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# Remapping Qur'ānic Studies

## *Histories and Methods*

It is an illustration of the rule, and not an exception to it, that Cambridge University rejected Wilfred Cantwell Smith's PhD dissertation because of its inclusive treatment of Muslims in India and its Marxist critique of the British Raj.<sup>1</sup> Smith, the most influential scholar of Islam and comparative religion of the last century, was an unyielding critic of intellectual colonialism. In approaching the intricate history of Islam, he did not subscribe to historical revisionism or, for that matter, to any other so-called method.<sup>2</sup> He did not see Islam as an alien object that scholars needed an authorized method to approach. Rather, he studied Islam as an intimate subject, as a fresh source for religious thought. For Smith, a combination of critique and comparison was the only way to avoid flying too close to the sun via intellectual hubris. "Interdisciplinary studies," he maintained, "are the ladder to get out of the hole into which the true scholar never falls."<sup>3</sup>

Like national borders, disciplinary boundaries are not always a thing so much as a series of practices for managing difference. There is not always a gate, but there is much gatekeeping. To start with, Smith calls attention to the politics of a renewed *ʿaṣabiyya*, a group solidarity or mode of turf protection that characterizes the network of Euro-American scholarship on Islam today. We only know of Smith's case because he persevered after what must have been a soul-crushing rejection of his thesis. He went on to become one of the most distinguished professors of Islam and comparative religion in the world—assuming numerous academic posts but spending most of his career at Harvard (1964–73, 1978–84)—until he died in 2000. The records of Smith's case notwithstanding, we cannot be sure of how many other junior scholars of Islam have dared to think differently and have, throughout the years, been denied their degrees or, more likely, been told to change topics or methods at Cambridge, Oxford, or the University of London's

School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), as well as at other bastions of scholarship on Islam. To understand the case of Cambridge's rejection of Smith's path-breaking scholarship, we have to understand the institutional landscape, historical and contemporary, of the field in which Smith wrote.

The academic field of Qur'ānic studies in the West was born at a peculiar moment in European history. The attempt to fill a knowledge gap of Islam grew out of a global turning point and a cultural crisis. Regardless of Europe's ideological predispositions toward Islam—many European scholars demonstrated a familiarity with the Qur'ān that was much more sophisticated than that of scholars in the United States, where the needs for public diplomacy and civilizational change loomed large after the fog of two world wars, of decolonization, and of a nascent world order. The need to understand foreign cultures, especially cultures unknown to study in the United States, became increasingly urgent. Europe, which was already undergoing its own set of cultural and intellectual crises, was the obvious supplier of what was needed. At that time in the United States, only a few departments had ancient Near East civilization programs. The most prominent were Columbia, Chicago, Yale, and Princeton. Although Princeton established the Department of Oriental Arabic and Literatures as early as 1927, and launched its first program in Arabic and Islamic studies under the heroic efforts of its pioneer historian, Philip Hatti (1886–1979), it still needed a specialized scholar in Islam and particularly in the Qur'ān to complement its strong Bible studies program.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s, prominent American universities began to invite European secular academics to give lectures or to teach in the field of Islamic studies in the United States. When the first official conference on Islam took place at the University of Chicago in 1942, it had the title “The Near East: Problems and Prospects.” Ever since that conference, up to and including the present, the word “problem” has become the cognate word for Islam in US politics and academia.<sup>5</sup> This despite moderates such as H. A. R. Gibb, who wrote at a time when many scholars did not see a “problem” with the colonization of Muslim nations and the resultant rise of militant dictatorships. Indeed, there was “a common conviction,” Gibb wrote, “that these problems stem only partially from external causes, but mainly from factors within Middle Eastern society itself,” and “it is not only by careful study that the West can help,” he went on.<sup>6</sup> “If the Middle Eastern countries must work out their own solutions,” Gibb concluded, “the Western countries alone can relieve the psychological tensions which complicate their task.”<sup>7</sup>

But the West would continue to study Islam and the Islamic world by way of problematization.<sup>8</sup> The opening of new positions in Near Eastern studies, and the continuing migration of European scholars to the United States, marked a palpable shift in academic centers of power by the 1950s. Established European professors were appointed to open programs and spearheaded new projects in the then-infant fields of Arabic and Islamic studies. Before Gibb moved from Oxford to accept his new position as the James Richard Jewett Professor of Arabic at Harvard

in 1955, the United States had no academic infrastructure for studying Islam or the Middle East; nor was Europe deeply invested in its knowledge of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula or classical Arabic. The question of “deep” knowledge haunts Qur'ānic studies to the present day, perhaps precisely to the extent that Islam remains a “problem” to think through.

In considering the history of European-informed scholarship on the Qur'ān, one cannot emphasize enough the significance of Theodor Nöldeke's 1860's doctoral dissertation, “Geschichte des Qorān,” and its lasting impact on shaping Western scholarship on the origins of the Qur'ān over the last century and until today. Nöldeke's work was important enough to merit the republication, between 1909 and 1938, of a second enlarged edition in three coedited volumes by his successors Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer, and Otto Pretzl. Nöldeke's work thus became the cornerstone for writing a positivist history of the Qur'ān and critiquing, with others, both the authenticity and reliability of the immense archive of Muslim sources. More importantly, at least until the early 1970s and before the rise of the overtly “censorious” historical thought of John Wansbrough and Patricia Crone, as I explain below, Nöldeke's work still established the intellectual framework for all academic research on the origins of Islam, at times extending and at times challenging existing research on the text of the Qur'ān (Blachère) or the life of the Prophet (Guillaume, Watt).<sup>9</sup>

What must be historically recorded is that the few decades following World War II were the time when the humanities in Europe, especially in Germany, engulfed in post-Auschwitz guilt, sought to make amends to its criminal othering and persecution of Jews. But if anything, the *Historikerstreit* (historians' dispute of the 1980s) has exposed Germany's moral failure to heed the historical lessons of the Holocaust and learn to interrogate its own categorical prejudice against the other. It is in the name of the historical-critical method, which I discuss in detail in the following chapter, that Germany “othered” and divided human beings into two categories: Aryans (the Germanic people), whom it considered “genetically superior”; and the “inferior races,” which included Jews, Slavs, Roma, Sinti, as well as Africans, Arabs, Turks, and Asians who hailed from Muslim lands.<sup>10</sup>

The first wave of European scholars of Arabic and Islam appointed in the United States included senior orientalistes such as Gustav von Grunebaum at Chicago (1942), then UCLA (1957), George Lenczowski at Berkeley (1952), and Gibb at Harvard (1955). This wave constituted a strong bedrock and powerful network of Euro-American scholarship on Islam in America and triggered a tradition of subsequent waves. In this new European exodus to America, well-established universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, and SOAS continued to be the “safe” exportation hub of orientalistes in American institutions. Joseph Schacht (who taught Islamic law at Oxford from 1946 to 1954) assumed a position at Columbia University from 1957 to 1969; Bernard Lewis joined Princeton in 1974. In 1986, Lewis's student, Michael Cook, was appointed Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies at

Princeton. In 1997, another student of Lewis, Patricia Crone, was appointed to the Princeton's Institute of Advanced Studies as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Islamic History. Both Cook and Crone were students of John Wansbrough, the Harvard-educated revisionist, whose unflattering argument against the sources of Islam is even further misrepresented and taken out of context in their work.<sup>11</sup>

To be fair, Wansbrough came into Qur'ānic studies with a strong background and training in biblical criticism. In early twentieth-century Europe, biblical criticism underwent a seismic bifurcation, with clashing views on Christian historiography. These clashes resulted in some scholars turning attention away from biographers and historiographers to genres and communities. Academic endeavor to restore the Bible's scriptural significance began at the hands of Karl Barth (1886–1968), whose systemic theology allowed for a shifting of emphasis from the historical Jesus towards the message of the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) followed Barth's footprints in critiquing liberal theology and espousing an existential interpretation of the New Testament. Bultmann's work—which left a tremendous impact on Wansbrough's approach to theological history in general,<sup>13</sup> and guided his understanding of the Qur'ān text in particular—deemphasizes, if it does not blatantly dismiss, historical analysis of the life of Jesus and of the New Testament because of the belief that earliest Christian literature exhibited little to no interest in specific locations or geographies.<sup>14</sup>

This reorientation of the theological discourse toward the “thatness” instead of the “whatness” of Jesus allowed Wansbrough to embrace a similar approach toward the Qur'ān—namely, what matters is that the Qur'ān exists, not what is written about it or what happened throughout or after the life of Muḥammad. And just as the Bible is not a book of history, so too the Qur'ān, Wansbrough contends,<sup>15</sup> (perhaps following a hint from Bultmann's critique of Christian historiography and his focus on kerygma)<sup>16</sup> is not a book of history but rather a book of “scriptural authority.”<sup>17</sup> Wansbrough makes this point clear in his preface:

All such efforts at historical reconstruction (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) tend to be reductive, and here one senses the specter of that (possibly very real) dichotomy in early Christian history: Jerusalem *Urgemeinde* opposed to Hellenistic kerygma (Bultmann). The basic problem associated with that opposition, whether social or doctrinal, seems in retrospect to reflect disputes upon eschatology, much as the development of Rabbinic Judaism has been defined as reaction to or residue from extreme expressions of eschatological belief/activity.<sup>18</sup>

Wansbrough thus comes from a tradition that considers it demeaning and pointless to study the Bible and, by extension, the Qur'ān as books of history. Like Bultmann, Wansbrough is suspicious of tradition in general precisely because “it is quite impossible to ignore the presence of *Nachdichtung* in traditionist literary forms” and because “tradition implies, and actively involves, historicization.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the writing of history to Wansbrough is the writing of literature about

literature. “History, like poetry,” he maintains, “is mimetic and produces as many necessary truths as it contains fortuitous facts (Lessing).”<sup>20</sup> Wansbrough argues that historiographies surrounding the Qur’ān and the first Muslim community starting roughly from 800 AD became too easily acceptable in the Islamic tradition. He questions therefore *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *tafsīr*, and *sīra* literatures as belated compositions that are “pressed into the service of salvation history.”<sup>21</sup> His training in biblical criticism drives him to conclude that the so-called source “histories” of all religion, including Islam, are constructed ex post facto and projected as views formed amid intense polemics and ideological wars.

In other words, to Wansbrough, while the Qur’ān itself exists as a tangible material and a textual reality, a history of Islam proper does not really exist; nor could a historical approach to Islam prove or disprove anything. And since the writing of history is itself the writing of literature about literature, the only textual reality is literature itself, where religion has the potential of reaching high forms of literary representation. Wansbrough calls this literary representation “mythopoeic”—that is, “artistic reimagining of mythological narratives.”<sup>22</sup> Wansbrough derives this definition from Bultmann, who defines myth as “an expression of man’s conviction that the origin and purpose of the world in which he lives are to be sought not within it but beyond it—that is beyond the world of known and tangible reality, a realm that is perpetually dominated and menaced by those mysterious powers which are its source and energy. Myth is also an expression of man’s awareness that he is not the lord of his own being.”<sup>23</sup> Even though he argues that Islam evolved gradually from sectarian forms of Judaism over a period of 150 years in the aftermath of the Arab conquest around the middle of the seventh century,<sup>24</sup> Wansbrough still considers it a unique expression of the same literary mythopoeic monotheism that informs both the Torah and the Gospels. Yet much of what has been written on Wansbrough ignores or fails to understand or consider such formative precepts of his own intellectual thought. The fact that Wansbrough himself makes so few concessions to his readers and uses technical language accessible only to very few scholars familiar with his methodology is largely to blame for this misunderstanding.

Bultmannian as it is, and deep in its quasi-Biblical dehistoricization of the origins of Islam as a solution to the question of origins of Islam, Wansbrough’s comparative venture into the Qur’ān is neither useful nor precise. It is true that Western scholarship on the hagiography of Muḥammad has learned not to trust *sīra* or ḥadīth literatures, as did some highly regarded classical Muslim scholars. But historically, there is more material available for learning about Muḥammad than former prophets. “The evidence about Jesus,” argues Marshall Hodgson, “is almost exclusively contained in the four Gospels and in a letter by Paul. The more they are analyzed, the less dependable the Gospels prove to be . . . As to the personal spirituality of Jesus we have only the thinnest evidence.”<sup>25</sup> To be fair, I do not agree with Hodgson’s argument against the historicity of Jesus. It is neither fair

nor productive to argue that there is “enough evidence to allow scholarship . . . to be based on academic principles” in one (Islam) but not the other (Christianity).” After all, there is a decent scholarly consensus that Jesus existed and was executed. And the authentic letters of Paul are at least a very early second-hand source of information. In the case of Muḥammad, there are also several sources about his life, in which the Qur’ān itself is a direct and primary evidence. These sources range from Muslim to non-Muslim material from the sixth to seventh centuries AD, enough evidence to allow scholarship on Muḥammad to be based on objective academic principles.<sup>26</sup>

Although not a proponent of the German School per se, Wansbrough argues that the Qur’ān and the biography of Muḥammad are material, or rather “literature,” controversially and belatedly constructed *ex post facto* (over the span of three centuries) and formed against a background of other sectarian groups—namely, the rabbinic Judaism of Iraq. This is a mistake superimposed on an old orientalist error. The mistake is the intellectual hubris of snubbing the Qur’ān as a cultural text symbolic of the social, political, and literary significations of its *own* time and place. And the old error is the unyielding reification of the conceptual gap between the self and the other, in which the self paralyzes and distorts the thinking of the other about its own time and place, as boldly as it alienates it from its own logos.

And so it was, at a time of intellectual turmoil in post-Vietnam War America, the study of the Qur’ān made an uneasy debut in the academic halls of US universities, with scholars and ideas mostly imported from Europe, and with Western academics entrusted with launching and leading programs that would set the course on how to ideologically approach, define, and teach Islam. US academe, in turn, divided Islamic studies, and the Middle East, into subdisciplines that included anthropology, economics, history, and sociology.<sup>27</sup> Each of these narrow professional settings approached Islam and, by default, the Qur’ān as an object of analysis from its own specialized standpoint, creating in the process its own disciplinary turfs and boundaries. After more than fifty years, the field of Qur’ānic studies split into a diversity of experimental and methodological projects that not only gave rise to chaos,<sup>28</sup> but also rendered the Qur’ān text irredeemably othered and locked into a web of subdisciplinary specializations, a free-floating object that has almost nothing to do with the cognate Arabic text of the Qur’ān Muslim and informed non-Muslim readers the world over are familiar with, not to speak of the interactive, multifaceted lived reality of the historical or contemporary Muslim world. One cannot, then, emphasize enough that the epistemological framework and ideological dispositions of this Euro-American network of Islamic studies has been engendered with specific “problems” in mind. A strong sense of affiliation and unanimity grew among the adherents of this institutional network to a point that it became intolerant of disagreement, criticism, or alternative approaches. That is, Qur’ānic studies remains characterized by *‘aṣabiyya*.

The theoretical bedrock and empirical ramifications of this new *'aṣabiyya* are not only perversely visible—we see them manifested in scores of publications on the origins of Islam—but utterly lacking a *theologia civilis*, or what Emmanuel Levinas once described as an imperative ethico-religious relationship to the other.<sup>29</sup> At stake here is the positionality of the history of Islam, in topographical and thematic terms. This is not to point blame at the *'aṣabiyya* well-established scholarship on the Qur'ān. After all, this type of scholarship prepares and trains scholars to disengage not only from faith-based Arabic sources but from direct textual and analytical readings of the Qur'ān text in its original Arabic, therefore siding with what is academically “right.” Yet that which is academically “right” is also a parochial right, informed by its virtue as overbearing partiality toward Eurocentric ascendancy and the establishment of epistemological hegemony. In that provincial sense of the right, non-faith-based sources basically translate into non-Muslim sources, a presupposition that manifests a gross trivialization of the sources of “faith” in these so called “non-faith” sources of the “self” versus the unreliable accounts voiced by the other. Erasing the other in the name of “method” is not a discourse of objectivity, but a sugar-coated subjectivity predicated on silencing this other, a realization Muslim readers have to reckon with when they cannot recognize themselves or their own scripture and tradition in the very scholarship that should be in conversation with them. Even if the main goal has always been academically grounded in the sense that it would lead to some rational and scientific understanding of the past, or a “shared heritage,” one would never commit the mistake of conflating (selected) history with that sought-after understanding. There is no such thing as an “objective” source or a traceable true history of religious language, precisely because it is largely iconic, a point that William Montgomery Watt underscored decades ago.<sup>30</sup>

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the rise of colonialism, which fed off the frantic energies of Europe's industrial modernity, led not only to the emergence of theories of racial supremacy but also to militant thought and combative ideology against everything the colonies stood for—the peoples, the lands, the cultures, and the traditions. This ideological militarization soon became the *modus operandum* of European scholarship on the history of Islam. But to view the demonization of Islam solely as a Eurocentric phenomenon only truncates our understanding of the ways in which this ideology we witness in the Euro-American academy is deeply indebted to European colonialism and, with it, to the underpinnings of racial and cultural superiority, resulting in a consistent stream of “high culture” scholarship that has methodically “researched” Islam—for the entirety of the twentieth century—as oppositional to the West and as a threat to modernity, globalization, and world peace.

For centuries, the presence of the Qur'ān in Europe and, by extension, in the United States, given the above history of prestigious US universities, has been reduced to an ardent revisionism of its origins, aided by flawed and truncated

translations shelved with caution in large European or American libraries and accompanied by Christian apologetic commentaries. Robust European academic interest in the study of Islam's past did not take place before the 1833, the year Abraham Geiger published *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*<sup>31</sup> This epoch coincided with the age of colonialism in Europe and the mad "Scramble for Africa."<sup>32</sup> To say the least, these times were not conducive to dispassionate and unbiased scholarship on Arabs, or on Islam and its origins. This was also a philosophical epoch from which emerged the foundations of "high theory," which justified even slavery in a complex Hegelian dialectic. The usurpation of innocent people's lands and resources was a military and economic competition among European states. It is not a coincidence that the height of European colonialism in the Muslim world was coterminous with Germany becoming a hub for scholarship on the Qur'ān in the nineteenth century. Although the 1919's Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to give up its colonies, German academics still benefited from a perverse culture of imperialism.<sup>33</sup> German scholarship on the Qur'ān profited from European colonization of African and Asian countries through uninhibited acquisition of manuscripts and accessible roaming of Arab-Muslim lands. Culturally and philosophically, Germany harbored a troubled xenophobia against Turkey, an anxious fascination with Muslim culture, and an academic obsession with rearranging Islam's past.<sup>34</sup>

When a postcolonial self-critique of Western imperialism began to take shape in the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>35</sup> the one field that escaped the scythe of this long-overdue deconstructive turn in European thought was that of Qur'ānic studies, especially in Germany. Even Edward Said's *Orientalism*, with its enormously broad critique of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European scholarship on the "Orient" (mainly French and British), failed to include it, a failing for which Said reproached himself.<sup>36</sup> We see scholastic humility exercised in many humanistic fields, but it remains rare in Euro-American scholarship in the field of Islamic and Qur'ānic studies. In fact, the opposite holds. Qur'ānic studies is the only field that has attracted some scholars who loathe their subject matter more than any other area of knowledge I have come to know, save Holocaust studies.

It therefore matters significantly to interrogate the current push for repositioning the origins of Islam and to radically historicize its intellectual premises. Even though the Qur'ān rightly insists that it is not poetry, pre-Islamic poetry and prose were the only literary genres germane to its emergence, and they remain the only resources for understanding its meaning and significations. Over the last four decades, only a handful of scholars of classical Arabic routinely entertained the literary and rhetorical dynamics of the Qur'ān in relationship to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.<sup>37</sup> But outside this circle of Arabists, the field of Qur'ānic studies in the West has continued the positivist historical turn advanced in *Hagarism*. Yet to claim that the Qur'ān is a "product" or an "intertext" of late antiquity would not only resurrect Wansbrough's radical method; it would continue to authorize the

die-hard approach to the text according to an imperative of sovereignty. A self-critical sovereignty is still a sovereignty. The movement from Cronian othering to Neuwirthian “spacing” and inclusivity, while redeeming, continues to perpetuate the shallowing of the Qur’ān’s Arabic cultural and literary tradition.

There are certainly valid historical reasons as to why a robust dialogue with the Arabicity of the Qur’ān has rarely been engaged or deemed worthy of study in the West: the sorrowful lack of proficiency in classical Arabic is one; the uncomfortable anti-trinitarian tone of the Qur’ān is another; the post-Enlightenment fascination with history as a “scientific” discipline capable of objective and non-ideological findings about the past is a third; add to this the public and academic demonization of Islam as Europe’s archenemy for centuries. It is not an understatement to say that the normative illusion of the historical-critical method has long enjoyed the benefit of allowing Western readers to measure the complexity of a properly positivist assessment of the Qur’ān against those of Muslim interpretive methods—the semantic, the semiotic, the syntactic, the phonological, the ethical, the aesthetic, and so on. The latter are mostly written in Arabic or non-European languages and are often dubbed apologetic or subacademic. The enduring academic authority of the historical-critical method derives not only from a deep commitment to and continuous refinement of old ideas of the “self,” but also from the loyal *‘aṣabiyya* of a complex academic superstructure. In the spirit of this “trusted” academic tradition, a direct and text-based rhetorical engagement with the Qur’ān would come across as a distraction—one that disrupts such apparently objective and highly refined academic practice. While this *‘aṣabiyya* may not necessarily be premeditated, there is an undeniable scholarly inertia when it comes to Arabic sources. Not only do scholars fail to achieve the competency to read original Arabic sources but, unsurprisingly, they tend to go for the low-hanging fruit, the stories of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the seven sleepers, and so on that are familiar in biblical texts, and latch onto them as a way of explaining this challenging text.

Devin Stewart is right to argue that “specialists in various subfields in Islamic Studies have biases that make it difficult for them to write objectively and insightfully about other subfields.”<sup>38</sup> But he is also keenly aware that “a great deal of scholarship in the academy is shoddy work,” a shoddiness caused for the large part by linguistic incompetency. It is no surprise that Stewart starts his “Theses for the Improvement of Islamic Studies” with the clarion call: “For God’s sake, learn Arabic.”<sup>39</sup> Stewart’s twenty-seven well-conceived theses are worth posting on doors of every graduate seminar in Islamic studies. I too would argue for the priority of superior proficiency in classical Arabic as a prerequisite, given the Qur’ān’s semantic and rhetorical richness. I contend that only the language of the Qur’ān offers a theoretically sound and intellectually compelling solution to the disarray of the field of Qur’ānic studies discussed above. Even though, to Stewart’s point, “fundamental ideological differences will remain, no matter how much historical detail is added to the picture,”<sup>40</sup> solid proficiency in Arabic will still make it

difficult for these ideologies to hold, since only the text of the Qur'ān gives us in its own language a fair account of the essential history of its sociocultural and stylistic setting, which, like the transplant of a second lung, will bring it to life and allow it to *speak for* itself but also *to* alien cultures that have systematically silenced it.

Yet the call for improving Islamic studies, and in particular for proficiency in Arabic, still raises the important question of whether certain scholars of the Qur'ān have failed to do so or if the issue is far graver than the problem of mere linguistic proficiency would indicate. In other words, inasmuch as there is a correlation between Western scholars learning Arabic and the quality of their work, the harsh reality is that linguistic competency alone, no matter how refined, is not going to stop a scholar from operating within a colonial mentality. Decolonized understanding of the Qur'ān can only be achieved if one views the other as belonging to a category different from one's own, to be sure, but a category that is not necessarily combative or threatening,<sup>41</sup> and only if more attention is paid to the text at hand, to what it says, not what it refuses to say, nor what one wants it to say—not by way of the convoluted past of late antiquity, or the nitpickings of biblical criticism, or even the moot debates about the Qur'ān's origins. These methods may still claim their academic usefulness and relevance, but only if they are reframed and retold from within an ethic of comparativity, one that does not “embrace” the other as an extension of the self but that listens to and includes the other as an equal participant in the immense and unfinished project of humanism.

There is no question that the Qur'ān is a dialectical text: it offers both a continuity of Abrahamic monotheism and a rupture breaking through rituals and practices not only of the peninsular society in which it emerged but also of the world of late antiquity. While it continues perennial themes, ideas, and narratives of monotheism known to the world of late antiquity, and even of classical antiquity *writ large*, the Qur'ān still shattered fundamental understandings of that very monotheism and disrupted the multiple and complex milieus that constituted late and classical antiquity. Understandably, the choice between continuity and rupture is critical because it is also a choice of deciding beginnings and endings. This choice cannot simply be justified by historical evidence or late antiquity “material,” so to speak, because it is in the nature of the choice to organize and select its own evidence and material. We have seen time and time again how critical choices themselves can be reconstructed as facts that generate their own causalities. This book is a result of this very tension, which confirms not only the temporality of historical thought in Euro-American approaches to the Qur'ān but also contemporary trends to colonial guilt and self-critique without changing scholarly habits, such as the committed learning of Arabic, that would demonstrate genuine epistemological respect for a subject. It is, in fact, “natural” for the Euro-American academy to be where it is now. Islam has for more than a millennium been perceived as radically oppositional to the West. This is precisely the perception that informs Neuwirth's argument for a remedy that allows the field to look forward only if

it first looked backward. But how far backward in the expanse of late antiquity can one look? Since medieval times, Muslims have emerged as the strangers from another space, οἱ Σαρακηνοί, or desert-dwelling camel riders who spoke an unintelligible language and followed deviant practices, and whose seemingly human appearances belied malevolent traits and inferior levels of intelligence. And if Islam were the hackneyed other of Western history, then the Qur'ān would effortlessly assume the status of its archetype.

The point is not so much that the Qur'ān is a cause of “anxiety” because it is problematic. Rather, it is framed as problematic because it became normalized as the other, the alien, and the unfamiliar in public discourses. And while the late antiquity thesis of embracing the Qur'ān as quintessentially European is a much more progressive approach than the dismissive one adopted, say, in *Hagarism*, one must at the very least raise questions about whether this new paradigm has truly overcome the positivistic and revisionist tendencies of Crone's and Cook's studies, or whether in the process of overemphasizing foreign influences or “intertexts” of late antique times on the Qur'ān, it has, directly or inadvertently, uprooted the text's native context.

In the end, the purpose of offering a genealogy of Euro-American scholarship on the Qur'ān is not to provide a critique of the Euro-American academy per se. Rather, the goal is to de-universalize the academy's claims to historical certitude and highlight it for the whole world to see. The Qur'ān is not a fixed entity; nor is it for that reason a mobile object whose geographical contours and themes could be stretched for political correctness. The Qur'ān, in the words of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, is a “subject”<sup>42</sup>—that is, a living source of engagement that continues to lend insight and discernment outside the forbidding field of Euro-American Qur'ānic studies.