CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The millenium or so before the rise of Islam in the early seventh century CE was a period of enormously rich social and cultural development in the lands that form the subject of this book. So much is probably true of any thousand-year interval of human history, but this particular epoch was of special importance in that it saw the crystallization of the religious traditions which have survived into the modern era, and which formed the backdrop to the emergence of the new religion which traces its origins to the preaching of Muhammad in western Arabia.

Marshall Hodgson, in his monumental history of *The Venture of Islam*, identified the period between 800 and 200 BCE, which the German philosopher Karl Jaspers had referred to as the "Axial Age," as decisive in creating the world out of which Islam eventually emerged.[1] Throughout the Eurasian landmass, the Axial Age saw the coalescence of a number of distinct cultures, regionally-based but linked by both trading networks and a common core of principles: the Graeco-Roman or Mediterranean, the Indian, the Chinese. This was an era of leading religious figures and of the production of foundational religious texts in all of these regions: the teaching of Lao-Tzu, Buddha, the Greek philosophers, the Hebrew prophets, and the compilation of the Upanishads in India. From the standpoint of the religious traditions which are studied in this book, the year 200 BCE may be somewhat arbitrary, since the subsequent centuries were, at least in the Near East, equally decisive regarding the articulation of identifiable religious traditions. Indeed, it was the period between 200 BCE and 600 CE – the later portion of what is usually called the "Hellenistic period" and the centuries which comprise the era known as "late antiquity" – which saw the spread of those cultural and religious patterns which are loosely identified as Hellenism; their impact on virtually all social strata throughout the Near East; the fuller articulation of rabbinic Judaism in the academies of Mesopotamia; and of course the career of Jesus and the subsequent emergence of a distinctive Christian faith.

If the millenium or so prior to the rise of Islam had an "axial" character, so too, in a geographic sense, did the region of the Near East. General histories of the Near

[1] Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, in 3 volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1.111f.

East or of the world commonly speak of the Fertile Crescent, that arc of territory stretching from the Nile River in Egypt to the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq, as a "crossroads," as the meeting point of three continents, but the characterization is no less true for its overuse. The cultures produced in this region, and in those territories around its periphery (including Anatolia, the peninsula of Arabia, and Iran as far as the Oxus River) which played such critical roles in its historical development, mingled productively if not always entirely freely. Despite their latent hostility to the "barbarians," many Greeks believed that much of their civilization had been borrowed from the East, and even if Athena was not exactly "black" (in the somewhat polemical phrase of a controversial study), it is true that Greek culture owed a considerable debt to the peoples of the east Mediterranean littoral – for example, to the Phoenicians for their alphabet.[2] The conquests of Alexander the Great, and the subsequent penetration of Hellenism into Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and even lands further to the east, "pulled Hellenism's center of gravity sharply eastward."[3]

The crossroads was not without its obstacles. In the centuries before the rise of Islam, the Near East was dominated by two rival states. The Byzantine Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, *was* the old Roman Empire, or what was left of it. Across its eastern border, in the eastern half of the Fertile Crescent and in the lands beyond, lay the empire of the Sasanians, an Iranian dynasty which had come to power in the third century. The two states were bitter rivals, and for much of late antiquity were at war. Their political rivalry, however, did not completely preclude meaningful cultural contact. The Sasanians, even at the height of their conflict with Rome in the sixth century, relentlessly borrowed from Byzantine culture everything from bath-houses to systems of taxation, and the shah Khusrau I Anushirvan (r. 531–579) gleefully welcomed the pagan Greek philosophers whom the Roman emperor Justinian had expelled from their Academy in Athens.[4] Looking back from the vantage point of the Muslim conquests, rather than from the imperial capitals of the two empires, it is equally important to stress not just the Fertile Crescent's character as a crossroads, but also its political vulnerability to powers on its periphery, its historical role as a "vortex that pulls inward and fuses what lies around it."[5] In the millenium or so before the rise of Islam, the region was usually dominated by states based just beyond its physical boundaries, including the Roman and Sasanian empires. The conquests of the Muslim Arabs, who in the seventh century burst into the Fertile Crescent from the remote and inhospitable desert peninsula to the south, represent simply one more example of far older historical patterns.

[2] Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, volume 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U.P., 1987).

[3] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 61–2.

[4] Patricia Crone, "Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran: Journal of the British Institute for Persian Studies* 29 (1991), 30; Averil Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 101; Richard Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1963), 218.

[5] A point made brilliantly by Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 17–18.

Central to the character of Near Eastern society in these centuries was the rise of an urban, mercantile economy. Of course, no pre-modern society reached anything close to the levels of urbanization in our industrial and post-industrial world, and it is worth remembering at the outset that many of the religious developments described in this book reached the ninety percent or more of the population which was rural in attenuated and problematic form. Nonetheless, cities there were, cities which were frequently dominated by merchants and others involved in a commercial economy, and often it was in them, or in response to their needs and uncertainties, that the religious developments which survived and which seemed important to later generations took shape. It was in this period, for example, that the use of currency became a widespread phenomenon, and it is surely not coincidental that two of the more memorable episodes from the accounts of Jesus' life – his encounter with the moneychangers in the Jerusalem temple, and his remark about rendering unto Caesar that which was Caesar's – involved coins.

The urban commercial economy had a decisive impact on religious developments of the era. In the first place, the existence of regional and trans-regional trading networks discouraged cultural and religious parochialism. They helped to make possible, for example, the emergence of traditions which claimed adherents beyond any one city or locality: the household god, or the tutelary god of a city, gradually was eclipsed by (or identified with) deities with a more catholic appeal. Similarly, they encouraged the spread of religious ideas from one place to another. It comes as no surprise that the missionary activities of several of the religions of late antiquity – Manichaeism, for example, and later Islam – were closely associated with merchants. Secondly, and more importantly, urban commercial economies tended to make social inequities more conspicuous and brought social injustices into sharper relief. It was to such problems, made worse by the permanently shifting character of urban life, that many of the new religions addressed themselves.

Although he seems to have glossed over some of the more nuanced questions regarding economic structures and social class, Hodgson drew in a general way upon the sociological analysis of Max Weber; and – if we allow ourselves at the outset to paint with a rather broad brush – it will serve us as well, in part because it informs some of the most basic questions about the origins and character of Islam.[6] Despite the significant differences between the religions of Buddha, the rabbis, and others, they shared many characteristics. Arising against the background of injustice, inequality, and social dislocation, they pointedly spoke to

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[6] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), esp. Chaps. 6 and 7. Note that Weber drew a distinction between the religious orientation of "commercial" and "capitalist" classes, defining capitalism as "capital continuously and rationally employed in a productive enterprise for the acquisition of profit" (92–3); it was the latter which were especially troubled by social injustice and inequity, and so were attuned to religions of a profoundly ethical (and frequently prophetic) character. His analysis (and that of Hodgson), however, included many merchants under the "capitalist" heading.

the individual conscience, and so had a "confessional" character. Produced by increasingly literate societies, they were frequently affirmed by scriptures, both those for which a divine origin was claimed (the Torah, say, or the Koran) and those of a more exegetical character (the Talmud), as well as those of a more indeterminate nature (the Zoroastrian *Avestan* texts and the surviving commentaries in which they are embedded). A corollary is that, however spontaneous their origins (and frequently they originated as reactions against established traditions), they tended to adopt increasingly systematic form, whether the formal hieratic institutions of the Christian church, or the rabbis' more decentralized and "democratic" structures of authority.[7] Despite radically different solutions to the problems raised by an unjust world, they increasingly looked to a life after death, or to some eschatological future, as the locus of justice and salvation. This was true even of a religion such as Judaism, which, succumbing to the powerful gravitational pull of late antique Hellenism, moved beyond the this-worldly focus of its core Biblical texts.

Two general trends among the religions of the end of the classical and the late antique worlds deserve special mention. First, they tended to be closely associated with states and empires.[8] The most obvious example is Christianity, whose identification with the Roman Empire began under the emperor Constantine (d. 337) and was complete before the reign of his sixth-century successor Justinian. The attachment of Rome's great historical rival, the Sasanian Empire of Iran, to Zoroastrianism developed at an uneven pace, but by the sixth and seventh centuries was substantially complete, and the almost complete collapse of the Zoroastrian community in the centuries following the Islamic conquests was due in part to the destruction of the state structure which had supported it. Islam itself from the beginning represented a close if problematic fusion of political and religious authority, in which condition it once again constituted less a rupture with the Christian Roman past than a continuation of one of the major themes of late antiquity, an opportunity, as it were, to do Constantine one better.[9] Here again, for all its peculiarity, Judaism was not altogether different. Isolated Jewish kingdoms or principalities emerged in various times and places – in Armenia, Chalcis, Cappadocia, Iturea, and Abilene in the first century CE; among the Himyarites, in southern Arabia, during the sixth century; or among the Khazars of Central Asia in the eighth – and the Jewish revolts in Palestine in 66 and 132 CE represented a striking amalgamation of political and religious authority.[10] If the other great religion to emerge from the late antique Near East, Manichaeism, failed to

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[7] Cf. Peter Brown, "The Religious Crisis of the Third Century A.D.," in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 83.

[8] On this, see now Garth Fowden's magisterial study, *Empire to Commonwealth*.

[9] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 152f, drawing closely on Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[10] Jacob Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964), 61. On the Jewish kingdom in southern Arabia, see Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia from Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, South

establish a lasting relationship with one of the states of the region, it was not for lack of trying.

A second point concerns the universalist character and claims of the religions of late antiquity. The adherents of the religions of late antiquity – or at least those adherents who took their religion seriously – increasingly associated their faith with a truth which applied to all the world, and not just to a particular people or place. Surely one of the features of Christianity which appealed to Constantine and his successors was its universalism, for it allowed the emperor to present himself as the representative or instrument of a God who stood over all of humankind, a God who could reveal to Constantine his sign and commend it to him as the banner under which to carry out his military campaigns.[11] This union of Roman state and Christian religion, which reached fruition in the early Byzantine state, in fact built upon a connection between religious truth and political power which was implicit in the cult of the emperor as it developed during the centuries immediately preceding Constantine's conversion.[12] The ideal of an association of universalist faith and triumphal state percolated widely through late Roman society. In a famous passage from his Christian cosmography, an early sixth-century Alexandrian merchant named Cosmas glossed a verse from the Book of Daniel which he took to refer to the rough coincidence of the establishment of the Roman Empire and the birth of Christ.

> For while Christ was yet in the womb, the Roman empire received its power from God as the servant of the dispensation which Christ introduced, since at that very time the accession was proclaimed of the unending line of the Augusti by whose command a census was made which embraced the whole world. … The empire of the Romans thus participates in the dignity of the Kingdom of the Lord Christ, seeing that it transcends, as far as can be in this state of existence, every other power, and will remain unconquered until the final consummation.[13]

And once again, the rise and success of Islam followed rather than digressed from older patterns. It is doubtful that Islam began as anything more than the monotheistic religion of the Arabs. Of course it did eventually become universalist; the existence and permanence of a territorially enormous and explicitly Muslim state probably made that transformation inevitable.

The social dimension was equally significant, as merchants crossing international borders cultivated a truly ecumenical outlook. But more importantly, monotheism itself must have contributed to the phenomenon of universalism, since

Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 38f; on the Khazars, see *EI*[2], art. "Khazar" (by W. Barthold and P. B. Golden); on the Palestinian revolts, see Fergus Millar, "Empire, Community and Culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987), 143–64, esp. 147–8.

[11] The universalist claims of Christianity underlie a very interesting letter of Constantine's to the Persian emperor Shapur, expressing horror at Zoroastrian ritual and commending Iranian Christians to the shah's care. See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 636–7.

[12] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, esp. 38, 81–2, 87–8.

[13] Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography*, trans. J. W. McCrindle (London: Hakluyt Society, 1897), 70–1.

the belief in a single god by definition constitutes a narrowing of the scope of what constitutes truth.[14] Polytheistic religious systems by their very nature acknowledge a multiplicity of paths to truth, or salvation, or whatever is the goal of the religious enterprise. The belief in a single god, by contrast, can easily become an assertion that that deity can be understood and approached in only one way. And monotheism, or at least a tendency toward belief in a single god, permeated the late antique world, by no means exclusively in its Jewish or Christian form. The various local and national religions, even the colorful and exuberant polytheism of Egypt, were not immune to the force of the monotheistic ideal.

> O God most glorious, called by many a name,
> Nature's great King, through endless years the same;
> Omnipotence, who by thy just decree
> Controllest all, hail, Zeus, for unto thee
> Behooves thy creatures in all lands to call,

begins the famous "Hymn to Zeus" of the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (d. 232 BCE).[15] In the Graeco-Roman world, it was the philosophers whose monotheism was most noticeable, but even explicitly polytheistic texts, such as the poems of Homer, and the cultic polytheism of which they formed the basis, do not preclude a more inclusive understanding of divinity in which localized and anthropomorphic gods were merely particular and imperfect manifestations of a single divine power.[16] The situation in Arabia in this period was extremely complex, but even there, on the remote periphery of the Mediterranean world, various monotheisms were known in the years before the beginning of Muhammad's ministry.

From monotheism, it is but a short step to an explicit, and potentially militant, universalism. The example of Judaism in this regard is somewhat problematic, since Jewish monotheism was coupled with the association of Judaism with a particular ethnic group. Even so, there was a strong universalizing streak in the Judaism of late antiquity. One should not overstress the simplistic contrast between the tolerant polytheism of the classical Mediterranean world and the more repressive orthodoxies of the monotheistic faiths. On the other hand, the confessional religions of late antiquity were by nature increasingly exclusive: adherence to one automatically excluded identification with another, even if, as we shall see, it was not always possible or easy to draw fine lines between one

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[14] Cf. the remarks of Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Religious Contacts in Byzantine Palestine," *Numen* 36 (1989), 16–42, esp. 23, and Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 106–7.

[15] *Essential Works of Stoicism*, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Bantam, 1965), 51.

[16] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 38–41; Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 52; H. Idris Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1953), 1–24, esp. 7–16; E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 116–18; John Peter Kenney, "Monotheistic and Polytheistic Elements in Classical Mediterranean Spirituality," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 269–92, esp. 273.

tradition and the next. (This leaves open, furthermore, the analytically separate issue of religious syncretism.)

Confessions which exclude others are a necessary ingredient of a world of distinct religious identities and of competing faiths. And the world we are investigating was, as much as anything else, a world of missionaries, proselytization, and religious competition. Conversion and initiation – more generally, the making of *individual choices* on matters of religion – were common themes in the religious literature of the age, from Apuleius's fictional account of the experiences of an initiate into the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis, to St. Augustine's autobiographical narrative of his own conversion to catholic Christianity and a life of religious discipline. The dominant factor in the religious turmoil of late antiquity was the rise of Christianity, and the competition between Christianity and paganism was largely of Christian manufacture.[17] But the period was more generally an "age of anxiety."[18] In a work such as Augustine's *Confessions* we can trace the psychological dimensions of the religious stress characteristic of the age. In what follows we will try to elucidate briefly the identities and parameters of the traditions involved in the religious competition of late antiquity.

[17] Glen Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 5–6.
[18] E. R. Dodds used the phrase to describe the third century, but it is just as descriptive of the ensuing centuries. And cf. Brown, *Religion and Society*, 80: "The 'Age of Anxiety' became, increasingly, the age of converts."