prophet Muḥammad. A salient characteristic of it in Muslim tradition is its polytheistic and idolatrous religion, and with that are associated such things as sexual and other immorality, the killing of female children, and the shedding of blood.[4]

It should be remembered that Muslim tradition is virtually our only source of information about the *jāhiliyya*: it is rather as if we were dependent on early Christian literature for our knowledge of Judaism in the first century AD. In spite of that, modern scholars have generally accepted that, as the tradition maintains, the *jāhiliyya* was the background to Islam and that the more we know about it the better position we will be in to understand the emergence of the new religion.

Footnote 2 (*cont.*)
guidance and an organisational set-up refusing to be regulated by God's revelation': see Elizabeth Sirriyeh, 'Modern Muslim Interpretations of *Shirk*', *Religion*, 20 (1990), 139–59, esp. 152. The eponym of the Wahhābī sect which provided the religious ideology for the development of the Saudi kingdom in Arabia, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792), drew up a list of 129 issues regarding which, he asserted, the Prophet opposed the people of the *jāhiliyya* (*Masāʾil al-jāhiliyya* in *Majmūʿat al-tawḥīd al-najdiyya*, Mecca 1391 AH, 89–97). Generally, the list is not specific to the pre-Islamic Arabs, but refers to beliefs and practices which in the author's view are inconsistent with true Islam, and many of them presuppose the existence of Islam.

[3] For some reflexions on the transmissions and collection of so-called *jāhilī* poetry and its importance in early Islam, see Rina Drory, 'The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making', *SI*, 83 (1996), 33–49.

[4] For a traditional characterisation of the *jāhiliyya*, see below, pp. 99–100. See also *EI2* s.v. 'Djāhiliyya'. For discussion of the wider connotations of the term, see I. Goldziher, 'What is meant by 'al-Jāhiliyya'', in his *Muslim Studies*, 2 vols., London 1967, I 201–8 (= I. Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2 vols., Halle 1889, I, 219–28); F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Leiden 1970, esp. 32ff.; S. Pines, 'Jāhiliyya and ʿIlm', *JSAI*, 13 (1990), 175–94. Wellhausen, *Reste*, 71, n.1 suggested a Christian origin for the term: he saw it as an Arabic translation of Greek *agnoia* (Acts 17:30 – 'the times of this ignorance'), used by Paul to refer to the state of the idolatrous Athenians before the Christian message was made known to them. The same Greek word occurs in a context perhaps even more suggestive of the Muslim concept and use of *al-jāhiliyya* in the Jewish Hellenistic work, The Wisdom of Solomon, 14:22 (see further below, p. 99).

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The present work does not share that approach. It treats the image of the *jāhiliyya* contained in the traditional literature primarily as a reflexion of the understanding of Islam's origins which developed among Muslims during the early stages of the emergence of the new form of monotheism. It questions how far it is possible to reconstruct the religious ideas and practices of the Arabs of pre-Islamic inner Arabia on the basis of literary materials produced by Muslims and dating, in the earliest forms in which we have them, from at least 150 years after the date (AD 622) that is traditionally regarded as the beginning of the Islamic (Hijrī) era.

According to Muslim tradition, however, the Prophet Muḥammad was sent to a people who were idol worshippers and morally debased. The tradition identifies this people for us as the Arabs (of the tribe of Quraysh) of the Prophet's own town, Mecca, those of the few neighbouring towns and oases (such as Ṭā'if and Yathrib), as well as the nomads of the region generally. Although Muḥammad's move (*hijra*) to Yathrib (later called Medina) in AD 622 is said by tradition to have brought him into contact with a substantial Jewish community which lived there together with the pagan Arabs, even in the ten years he passed in that town he is portrayed as continuing to struggle against the still pagan Meccans and the Arabs of the surrounding region at the same time as he was concerned with his relationship with the Jews. Of the Koran's 114 chapters (*sūra*s), 91 are marked in the most widely used edition as having been revealed in Mecca before the *hijra*.[5]

The tradition often refers to these pagan Arabs of the Ḥijāz, whom it sees as the first targets of the koranic message, using the terms *mushrikūn* (literally 'associators') and *kuffār* ('unbelievers'). These and related expressions occur frequently too in the Koran itself with reference to the opponents who are the main object of its polemic. Those opponents are accused of the sins of *shirk* and *kufr*. The latter offence is only loosely understood as 'unbelief' or 'rejection of the truth', and is sometimes taken to apply to Jews and Christians as well as to the idolatrous Arabs. *Shirk*, however, is conceived of somewhat more precisely: it refers to the association of other gods or beings with God, according them the honour and worship that are due to God alone. Hence it is frequently translated into European languages by words indicating 'polytheism' or 'idolatry'.[6]

The traditional Muslim material – the lives of Muḥammad, the commentaries on the Koran, and other forms of traditional Muslim literature –

[5] Since the chapters traditionally assigned to the Medinese period of the Prophet's career are generally longer than those assigned to Mecca, this figure is not a precise indication of the traditionally accepted proportion of Meccan to Medinese material. The tradition's stress on the priority (in time and importance) of the Prophet's attack on Arab paganism compared with his criticism of Jews and Christians generated reports in which the pagans complain about his greater hostility to them: e.g., Muhammad b. Aḥmad Dhahabī, *Ta'rīkh al-Islām*, ed. Tadmurī, 38 vols., Beirut 1994, I, 186, citing Mūsā b. ʿUqba (d. 141/758).

[6] See Muhammad Ibrahim H. Surty, *The Qur'anic Concept of al-Shirk (Polytheism)*, London 1982, 23: '*Shirk* in *shariʿah* means polytheism or idolatry. Since a man associates other creation with the Creator he has been regarded as polytheist (Mushrik)'.

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frequently explicitly identifies the *mushrikūn* or *kuffār* referred to in a particular koranic passage as the pagan Meccans and other Arabs. When that material is put together it appears to supply us with relatively abundant information about the idols, rituals, holy places and other aspects of the opponents' polytheism. The nature and validity of the identification of the koranic opponents with idolatrous Meccans and other Arabs, the extent to which traditional material about them is coherent and consistent with the koranic material attacking the *mushrikūn*, is one of the main themes of this work.

As an example of the way in which the tradition gives flesh to the anonymous and sometimes vague references in the text of scripture, we may consider the commentary on Koran 38:4–7. That passage contains some problematic words and phrases but seems to tell us of the amazement of the opponents that the 'warner' sent to them should claim that there is only one God, and of their accusation against him that he was a lying soothsayer, not a true prophet:

> And they are amazed that there has come to them a Warner from among themselves. Those who reject the truth (*al-kāfirūna*) say, 'This is a lying sorcerer. Has he made the gods one god? Indeed this is a strange thing!' The leaders among them go off [saying], 'Walk away and hold steadfastly to your gods. This is something intended. We have not heard of this in the last religion.[7] This is nothing but a concoction.'

The major koranic commentator Ṭabarī (d. 311/923), who drew widely on the tradition of commentary as it had developed by his own day, glossed this passage in a way to make it clear that these opponents were Meccan polytheistic and idolatrous enemies of Muḥammad: 'Those *mushrikūn* of Quraysh were surprised that a warner came to warn them . . . from among themselves, and not an angel from heaven . . . Those who denied the unity of God . . . said that Muḥammad was a lying soothsayer.' One of the traditions Ṭabarī cited to support his gloss explains: 'Those who called Muḥammad a lying soothsayer said: "Has Muḥammad made all of the beings we worship (*al-maʿbūdāt*) into one, who will hear all of our prayers together and know of the worship of every worshipper who worships him from among us!" Ṭabarī gave a number of traditions which say in different versions that the reason why the *mushrikūn* said what God reports of them is that Muḥammad had proposed to them that they join him in proclaiming that there is no god but God (*lā ilāha illā 'llāh*) – that is what occasioned their surprise and made them say what they did. Their response was to tell Muḥammad's uncle Abū Ṭālib that his nephew was reviling their gods and to ask that he stop him.[8]

This is typical of many such amplifications of the koranic text in the com-

[7] Some commentators see this problematic expression (*al-milla al-akhira*) as referring to Christianity.
[8] *Tafsīr* (Bulaq), XXI, 78 ff. The suggestion that the opponents would have accepted the warner if he were 'an angel from heaven' sits, it might be thought, uncomfortably with the idea that they were idolatrous pagans. Some other accounts seeking to contextualise the question 'Has he made the gods one God?' refer to the custom of the pagan Arabs of stroking or rubbing against their domestic idols before leaving for a journey.

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mentaries; other examples will be given in the course of this work. Generally, they are concerned to provide a relatively precise historical context for koranic verses which in themselves give few if any indications of such, and to identify individuals and groups who, in the text itself, are anonymous. One of the most obvious result of them, and of material in the literature that provides details for us about the gods and idols of the Arabs, is to establish the common image of Islam as something beginning in a largely polytheistic milieu. The exegetical amplifications of the Koran lead us to understand Islam as, in the first place, an attack on the idolatry and polytheism of the Arabs of central western Arabia.

This traditional material has both a religious and a geographical aspect. It is not only that Islam is presented as having emerged as an attack on polytheism and idolatry, but that the polytheism and idolatry concerned was specific to the Arabs of central and western Arabia. The present work is mainly concerned with the religious aspect of the traditional image. It may be possible to reassess that without rejecting the Ḥijāz as the geographical locus of the Koran, but in tradition the background is so strongly identified as a specifically inner Arabian form of polytheism and idolatry that to question whether we are concerned with polytheists and idolaters in a real sense may be thought to have geographical implications too. This will be discussed further shortly.

First, however, why do we think that the traditional accounts might or should be reassessed, and what is the purpose of doing so?

Some answers to those questions are, I hope, made clear in the main chapters of this book. To anticipate the arguments pursued there, the identification of the *mushrikūn* as pre-Islamic idolatrous Arabs is dependent upon Muslim tradition and is not made by the Koran itself; the nature of the koranic polemic against the *mushrikūn* does not fit well with the image of pre-Islamic Arab idolatry and polytheism provided by Muslim tradition; the imputation to one's opponents of 'idolatry' – of which *shirk* functions as an equivalent in Islam – is a recurrent motif in monotheist polemic (probably most familiar in the context of the Reformation in Europe) and is frequently directed against opponents who consider themselves to be monotheists; the traditional Muslim literature which gives us details about the idolatry and polytheism of the pre-Islamic Arabs of the *jāhiliyya* is largely stereotypical and formulaic and its value as evidence about the religious ideas and practices of the Arabs before Islam is questionable; and, finally, the commonly expressed view that the traditional Muslim reports about Arab polytheism and idolatry are confirmed by the findings of archaeology and epigraphy needs to be reconsidered.

Underlying those arguments is the view that the traditional understanding of Islam as arising from a critique of local paganism in a remote area of western Arabia serves to isolate Islam from the development of the monotheistic tradition in general. At least from before the Christian era until about the

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time of the Renaissance it seems, the important developments within the monotheist tradition have occurred as a result of debates and arguments among adherents of the tradition rather than from confrontation with opponents outside it. Those debates and arguments have often involved charges that one party or another which claimed to be monotheistic in fact had beliefs or practices that – in the view of their opponents – were incompatible with, or a perversion of, monotheism.[9]

The two major forms of the monotheist tradition other than Islam – Rabbinical Judaism and Christianity – each emerged from a common background in ancient Judaism, and their subsequent history, for example the development of Karaism and of Protestantism, has been shaped primarily by intra- and inter-communal debates and disputes. Of course, for some centuries both Jews and Christians had to face the reality of political domination by a power – the Roman Empire – associated with a form of religion that the monotheists regarded as idolatrous and polytheistic. Sometimes they were subject to persecution and physical oppression by it, and sometimes they had to enter into debate and argument with representatives of the pagan religion. There is little, however, to suggest that the monotheists took the Graeco-Roman polytheism seriously enough to regard it as a challenge at the religious level, or to respond to it in the same way that they did, for example, to Manichaeism. The gospels contain polemic against Jews, not against Graeco-Roman religion. Notwithstanding the fact that some Rabbinical texts continued to count idolatry as one of the greatest sins and incompatible with being a Jew, others indicate that the tendency of Jews towards idolatry had passed away in the time of the first temple.[10] Long before Graeco-Roman polytheism was outlawed by the (by then Christian) Roman emperors, at a learned level it had come to present itself in terms comprehensible to monotheists. Judaism and Christianity had themselves adapted Hellenistic concepts and vocabulary, but long before the seventh century the balance of power was decisively in favour of monotheism.[11]

[9] In the real world monotheism and polytheism are often subjective value judgements, reflecting the understandings and viewpoints of monotheists, rather than objectively identifiable forms of religion. We are not concerned in this book to evaluate the claims of any particular group to be monotheists: 'monotheism' here covers all those groups that have originated within the Abrahamic tradition, but not groups outside that tradition even though they might legitimately be described as monotheistic. Cf. the view of Peter Hayman that 'it is hardly ever appropriate to use the term monotheism to describe the Jewish idea of God', argued in his 'Monotheism – a Misused Word in Jewish Studies?', *JJS*, 42 (1991), 1–15.

[10] For repudiation of idolatry as the essence of being a Jew, see, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, fo. 13 a (Eng. trans. London 1938, 44); for the view that idolatry was no longer a threat to Jews, Midrash Rabba on Song of Songs, 7:8 (Eng. trans. 1939, 290 f.). See further Saul Lieberman, 'Rabbinic Polemics against Idolatry' in his *Hellenism and Jewish Palestine*, 2nd edn. New York 1962, 115–27; *EJ*, s.v. 'Idolatry', 1235a.

[11] For the strength of monotheism in the Middle East by the time of the rise of Islam, see especially Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1993.

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According to the traditional accounts Islam was not born in the same way – not as a result of disputes among monotheists but from a confrontation with real idolaters. Furthermore, whereas other major developments within monotheism occurred in regions where that tradition of religion was firmly established if not always completely dominant (Palestine, Iraq, northern Europe and elsewhere), Islam is presented as having arisen in a remote region which could be said to be on the periphery of the monotheistic world, if not quite outside it. None of this is impossible but it does seem remarkable and is a reason for suggesting that the traditional account might be questioned.[12] It is a suggestion of the present work that as a religious system Islam should be understood as the result of an intra-monotheist polemic, in a process similar to that of the emergence of the other main divisions of monotheism.

Reference has already been made to the relatively late appearance of Arabic Muslim literature in general, and that too is important for the argument that the traditional accounts of Islam's origins may be reconsidered.

The earliest examples that we have of Muslim traditional literature have been dated to the second/eighth century.[13] These include several books and a number of texts preserved on papyrus fragments.The papyrus remains (i.e., those pertaining to such things as the life of the Prophet, the early history of the community, koranic commentary, *ḥadīth*s and Arabic grammar) are fragmentary and the dating of them is often insecure. The earliest of them, assigned by Adolf Grohmann to the early second century AH, that is, approximately the second quarter of the eighth century AD, seems to be one referring to events associated with the victory of the Muslims at Badr in the second year of the Hijra (AD 624). Grohmann's dating is apparently on stylistic grounds for the text itself is undated. That versions of Muslim traditional texts are to be found on fragments of papyrus does not in itself tell us anything

[12] J. Waardenburg, 'Un débat coranique contre les polythéistes', in *Ex Orbe Religionum: Studia Geo Widengren Oblata*, 2 vols., Leiden 1972, II, 143: 'Le surgissement d'un monothéisme qui se dresse contre une religion polythéiste est un phénomène poignant dans l'histoire des religions.'

[13] 'Muslim traditional literature' here excludes, as well as the Koran, early Arabic administrative documents and official and unofficial inscriptions. Such things as letters and poems ascribed to individuals living in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times are known to us only in versions included in later Muslim literary texts; we do not have them in their original form, if any. For example, when modern scholars discuss, as many have, a theological epistle addressed to the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (65/685–86/705) by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), they are in fact discussing a document edited from two late (eighth/fourteenth-century) manuscripts and excerpts in an even later Muʿtazilī text (H. Rittter, 'Studien zur Geschichte der islamischen Frömmigkeit. I. Ḥasan al-Baṣrī', *Isl.*, 21 (1933), 62; *GAS*, 592). Recently, extensive excerpts of the letter have been found in two fifth/eleventh-century Muʿtazilī texts, but the relationship of the excerpts found in the Muʿtazilī tradition to the version of the eighth/fourteenth-century manuscripts is problematic. For fuller details and the development of attitudes to the authenticity of the ascription and dating of the epistle, see Josef van Ess, *Anfänge muslimischer Theologie*, Beirut 1977, 18, 27–9; Josef van Ess,, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, 6 vols., Berlin 1992, II, 46–50; and Michael Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma*, Cambridge 1981, 117–23.

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about their date since the use of papyrus as a writing material continued long into the Islamic era.[14]

The books (such as the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Mālik, d. 179/795, or the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil b. Sulaymān, d. 150/767) that have been accepted as of second/eighth-century origin are often accompanied by problems about transmission and redaction, and the manuscripts in which they have been preserved are considerably later than the scholars to whom the works have been attributed.[15]

It is not really until the third/ninth century, therefore, that we can speak with some certainty about the forms and contents of Muslim literature concerning such things as prophetic biography and koranic exegesis. Our earliest extant biography of Muḥammad is conventionally attributed to Ibn Isḥāq (d. 151/768), but we only have that work in a number of later, related but variant, recensions, the best known of which was made by Ibn Hishām, who died in 218/833 or 213/828. From the third/ninth century onwards the amount of Muslim literature increases rapidly. It is obvious, of course, that the earliest texts available to us are the end result of some generations of formation, transmission and reworking, both in an oral and a written form, but we have to work with the texts as we have them and reconstruction from them of the earlier forms of the tradition is problematic.[16]

Goldziher in the late nineteenth century argued that the *ḥadīth* literature tells us more about the circles and times that produced it – the generations preceding and contemporary with the emergence of the texts – than it does about the topics with which it is explicitly concerned. Reports about the Prophet and the earliest period of Islam in Arabia should, accordingly, be understood primarily as evidence of the concepts and debates within the formative Muslim

[14] For an introduction to Arabic papyri, see A. Grohmann, *From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo 1952. For excerpts from Muslim tradition on papyrus, see Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, 3 vols., Chicago 1957–72. For the apparently early second-century papyrus, see A. Grohmann, *Arabic Papyri from Ḫirbet al-Mird*, Louvain 1963, 82, no. 71, and for a reassessment of the event to which it refers, see Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton 1987, 228–9.

[15] For a radical argument regarding the dating of the work known as the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Mālik, see Norman Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence*, Oxford 1993, 20–38; for counter arguments, Harald Motzki, 'Der Prophet und die Katze: zur Datierung eines *ḥadīth*', paper read at the 7th Colloquium 'From Jāhiliyya to Islam', Jerusalem, 28 July–1 August, 1996, trans. as 'The Prophet and the Cat. On Dating Mālik's *Muwatta'* and Legal Traditions', *JSAI*, 22 (1998), 18–83. For a survey of the problems associated with a number of apparently early works of *tafsīr*, including those of Muqātil, see Andrew Rippin, 'Studying Early *tafsīr* Texts', *Isl.*, 72 (1995), 310–23, esp. 318–23.

[16] For recent strong arguments that it is possible to reconstruct the earlier stages of some parts of Muslim tradition, see Harald Motzki, 'The *Muṣannaf* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣanʿānī as a Source of Authentic *aḥādīth* of the First Century AH', *JNES*, 50 (1991), 1–21; Harold Motzki, *Die Anfänge der islamischen Jurisprudenz*, Stuttgart 1991 (reviewed by me in *BSOAS*, 59 (1996), 141–3); and Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds*, Berlin 1996. For two recent substantial attempts to to reconstruct conditions in the Ḥijāz before and in the time of Muḥammad on the basis of Muslim tradition, see Michael Lecker, *The Banū Sulaym. A Contribution to the Study of Early Islam*, Jerusalem 1989 (reviewed by me in *BSOAS*, 54 (1991), 359–62); and Michael Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina*, Leiden 1995.

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community and of its arguments with its opponents.[17] That is the position taken here – that the traditional texts, especially those pertaining to the *jāhiliyya*, can help us to see how early Muslims understood and viewed the past but are not primarily sources of information about that past. Beyond that, furthermore, the fact of the appearance of the traditional texts from the third/ninth century onwards is interpreted as indicative of the growing stabilization of the tradition and as one of the signs that at that time Islam was taking the shape that we now see as characteristic.

Another reason for thinking that we will not make much progress in understanding the genesis of Islam simply by accepting the framework provided by the tradition and working within it is the less than convincing nature of much modern scholarship which has attempted to do that.

For the Muslim traditional scholars Islam resulted from an act of revelation made by God to an Arab prophet. In this presentation Islam was substantially in existence by the time of Muḥammad's death (AD 632) and any subsequent developments were understood as secondary elaborations.[18] The traditional scholars had no need to seek beyond that explanation although their works contain a large amount of detail which seems to relate the act of revelation to what was understood as its historical context, the early seventh-century Ḥijāz.

Modern non-Muslim scholars, unable to accept the reality of the revelation, have used some of that detail to develop theories intended to provide what they saw as more convincing explanations for the appearance of Islam, explanations that stress economic, political and cultural factors, while at the same time accepting what the tradition tells us about time and place.

Two such explanations, often used together, have been particularly widespread in modern accounts of the emergence of Islam. One of them – the evolutionary development of Islamic monotheism out of pre-Islamic Arab paganism – will be discussed in the first chapter. The other attempts to account for the origins of Islam in early seventh-century Arabia by reference to the claimed location of Mecca at the heart of a major international trade route. According to that theory, developed especially by W. Montgomery Watt and prominent in the popular biography of Muḥammad by Maxime Rodinson, the impact of trade on Mecca led to a social crisis which both generated, and ensured the success of, ideas associated with the new religion preached by the Prophet. The concept of the trade route passing through Mecca has also been useful in accounting for the penetration of monotheistic ideas and stories into the Ḥijāz.[19]

[17] Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II, esp. 89–125 (=*Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 88–130).
[18] A. J. Wensinck, *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina*, 2nd edn. Berlin 1982, 73: 'Generally, posterity was obliged to trace back to Muhammad all customs and institutions of later Islam' (cited by F. E. Peters, 'The Quest of the Historical Muhammad', *IJMES*, 23 (1991), 291–315, at 306).
[19] W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford 1953; M. Rodinson, *Mahomet*, Paris 1961 (2nd English edn., *Muhammad*, Harmondsworth 1996).

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The theory has become part of the orthodoxy of modern non-Muslim, and even some Muslim, scholarship on the origins of Islam, and is to be found elaborated in many textbooks on Islam or the history of the Arabs. The weaknesses regarding evidence and logic have been clearly presented in Patrica Crone's detailed refutation of the trade route theory, and her arguments underline the difficulties of accounting for the origins of Islam in early seventh-century central western Arabia.[20] Suggesting another such theory without fundamentally rethinking our ideas about how Islam developed is unlikely to get us very far.

Such theories, which typically emphasise the role of one man and envisage a restricted time-span and location, seem too confined in their understanding of the development of a major religious tradition. It is rather as if we were to account for the rise of Protestantism simply by discussing Martin Luther and his historical environment. But in that case at least we would not need to rely mainly on sources only available to us in versions made more than a century after Luther's death and reflecting only the understanding of Protestants.

In the case of Islam,we probably need to abandon the expectation of reconstructing its origins with any more detail or precision than we can those of Christianity or Rabbinical Judaism. In the nineteenth century Ernest Renan was able to make the well-known statement that, unlike other religions whose origins were cradled in mystery, Islam was born in the full light of history. Research since then, however, has shown that the problems concerning the evidence for the emergence of Islam are just as great as those for that of the genesis of the other major forms of monotheism. Instead we should seek general theories and models which can make sense of the evidence in different ways. The argument of this book is intended to support an approach to the origins of Islam that treats Islam in a way comparable with other developments in the monotheist tradition and which does justice to Islam as a part of that tradition.

There are a number of general ideas and theoretical starting-points underlying the argument of the following chapters. The first concerns the way in which new religions emerge within the monotheistic tradition.

One of the main themes in the sociology of religion, following on from the work of Troeltsch and Weber in the early decades of the twentieth century, has concerned the emergence and development of religious groups designated by terms such as 'sect', 'denomination' and 'church'. Sociologists, who in the main have studied the development of Christianity in modern societies, have been concerned with questions about the character of the groups thus designated, how and why sects form within larger groups, and why different groups

[20] Crone, *Meccan Trade*. One of Crone's suggestions, 196–9 (with supporting evidence), is that the trading centre and the sanctuary that Muslim tradition locates at Mecca might in fact have been situated much further north. The application, by the tradition, of the relevant material to Mecca might then be understood as part of the elaboration by early Islam of an account of its origins in the Ḥijāz.

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