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0521651654 - The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History

G. R. Hawting

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The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam

From Polemic to History

In this book G. R. Hawting supports the view that the emergence of Islam owed more to debates and disputes among monotheists than to arguments with idolaters and polytheists. He argues that the 'associators' (*mushrikūn*) attacked in the Koran were monotheists whose beliefs and practices were judged to fall short of true monotheism and were portrayed polemically as idolatry. In commentaries on the Koran and other traditional literature, however, this polemic was read literally, and the 'associators' were identified as idolatrous and polytheistic Arab contemporaries and neighbours of Muhammad. Adopting a comparative religious perspective, the author considers why modern scholarship generally has been willing to accept the traditional image of the Koranic 'associators', he discusses the way in which the idea of idolatry has been used in Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and he questions the historical value of the traditional accounts of pre-Islamic Arab religion. The implications of these arguments for the way we think about the origins and nature of Islam should make this work engaging and stimulating for both students and scholars.

G. R. HAWTING is Senior Lecturer in the History of the Near and Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His publications include *The First Dynasty of Islam* (1986) and (with A. A. Shereef) *Approaches to the Qur'an* (1993).

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for

Mary Cecilia († 30.3.99) and Ernest James Hawting († 30.9.83)

and

Mabel and William Eddy

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Idols and images

Have none in usage

(Of what mettel so ever they be)

Graved or carved;

My wyle be observed

Or els can ye not love me.

From: William Gray of Reading (first half of sixteenth century), 'The Fantassie of Idolatrie', quoted by Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*, New Haven and London 1992, 408–9

In vain with lavish kindness

The gifts of God are shewn;

The heathen in his blindness

Bows down to wood and stone.

Reginald Heber (1783–1826) Bishop of Calcutta

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Preface

In the prologue to his *Studying Classical Judaism*, Jacob Neusner identifies what he sees as the most significant recent theoretical development in the study of the emergence of Judaism (and Christianity) during roughly the first six centuries AD. Dealing with the spread of such study from the seminary to the secular university, and with the involvement in it there of believing Jews and Christians of different sorts, he selects as most important a rejection of the simple ‘debunking’ which he thinks was characteristic of the early modern study of religion. ‘What scholars [in the second half of the twentieth century] have wanted to discover is not what lies the sources tell but what truth they convey – and what kind of truth’ (J. Neusner, *Studying Classical Judaism. A Primer*, Louisville, Ky. 1991, esp. 20–1).

It is clear that Neusner has in mind a diminution of the importance of questions such as ‘what really happened?’ and ‘do we believe what the sources tell us happened?’, questions which he describes as ‘centred upon issues of historical fact’. In their place he finds a growing interest in questions about the world-view that the religious texts and other sources convey: ‘how these documents bear meaning for those for whom they were written – and for those who now revere them’. Part of this process is a realisation that ‘scriptures are not true or false, our interpretations are what are true or false’.

The contrast Neusner sets up cannot be an absolute one. If scriptures are not true or false, interpretations are rarely necessarily or demonstrably the one or the other. While historians of religion are not usually interested in debunking as such, if the significance of a text or a story for a particular religious group is to be understood, then attention has to be paid to historical questions such as the circumstances in which the text or story came into existence, and those questions have implications for the way we understand what the text or story tells us.

The relevance of these reflexions for the present work is that it aims to take seriously the character of Islam as a part of the monotheist religious tradition, not merely to question the widely accepted view that Islam arose initially as an attack on Arab polytheism and idolatry. That Islam is indeed related to Judaism and Christianity as part of the Middle Eastern, Abrahamic or

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Semitic tradition of monotheism seems so obvious and is so often said that it might be wondered why it was thought necessary to repeat it. The reason is that although it is often said, acceptance of Islam as a representative of the monotheist religious tradition is not always accompanied by willingness to think through the implications of the statement. Part of the reason for that is that Islam's own account of its origins seems to undercut it.

Islam's own tradition portrays the religion as originating in a rather remote part of Arabia, practically beyond the borders of the monotheistic world as it existed at the beginning of the seventh century AD. Initially, according to the tradition, it arose as the result of a revelation made by God to the Prophet Muḥammad and its first target was the religion and society within which Muḥammad lived. That society's religion is described as polytheistic and idolatrous in a very literal and crude way. Only after the Arabs had been persuaded or forced to abandon their polytheism and idolatry was Islam able to spread beyond Arabia into lands the majority of the people of which were at least nominally monotheists.

It will be argued in the introduction that that account of its genesis seems to set Islam apart from other versions of monotheism (notably Rabbinical Judaism and Christianity). That is so even in those non-Muslim reworkings that interpret the initial revelation as, for example, a psychological or physiological experience, or seek to introduce economic, social and political explanations. Other forms of the monotheist religious tradition may be understood historically – at one level – as the outcome of debates and conflicts within the tradition: idealistically, as the result of developing awareness of the implications and problems of the deceptively simple idea that there is one God. In contrast, Islam by its own account seems to emerge within a society that is overwhelmingly polytheistic and idolatrous, and remote from the contemporary centres of monotheist religion. It is as if the initial emergence of monotheism, now also including knowledge of much of monotheist history and tradition, occurred independently for a second time. Setting Islam apart from the rest of monotheism in this way can be a source of strength or of weakness in situations of religious polemic.

On the one hand, to present Islam as originating in the way tradition describes it underlines the importance of the revelation and the Prophet and counters any suggestion that it was merely a reworking of one or more existing forms of monotheism. It might be argued that since Mecca, the crucible of the new religion, was virtually devoid of Christianity, Judaism or any other type of monotheism, Islam could not have originated as a result of influences or borrowings from other monotheists. Those things that Islam shares with other forms of monotheism are not evidence, according to this view, that it evolved out of one or more of those forms, or as a result of historical contact; rather they are elements of the truth that other forms of monotheism happen to have preserved in the midst of their corruption of the revelation with which they too began. That revelation was repeated to Muḥammad, and his follow-

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ers, unlike those of Moses, Jesus and other prophets, preserved it intact and in its pristine form. (This understanding of the value to Islam of its own account of its origins is supposition: I do not know of any statement in Muslim sources which makes the argument explicit. On the other hand, there is – especially Christian – polemic against Islam which portrays it as a Christian heresy. That earlier prophets had been given the same revelation as Muḥammad but that the communities of those earlier prophets had either rejected the revelation completely, or accepted it but then corrupted it, is a commonplace of Muslim tradition.)

Against that, however, non-Muslim monotheists have been able to use the Muslim traditional account to deny Islam a status equal to that of their own version of the common tradition. Islam could be presented as a version of the truth adapted to the needs of pagan Arabs and bearing within it some of the marks of the idolatrous and pagan society within which it originated. In this version, it is often said that the Koran and Islam contain mistaken and erroneous versions of the common monotheistic ideas and stories because the Prophet had either deliberately or unconsciously misapprehended them when taking them from his sources. These views are common in pre-modern and modern accounts (many of them not overtly polemical) of Islam by non-Muslims and the impression they give is that Muslims follow a somewhat crude and backward version of the truth.

This book questions how far Islam arose in arguments with real polytheists and idolaters, and suggests that it was concerned rather with other monotheists whose monotheism it saw as inadequate and attacked polemically as the equivalent of idolatry. It is this, it is assumed here, which explains that emphasis on monotheism, the need constantly to struggle to preserve it and prevent its all too easy corruption, that has been a constant theme of Islam. Naturally, it is not impossible that such an emphasis could result from an initial struggle with a real idolatry, but ‘idolatry’ is a recurrent term in polemic between monotheists and by the time of the emergence of Islam monotheism, in one form or another, was the dominant religious idea in the Middle East.

To come back to Neusner: he defines the fundamental question facing the student of early Judaism as, *What do we know and how do we know it?* A necessary preliminary to that is to ask, *What did we think we knew and why did we think we knew it?*

I am conscious of many who influenced me and helped in the writing of this book. For several years the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Institute of Asian and African Studies has held regular colloquia on the theme ‘From Jahiliyya to Islam’, in which many of the leading scholars of early and medieval Islam have participated. Although I am sure many of them will disagree with my arguments, I owe a great debt to those who have organized and invited me to those colloquia and to those colleagues in the field who have presented papers there relevant to the theme of this book. If I do not mention individuals here or

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below, that is partly because many of them will appear in my footnotes and bibliography, but mainly not to discourage review editors from inviting them to review this book. A version of parts of chapter 4 of this book was given as a paper at the 1996 colloquium and was published in *JSAI*, 21 (1997), 21–41.

An earlier version of chapter 3 was written at the invitation of the editors of *Israel Oriental Studies*, 17 (1997), an issue devoted to Jews and Christians in the world of classical Islam, and appeared there as pp. 107–26. I am very grateful for their invitation and the opportunity it offered.

Another opportunity to try out some of the arguments used here was provided by a conference held at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in May 1997, entitled ‘Reverence for the Word: Scriptural Exegesis in Medieval Judaism, Christianity and Islam’. It is hoped that a book arising from that conference will appear shortly. Again, I thank the organisers for the opportunity offered and for their generous hospitality.

More generally, I am aware that many of the suggestions made here arise from contact over several years with Professor John Wansbrough. In his *Sectarian Milieu* he isolated idolatry as one of the topoi of monotheist sectarian polemic, and in *Quranic Studies* remarked that ‘the growth of a polemical motif into a historical fact is a process hardly requiring demonstration’. It was his stress on the importance of Islam for western culture and for the monotheistic religious tradition that first inspired my own interest in the study of Islam.

To my colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies I am also grateful, for their continuing support and stimulation and especially for allowing me a period of study leave in 1993–4 when I was able to formulate some of the arguments put forward here.

Drafts of parts or the whole were read by my wife, Joyce, the Rev. Paul Hunt, Dr Helen Speight, Dr Norman Calder whose death on 13 February 1998 was both a personal and a scholarly loss, Dr Tamima Bayhom Daou, and Professor Michael Cook. The last also served, coincidentally, as one of the two professional readers asked to evaluate the work by the Cambridge University Press, and he responded with a list of expectedly acute remarks and criticisms; the other reader, still unknown to me, also made many helpful suggestions and comments. To all of these I am indebted; they have all contributed to improve, I hope, what was once an even more imperfect text.

Finally, I am grateful to Marigold Acland of Cambridge University Press for help and encouragement.

Needless to say, faults, mistakes, infelicities, etc., are my own responsibility.

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The transliteration generally follows the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* system with the two modifications customary in works in English (i.e., *q* instead of *ḳ* and *j* instead of *ḍj*).

In names, 'b.' is short for 'ibn' = 'son of'.

Dates are usually given according to both the Islamic (Hijrī) and the Christian (or Common) calendars; e.g., 206/821–2 = 206 AH (Anno Hijrae) corresponding to parts of 821–2 AD. When not thus given, it should be clear from the context which calendar is intended.

Abbreviations

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>AIPHOS</i> | <i>Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves</i> |
| <i>AKM</i> | <i>Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes</i> |
| <i>AO</i> | <i>Acta Orientalia</i> |
| <i>AR</i> | <i>Archiv für Religionswissenschaft</i> |
| <i>Aṣṅām-Atallah</i> | W. Atallah, <i>Les idoles de Hicham ibn al-Kalbī</i> |
| <i>Aṣṅām K-R</i> | Rosa Klinke-Rosenberger, <i>Das Götzenbuch. Kitāb al-Aṣṅām des Ibn al-Kalbī</i> , Leipzig 1941 |
| <i>BIFAO</i> | <i>Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale</i> |
| <i>BMGS</i> | <i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i> |
| <i>BSOAS</i> | <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> |
| <i>CIS</i> | <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum</i> |
| <i>EI, EI1, EI2</i> | <i>Encyclopaedia of Islam (1st, 2nd edition)</i> |
| <i>EJ</i> | <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> , Jerusalem 1971– |
| <i>GAS</i> | F. Sezgin, <i>Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums</i> |
| <i>GS</i> | Ignaz Goldziher, <i>Gesammelte Schriften</i> |
| <i>ERE</i> | <i>Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics</i> , ed. James Hastings |
| <i>IJMES</i> | <i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i> |
| <i>IOS</i> | <i>Israel Oriental Studies</i> |
| <i>IS</i> | <i>Islamic Studies</i> |
| <i>Isl.</i> | <i>Der Islam</i> |
| <i>JAAR</i> | <i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i> |
| <i>JJS</i> | <i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i> |
| <i>JNES</i> | <i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i> |
| <i>JRAS</i> | <i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i> |
| <i>JSAI</i> | <i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i> |
| <i>JSS</i> | <i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i> |
| <i>MTSR</i> | <i>Method and Theory in the Study of Religion</i> |
| <i>MW</i> | <i>Muslim World</i> |
| <i>PSAS</i> | <i>Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies</i> |
| <i>RB</i> | <i>Revue Biblique</i> |
| <i>REA</i> | <i>Répertoire Chronologique d'Épigraphie Arabe</i> |

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| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>REI</i> | <i>Revue des Études Islamiques</i> |
| <i>REJ</i> | <i>Revue des Études Juives</i> |
| <i>RES</i> | <i>Répertoire d'Épigraphie Sémitique</i> |
| <i>RHR</i> | <i>Revue de l'Histoire des Religions</i> |
| <i>RSR</i> | <i>Recherches de Science Religieuse</i> |
| Ryckmans, <i>NP</i> | G. Ryckmans, <i>Les Noms Propres Sud-Sémitiques</i> |
| Ryckmans, <i>RAP</i> | G. Ryckmans, <i>Les Religions Arabes Préislamiques</i> |
| <i>SI</i> | <i>Studia Islamica</i> |
| <i>SWJA</i> | <i>South West Journal of Anthropology</i> |
| <i>Ṭab., Tafsīr</i> (Bulaq) | Ṭabarī, <i>Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān</i> , Bulaq 1323–8 AH |
| <i>Ṭab., Tafsīr</i> (Cairo) | Ṭabarī, <i>Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān</i> , Cairo 1954– |
| <i>VOJ</i> | <i>Vienna Oriental Journal</i> |
| Wellhausen, <i>Reste</i> | J. Wellhausen, <i>Reste arabischen Heidentums</i> , 2nd edition |
| <i>ZDMG</i> | <i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i> |