

Taming Time: The Possibility of History and Politics in Islam

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1.

Muhammad's God is not, "in the final analysis, indifferent whether He is effective in history or not", says Fazlur Rahman in his introductory book, *Islam*.¹ Indeed, he goes on to say, "[i]f history is the proper field for the Divine activity, historical forces must, by definition, be employed for the moral end as judiciously as possible".² It is a work of apologetics to be sure; the move, nevertheless, is artful. Rahman is trying to counter the challenge of historicism by refusing to have it posited as an *external* challenge.

Rahman had reasons to worry. Historicism is said to recognize no other reality but history, and no agency within history but the human—capricious as it is.³ That it relativizes "fact and value (and thereby truth) to particular historical periods" has long since been noted.⁴ Rahman, above all, had a sobering precedent to ponder in the encounter between historicism and the Christian faith; it is not at all clear that the latter emerged unscathed. Ironic as it might seem, historicism was a challenge to Christianity from without. It does arise, in a sense, from within Christianity, but it comes to define itself as against it—a variation, perhaps, on *die Krisis des Historismus* theme.⁵

(1) Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 21.

(2) *Ibid*, 21.

(3) Georg G. Iggers, "Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56: 1 (Jan., 1995): 129-152. Here, and throughout, I speak of historicism, broadly construed, as "the recognition that all human ideas and values are historically conditioned and subject to change"; *ibid*, 133. Iggers mentions different, and more specific, uses of the term.

(4) See, Mark Philp, "Political Theory and History", in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, edited by David Leopold and Marc Stears (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 135-6. Philp is talking about Leo Strauss, but there was never a shortage of voices espousing this contention. See, also, Iggers, "Historicism", 138ff.

(5) A product of accepting "the basic epistemological premises of historicism [... while giving up] the belief in the coherence of the historical process"; Iggers, "Historicism", 134-5.

Relying on the work of J. G. A. Pocock and Reinhart Koselleck,⁶ I look at the dynamics that ultimately led to the emergence of the historicist attitude through the unfolding, at times abrupt, at times stepwise, of a certain awareness of “the succession of particulars in time” that will prove crucial for the emergence of “robust politics”⁷ and “history itself” (*Geschichte selber*),⁸ or “history pure and simple” (*Geschichte schlechthin*).⁹

I then look at Aziz Al-Azmeh’s *Emergence*,¹⁰ a work undertaken with “the curiosity of a naturalist”,¹¹ and in the best tradition of Western historicism, admittedly a feature that complicates my inquiry, and shall be addressed in what follows, but it does not for that matter divert the inquiry from building upon Al-Azmeh’s meticulous and insightful reconstruction of the political and religious setting of what he prefers to call “Paleo-Islam” (more on this below). I argue that such a setting furnished, from the outset, the conditions for the possibility of history and politics

I am further helped, in this argument, by Tarif Khalidi’s graceful survey of the historiographic tradition in Islam.¹² The point of contention will prove to be a certain sense or notion of time, but let us not get ahead of ourselves. Suffice it to say, at this stage, and by way of qualification, that the categories I am concerned with are ones that are of interest to the political theorist, albeit one sensitive to the ways of history.¹³ The strictly historical question, indispensable as it is, is better entrusted to the trained historian.

(6) J.G.A. Pocock, *The Macchiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Translated and with an Introduction by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, translated by Todd Samuel Presner, with others, foreword by Hayden White (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); “The Temporalization of Concepts”, *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 1 (1997): 16-23.

(7) Koselleck, ‘Modernity and the Planes of Historicity’, *Futures Past*, 16.

(8) Koselleck, “The Temporalization of Concepts”.

(9) Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, 2.

(10) Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

(11) *Ibid.*, xii.

(12) Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

(13) “[P]olitical theory has a concern with the past that serves its disciplinary interests in understanding the character of political rule, the conditions for social and political order, the parameters of political possibility, and the values we should pursue within that set of possibilities”; Philp, “Political Theory and History”, 148.

2.

I was alluding, of course, to modernity.¹⁴ The intensification of the sense of time, the heightened awareness of the contingent, the coming to terms with the particular, these are all hallmarks of the modern, and one can see how their coming together in some *configuration* is conducive to historicism. Now, the developments that ultimately gave us modernity have quite a genealogy, and ramify along different axes, one of which, one that is quite central, and one that gives its mark to the modern, is in serious friction with religion. As a matter of fact, *the secular* is often defined in contradistinction to the religious.

One of the main concerns of this essay is to look at this configuration, the one conducive to historicism. It is a contingent fact that what we might call the forces of secularization culminated in so clean a sweep that the historicist challenge to religion was presented as a comprehensive and external challenge—religion answering to modernity. The process entailed “the containment, undermining, destruction, or channeling of millennial expectations”,¹⁵ thus divesting religion of its energy—rather, with the deftness of a master Aikidoka, investing religion’s energy in those very forces opposing it.

In his very influential book, *The Machiavellian Moment*, John Pocock presents us with a 15th century Florence teeming with millennial expectations. There is always the difficulty of reconciling eschatological time with the urgency and mundanity of the political, but, according to Pocock, it is the apocalyptic at the heart of the politics of Florentine prophet, Girolamo Savonarola, that proves to be the crucial step towards “the Machiavellian Moment”. Significantly for our purposes, the eschatological intensity was absorbed into a secular mood in Machiavelli.¹⁶ In the hands of later Western philosophizing, rampant apocalyptic was to become a belief in progress. In other words, it was exhaustively appropriated into a comprehensive secular apparatus that was already taking shape in early Modernity (*frühe Neuzeit*): “The facility with which anticipations of devout Christians, or predictions of all kinds, could be transformed into political action had disappeared by 1650. Political calculation and humanist reservations marked out a new

(14) One may legitimately speak of modernities, but that is beside the point here.

(15) Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity”, 17.

(16) Much the same can be said about the fate meted out to the Protectorate; see, Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity”, in *Futures Past*, 16.

plane for the future”.¹⁷

I am aware that the full expression of the historicist sentiment is a much later development. Nevertheless, “the formation of the Historical school, was founded upon the same conditions that had set progress free into the future”.¹⁸ “Rigorous politics” was one such condition.¹⁹ That it was arrived at after much striving heightens the historicist sensitivity to otherworldly enterprises. Historicism as a result is oblivious of its own past and its oblivion emboldens it to pass judgment on other traditions. It hastens to demystify the world, to bring us squarely back to the-here-and-now. But what if the otherworldly and the-here-and-now were not always odd bedfellows?

In Pocock’s account of the Western tradition, the historical and the political came to assert themselves to the exclusion of the otherworldly. He charts (a substantial segment of) the path of the abovementioned configuration that ultimately gave us historicism. I have doubts, however, that in the Islamic tradition the political and the historical could only genuinely exist as *fully* secularized, or that the secular forces were so opposed to the religious that to assert the one necessitated the overcoming of the other.

3.

Pocock undertakes to assess the Western political tradition and to explain the huge explosion—the moment—the fuse of which was lit by Machiavelli. It is the story of coming to terms with *the unfolding of the particular in time*.

According to Pocock, late scholasticism was well equipped to deal with universals, but it couldn’t cope with particulars. In the eyes of the whole Aristotelian tradition (in its medieval European adaptation), the universal alone was rational. Unless brought under some category (a universal), particulars could not be made sense of. It is a testimony to the influence of Plato that this view became so pervasive. Plato thought that

(17) *Ibid*, 17.

(18) Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories”, in *Futures Past*, 268.

(19) “All in all, it is possible to say that a rigorous politics had succeeded in gradually eliminating from the domain of political consideration and decision making the robust religious expectations of the future that had flourished after the decline of the Church”; Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity”, 16.

immutability was the mark of the real. *Ex hypothesi*, no particular can be real, for all particulars are transitory and circumstantial. Particulars belong in the world of ephemera and appearances. The (Platonic) exclusion of the particular from reality is then carried over to time, rendering it likewise unreal. This ontological reading was bound to have epistemological ramifications, and we soon realize that no *knowledge* of the particular (and the temporal) is possible; no philosophy of history is viable.

The becoming Christian of the West might have opened a way to own up to the materiality and untidiness of the phenomenal world. After all, the Christian God “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1: 14). Then again, can “secular time” become intelligible in a Christian framework that denies secular fulfillment? Even if Christian thought had linked *certain* particulars to eternity, allowing their unfolding in a now linear time, this was not enough to develop a full-fledged philosophy of history, for the significance of their contingency was removed, and history is “the domain of contingency”.²⁰ For someone like St. Augustine (354-430), “the *saeculum* was nothing other than the dimension of *man’s fall*”.²¹ Augustine’s *Civitate Dei* displaces politics, for politics is concerned with the temporal, whereas the City of God is eternal. “The eschatological vision became, in the Augustinian perspective, a vision of something in part extra-historical”.²² “The Church itself is eschatological” argues Koselleck. By that he means that

[t]he Church integrates the future as the possible End of the World within its organization of time; it is not placed at the end point of time in a strictly linear fashion. The end of time can be experienced only because it is always already sublimated in the Church. The history of the Church remains the history of salvation so long as this condition held.²³

Koselleck goes on to comment: “The most basic assumptions of this tradition were destroyed by the Reformation”.²⁴ Stabilization, it appears, is purchased at the cost of rendering politics (and history)

(20) Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 8.

(21) *Ibid.*, 35; emphasis added.

(22) *Ibid.*

(23) Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity”, 13.

(24) *Ibid.*

impossible. Politics, after all, dwells in the here and now, in the domain of contingencies; its imperative is to manage them, and, with some luck, systematically to understand them. But, before we get to the Reformation, in the Late Antique world, very much defined in Augustinian terms, and overshadowed by the fall of Rome, how do we make sense of all these contingent particulars? What are our options?

One way of providing explanation is good old deduction—Aristotelian by design, Platonic at heart. Here, particulars make sense by being subsumed under universals—by “participating in” a universal, to put it in Plato’s idiom. “Participation”, however, is not an easy relationship to grasp. You need to be a philosopher to fathom it—a philosopher-king in the case of (the particulars of) politics.²⁵ For all intents and purposes, Aristotle advises us against waiting expectantly for the philosopher-king to arrive.²⁶ He suggests that common experience might be sufficient to bridge “the gap between idea and reality”.²⁷ The customs that people follow are a sound enough basis for law making, for they have stood the test of time. As long as there is a precedent, we—rulers, rather—enjoy a grip on the ever-evasive particulars. Innovation, however, leaves us without guidance, precisely because we lack the precedent or the guiding norm. We may, however, appeal to the consent of the people, for it is implausible that so many people should be mistaken.

Sir John Fortescue (1390-1479), Author of *De Laudibus Legum Angliæ*, was aware of how irrelevant deduction was for the purposes of politics although it alone can claim to be “science”.²⁸ When it came to real governance, it was experience (custom or usage)—call it “the argument from antiquity”—and consent that provide a solid basis. In cases of unprecedented contingencies, however, Fortescue made room for prudence. In such cases, the ruler must set the policy alone—he must, to use Fortescue’s image, hold the tiller alone (*gubernaculum*)—although prudence of the many legitimizes decisions better (Fortescue’s “multitude for the moment”). Fortescue was aware that “standing the test of time” was a proof of sorts, but certainly not a demonstration, for

(25) Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 47.

(26) “Until the point was reached where the choice between action and contemplation had to be faced, the highest conceivable form of human life was that of a citizen”; *ibid.*, 67-8. In principle, however, Aristotle places the philosophical life of contemplation above the life of political action.

(27) *Ibid.*, 22.

(28) *Ibid.*, 17ff.

demonstrations belong in universals proper. He also “rightly saw that the first response to contingency formed part of prudential theory, but that it could be only indirectly if at all grounded in experience”.²⁹

Fortescue comes late, but Pocock still finds him very representative of the mindset shaped by Christianity and Aristotelianism and incapable, as such, of a philosophy of history or of real politics. Pocock argues, nevertheless, that the way out is already there in Aristotle’s conception of the republic, a form of government at once universal and particular. But this will be a long story to tell, and it is not my intention to summarize the book. Suffice it to say, for now, that a train of thought—and events, serendipitous and otherwise—brings us to where history and politics become possible. Major contributors include Polybius, Boethius, Goro Datti, Savonarola, Guicciardini and others. It culminates, of course, in Machiavelli. The key idea is that change is invested with a principle so that now we can fathom it, and, with enough *virtu*, master it. Boethius’s (480-524) complaint as to how God could allow *fortuna* to prey on *virtu* receives a response:³⁰ It is not Christian virtue (piety, humility, etc.) that subdues fortune; it is rather civic virtue that does.

4.

Doubtless, Muslims also fell under the sway of Greek philosophy—serious religious systems³¹ exposed to Plato find his appeal hard to resist, or so it seems.³² Even as Aristotle proved to be the more significant influence, he needed to be considerably Platonized.

(29) Ibid, 25.

(30) Clearly, it would never occur to Augustine to put such a question; “Augustine would have replied simply that men must expect injustice if they insist upon acting in the fallen city”; *ibid*, 38. Boethius’s own answer, as registered by Pocock, is “all fortune is good fortune”; *ibid*. But Boethius also develops a version of the “Socratic solution”, that virtue is its own reward, and vice its own punishment. See the excellent discussion in Peter King, “Boethius on the Problem of Desert”, in Robert Pasnau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), vol. 1, 2-22.

(31) That is, religions invested in developing a theoretical system or a rational theology.

(32) See, for Greek influence, Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbasid Society* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Lenn Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), esp. Introduction, and ch. 1-2. For Arabic philosophical influence, see, Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

It is difficult to exaggerate Greek influence here. In many respects, it is even more pervasive than in Western thought. But I speak as if Islam were a country that came under foreign influence. In reality, the lands of Islam were part and parcel of a late antique world shaped by Hellenistic culture. It might as well be true that “Western Arabia of c. 600 was an anachronism”,³³ in the sense that it remained outside the “structures of Romanity”³⁴ which was translating itself eastward at the time, but the processes that characterized these structures to the North of Arabia were well underway within it. It is in this sense that “the Arab Muslim empire was “implicit” in Late Antiquity”.³⁵ More to the point, “Islam might be regarded in determinate ways as the consummation of Late Antiquity, the rise of Islam being “the ultimate consequence of Hellenistic fermentation””.³⁶

But what was this “Hellenistic fermentation” about? And why was it more Roman in character—rather than, say, Sasanian—if “its history goes back to Cyrus and Alexander”?³⁷

According to Aziz Al-Azmeh, Late Antiquity had a “binding, propulsive element”³⁸ that was its defining feature, namely, “the *imperial aspect* of Hellenistic culture, [which was] borne by the Roman empire as its centre of gravity shifted to the east”.³⁹ Empire here is intended in a nontrivial sense *ex hypothesi* exclusive of, say, the Sasanian “empire”.⁴⁰ It is rather the centerpiece of “Hellenistic political theology in which the one universal empire mirrored the one God”,⁴¹ a political theology carved

(33) Al-Azmeh, *Emergence*, 40.

(34) *Ibid.*, 4.

(35) *Ibid.*, 28.

(36) *Ibid.*, 35; the phrase quoted is from the introduction by Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds.) to their *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 3.

(37) *Ibid.*, 28.

(38) *Ibid.*, 38.

(39) *Ibid.*, 30; emphasis added.

(40) “[I]n the context of an empire with a universalising vocation, it was the Roman rather than the Sasanian that highlighted its vocation in terms of a universalist religion. Except for a short period when Shāpūr I (r. 242-272) tried to impose Zoroastrianism...”; *ibid.*, 30.

(41) *Ibid.*, 41. See, also, 97: “Thus were combined in imperial context a doctrine of divine monopoly and imperial absolutism subtended by mundane monopoly. Both strands derived their conceptual and plastic sustenance from late antique philosophical and visual cultures. This absolutism was conceived as universalist and œcumenical in which historical reference was made with growing exclusiveness to the proximate state tradition deriving from Constantine and, later, Justinian”.

out of “Neoplatonic transcendentalism and Christian sacramentalism”,⁴² and, hence, cannot be thought of as a neutral category. More precisely, what is intended is an “œcumenical empire with the salvific vocation of a monotheist religion, the two articulated symbolically by political theology and a theology of history”.⁴³

In this regard, Al-Azmeh characterizes the Hījāz as “a fiercely conservative polytheistic reservation, persisting until swept away by Paleo-Islam which”, he adds, “on this score alone, could be considered a movement of acculturation into late antiquity”.⁴⁴ But there are other scores and Al-Azmeh enjoins us to be mindful of the cultural interplay in the peninsula and of the “Romanity” of the ensuing Caliphate, the peculiar—or not so peculiar, if we agree with Al-Azmeh—form of government assumed by the burgeoning Islamic empire. For “[t]his conjunction of political theology and a theology of history”, characteristic of the Late Antique Roman empire, and fused as it was with Christianity into an ecumenical cosmopolitan order, “was to have decisive influence on the Caliphate”⁴⁵. “In other words”, Al-Azmeh puts forth his thesis, “it will be seen that Paleo-Islam and its deity need to be regarded more as points of arrival, and less as generic beginnings”.⁴⁶

Situating Islam firmly within the structures of Late Antiquity risks, like any overtly structuralist reading, overdetermining our understanding of the Caliphate and, perhaps also, rendering it a monolithic entity, in the sense that we no longer appreciate all the

(42) Ibid, 85.

(43) Ibid, 4. Obviously, the Sasanian empire was not monotheistic, but neither was it ecumenical; see, Bowersock, *Crucible*. I wonder what Al-Azmeh would make of Nietzsche’s observation that “the advance toward universal empires is always also an advance toward universal divinities; despotism with its triumph over the independent nobility always prepares the way for some kind of monotheism”; *On The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale, edited, with commentary, by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House), 90.

(44) Ibid, 154. Al-Azmeh defines “Paleo-Islam as the emergent condition of the new religion prior to its exegetical and doctrinal elaboration and prior to the social and political conditions of dominion that made such a durable elaboration and crystallization possible”; *ibid*, 385. He goes on to say: “To this extent, this term is preferable to “early Islam”, an expression looking backwards from an accomplished condition and subtended by an assumption of too tidy a linear availability”, *ibid*. Al-Azmeh is concerned above all to work with a notion shorn of “assumptions of *Urmonotheismus*” (*ibid*, 280), but I share Anthony Street’s suspicion that it is not at all clear that “Paleo” suffers “the defect of implying a linear development” any less than “early” does; *Reviews of Religion & Theology* 23: 2 (2016): 109-111, at 110.

(45) Ibid, 99.

(46) Ibid, xiii.

negotiation that led to its adopting a certain form. While Al-Azmeh is careful to point out how Muhammad's career has contributed to shape the Caliphate, and to fashion the institutions and the administrative and political culture that it inherited from Late Antique Byzantium, his role is seen as expediting a process that was already underway. Still, this points to a very relevant dimension of what was going on.

The Muhammadan revolution, aptly so described, led to the "temporalisation of west Arabian Arabs".⁴⁷ It furnished them with new "horizons of expectation".⁴⁸ Al-Azmeh cannot be using this Koselleckian language noncommittally; it assumes Koselleck's "robust politics" and "history itself", and Al-Azmeh makes sure to register the full implications: "A sense of history over and above immediate preoccupation is a crucial constituent of this transition to Islam, and *what made this both possible and imperative was empire*".⁴⁹

The Muslim's kingdom is no more of this world than the Christian's. Yet, it was not seen—in the heat of empire building—to contradict the "heavenly kingdom", or to be its mere shadow. Empire has its imperatives; "[a]mong the so-called Abrahamic religions", says Khalidi, "Islam was the fastest to provide itself with a chronology. With this chronology, the *temporal* scaffolding of Islamic culture was now in place".⁵⁰ This "unprecedented step of marking itself with a new calendar, the Hijra calendar commencing in 622"⁵¹ was, according to Aziz Al-Azmeh, "one of the most lasting features of the Paleo-Muslim *sense of novelty*".⁵²

Empire produced, in the Muslims, a certain "urge", a "proto-historical consciousness" that was impressed "by the drama of events, especially the early conquests and civil wars – what Ibn Khaldun would later call the "amazement" (*dhuhul*) of early Muslims".⁵³ It is true that the Christian God becomes flesh, and is manifest in time, but no sooner than He comes, He departs. The prophet of Islam had an empire to build and some time on his hands. The fact that there was not a strong central government that could abort his project at its inception does of course

(47) *Ibid*, 41.

(48) *Ibid*, 163.

(49) *Ibid*, 518, my emphasis.

(50) Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 14; emphasis mine.

(51) Al-Azmeh, *Emergence*, 360.

(52) *Ibid*, my emphasis.

(53) Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 28-9.

help—providence, it seems, had other plans for Jesus which made it more difficult to legitimate secular fulfillment from within Christianity.

5.

Rather, Christianity was seized by a certain messianic mood. To quote Koselleck again,

Until well into sixteenth century, the history of Christianity is a history of expectations, or more exactly, the constant anticipation of the End of the World on the one hand and the continual deferment of the End on the other.⁵⁴

Koselleck goes on:

However the image of the End of the World was varied, the role of the Holy Roman Empire remained a permanent feature: as long as it existed, the final Fall was deferred. The Emperor was the *katechon* of the Antichrist.

Contrary to the familiar prosaicism, then, the Holy Roman Empire was indeed Holy, and indeed Roman, for Rome has become an “eternal city”. It has become, in spite of Augustine, a city of God, a city that was itself eschatological—to modify Koselleck’s phrase quoted above (think of the New Rome, the Second Rome, and the eternally disputed Third Rome). The Holy Roman Empire, however, is not an empire. Not in the worldly or political sense. It is rather a Kingdom of sorts, a *katechon*.⁵⁵

Beginning with the Roman Imperial crisis of the third century, and culminating in the Sack of Rome in 410A.D.—with the declaration of Constantine (ruled 307-337) a Christian emperor in the interim—a cascade of events ultimately brought about what is by any measure an apocalyptic event: Christianity, if truth be told, inherited the world. This period was characterized by the decline of learning. Augustine himself did not know Greek, and actually detested its “heathen” associations. By the time of Boethius, Greek learning has all but disappeared in the West,⁵⁶ and the connection with the tradition was somewhat severed.⁵⁷

(54) Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity”, 11.

(55) A *katechon* is, in the words of Carl Schmitt, “a restrainer of the Antichrist”; see his *Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, translated and annotated by G.L. Ulmen, (New York: Telos, 2003), 59.

(56) The retrieval of Greek works after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 was a major force behind the Renaissance.

(57) Despite discontinuity, the medieval world inherited from the Roman empire the Latin

The messianic mood was perhaps aggravated by the decline and fall of ancient Rome. While never completely absent in Islam, I want to argue that it never was as pronounced. In the words of Josef van Ess:

Neither Islam nor Judaism has ever had a church. Above all, both lacked the concept of redemption, a founding concept for the Christian Church. In Islam there exists no special category of individuals, no special profession, whose task it is to dispense salvation; all Muslims are laypersons.⁵⁸

There is no denying the presence of apocalyptic themes in Islam, especially in the case of the Shia. But more often than not, apocalyptic was espoused by marginal groups. Even when the Shia tended towards political ascendancy, one could argue that they often cultivated a less messianic outlook.⁵⁹ A more representative example of millennial expectations relates to the fall of Constantinople supposedly promised by the Prophet—quite at a remove from “the constant anticipation of the End of the World” that marked the Christian worldview.

Nevertheless, Messianism as a category is readily applied to explain Islam, especially in its earlier phases. The application, however, is malignant. Consider Ignaz Goldziher, one of the first and more brilliant scholars to engage the study of Islam with a historicist toolkit.⁶⁰ Goldziher takes as an organizing principle a certain opposition between the political and the apocalyptic. This opposition sustains his two-stage narrative of Islam in its early period (i.e. up until the death of the Prophet), the *hijra* being an unmistakable marker.⁶¹ The division

language (1) and Christianity (2), whose church replaced the collapsing institutions of the Late Antique world. So medieval philosophers retained a sense of identity indirectly and implicitly. See, *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, edited by Gyula Klima with Fritz Allhoff and Anand Jayprakash Vaidya (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), introduction.

- (58) Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2006), 13. [Originally published as *Prémices de la théologie musulmane* (Editions Albin Michel S.A., 2002)].
- (59) See, Hussein Abdulsater, *Shi'i Doctrine, Mu'tazili Theology: Al-Sharīf Al-Murtaḍa and Imāmī Discourse* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 219-20.
- (60) Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, translated by Andras and Ruth Hamori, with an Introduction and Additional Notes by Bernard Lewis (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981 [first published in 1910]), 3.
- (61) According to Bowersock, the *hijra* itself can only be explained within the context of broader politics: ‘The year of the *hijra*, 622, was precisely the year in which the Byzantine emperor Heraclius began his military onslaught on the Persian Empire.’ G.W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge, MA. and London, England: 2017), 109. This is the more

of the period into Meccan and Medinan is by no means novel. Nor is the observation that the two stages differ significantly in character. For Goldziher, however, the difference is more elemental, and more diametrical, with the Meccan period marked by apocalyptic, and the Medinan by politics. According to Goldziher,

Emigration from Mecca put an end to the time when [Muhammad] was to “turn away from the idolaters” ([*Qur’ān*] 15:94) or merely summon them ‘to the way of God through wisdom and good admonition’ (16:125). It was now time for a different watchword: “[...] fight in the way of God” (2:44).⁶²

Pocock’s Florence is a good rejoinder to Goldziher. The military expansion characterizing much of Goldziher’s second stage (and the whole of historical Islam, he would argue)⁶³ was in many respects a spiritual quest, and although it can arguably be seen as a *continuation* of Medinan politics—to borrow von Clausewitz’s tired expression—one could say that it rests on eschatological motifs. A better answer, however, and one to which I have hinted would detect in this opposition a category mistake.⁶⁴

Apocalyptic is often defined as cataclysm—a definition that feeds on a literalist impulse, according to Elizabeth Phillips.⁶⁵ A different impulse brings the confusion to bear on the understanding of events of early (Paleo) Islam: the ready use of categories more or less native to the West without questioning their salience. Al-Azmeh thinks that Mohammad’s visions in the early period were cataclysmic but not necessarily apocalyptic; “such forcefulness and immediacy need not be restricted to imagery of the end of time”,⁶⁶ and “such a cataclysmic

interesting because, earlier on, in 615, Muhammad sent some of his companions to *Christian* Ethiopia to spare them the oppression of the Meccans (this was the first, or lesser, *hijra*). Bowersock comments: ‘In view of the timing of this *hijra*, it is not impossible that the unease of the emigrants may have been exacerbated by news of the Persian capture of Jerusalem the year before [...]. It is very likely that once news of Persian complicity with the Jews in overthrowing the emblematic Christian city had reached Arabia, the court of the *negus* in Ethiopia might have seemed an increasingly safe place to be’. Bowersock, *Crucible*, 71-2. Notice that Heraclius’s onslaught is a response to this earlier Persian invasion.

(62) Goldziher, *Introduction*, 23.

(63) *Ibid*, 26.

(64) Considerations similar to what follows apply to “pietism” as well. See, *ibid*, 407-410.

(65) Elizabeth Phillips, “Eschatology and Apocalyptic”, *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 290.

(66) Al-Azmeh, *Emergence*, fn. 145.

vision was not unfamiliar to pagan Arabs”, given the “extraordinarily tenuous and precarious ecological conditions”,⁶⁷ wherein its source is to be found; it is futile to search for it in a mature eschatology usually connected “to cycles of prophecy and regress as are normally associated with the monotheistic schemes of universal history”.⁶⁸

The culture out of which Islam arose was not immune to mythical or cyclical time, wherein the moment is but a reiteration, and, being subject to *fortuna*’s whim, inscrutable. “A past recollected in grief and a future anticipated with dread is”, Khalidi says, “a common symmetry in *jahili* poetry”.⁶⁹ Indeed, the *Jāhili Dahr* (Eternity) makes time impossible cognitively to process. Life is all but fleeing, ephemeral. It’s a mixture of manly heroism, profligacy, and a dismal outlook that allowed those Arabs to front the essential facts of desert life—if I may borrow a phrase from Thoreau—and make a stand in the face of so many fickle gods and goddesses.⁷⁰ With the rise of Islam, however, inscrutable *Dahr* makes way to sacred history; “History is an on-going plot where God is the ultimate “schemer””.⁷¹ It is *fortuna*, once again, “converted into providence by faith”, as Pocock would have put it.⁷² This is not, however, a reiteration of the story Pocock tells. Sacred history had to grow alongside “history pure and simple”; providence and “robust politics” had to share a common and rapidly expanding “horizon of expectations”.

According to Koselleck, “[t]he Church utilized the imminent-but-future End of the World as a means of stabilization”.⁷³ Stability is one of those “problem-topics” that have always animated the history of politics.⁷⁴ In one of its senses, “the Machiavellian Moment” is that moment when we confront the problem of *secular stability* heads on. The tradition with which Christianity breaks—the world it inherited—had its own ways of dealing with instability, one of which was syncretism.

(67) Ibid, 308.

(68) Ibid, 307.

(69) Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 4. See, also, Al-Azmeh, *Emergence*, 308-310.

(70) Were it not for assisting the needy, having sex, and merrymaking—the pre-Islamic poet, Tarafa (~543-569), tells us in his famous poem (*mu‘allaqa*)—we would be living in vain.

(71) Ibid, 9. See, also, Al-Azmeh, *Emergence*, 180-182.

(72) Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 44.

(73) Koselleck, ‘Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,’ 13.

(74) Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, expanded edition with a new foreword by Wendy Brown (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 9-10.

6.

“Islam as well as Christianity has an impressive record of executions, pogroms, and burned books”.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, there are “systematic and structural differences”.⁷⁶ Van Ess is talking about the phenomenon of anathematizing religious opponents, or “heresy”, as the Christians would call it.

The word for heresy in the European languages comes from the Greek. But in antiquity, *hairesis* meant simply “choice”; the word had no negative connotations. Any school of philosophy could be called a *hairesis*, and it was not scandalous or blameworthy to prefer one *hairesis* to another. It was only the Church Fathers who used the word to mean a reprehensible or foolish choice [...]. In the religions of antiquity no mention was made as yet of aberration or schism. Rather than reject a foreign faith, they incorporated and transformed its elements, a process known as syncretism.⁷⁷

Aziz Al-Azmeh warns us against regarding syncretism

as an adulteration of something pristine, as the adventitious result of miscegenation. It is, rather, like panthea, a pattern of internal relationships to be described in their particular instances, each being an instantiation of the sublime. It is aggregative and additive, consolidating the energy of one deity with that of another.⁷⁸

In more succinct terms, “the mutual convertibility of local deities is the rule”.⁷⁹ The issue is that, to go back to Van Ess,

[i]t was only in Christianity that orthodoxy was defined by dogmas [...]. Dogmas were formulated and confirmed by councils, and the councils were in turn legitimated by an institution, the Church. The Church dispensed salvation;

(75) Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 14.

(76) Ibid.

(77) Ibid, 11.

(78) Al-Azmeh, *Emergence*, 65. Elsewhere, he says: “Syncretism might be defined initially as a pattern of relationships of association, assimilation, superordination and subordination among deities, considered both as sublime energies and as common and proper names, this constituting a major feature of polytheism”; *ibid*, 47.

(79) *Ibid*, 50.

anyone who repudiated it forfeited redemption. [...] Eventually, the Church laid claim to what was called the secular arm. In 1215, the fourth Lateran council obliged secular authorities to take measures against the Cathari. The noun “Cathari,” in fact, is the source of the German word for heretic, *Ketzer*.⁸⁰

The Cathars were wiped out. The twenty years military campaign (1209-1229) was called—in the spirit of the times—the Albigensian crusade. When the religious wars erupted in the sixteenth century, however, appeal to violence meant “ever-threatening ruin”, to use the phrasing of the Religious Peace of Augsburg, signed in 1555.⁸¹ The Peace, according to Koselleck, “concealed within itself a new principle, that of ‘politics,’ which was to set itself in motion in the following century”.⁸² It didn’t set itself in motion as much as it was impelled by further religious violence: “it was only after the Thirty Years War had worn down the Germans that they were able to make the principle of religious indifference the basis for peace”.⁸³

To quote Koselleck one last time here, “peace became possible when religious potential was used up or exhausted; that is, at the point where it was possible to restrict or neutralize it politically”, as opposed to violently.⁸⁴ The principle of politics is now fully disclosed. The path charted by Pocock is brought to a conclusion: politics emerges as religion is evicted and the antagonism is sealed.

Unless we want to espouse some variation of sacred history—and I do not deny the sophistication that some *Heilsgeschichten* are capable of—we must reckon with the contingency of the said antagonism. We are dealing with a complex phenomenon, one that obtains at the end of an open, variegated and tortuous historical route. Such a phenomenon speaks to certain concerns, expresses certain moral ideals, and inhabits a certain intellectual universe, i.e. it comes with its criteria of justification and legitimation—themselves a product of the said historical process. Hence, it is a phenomenon with a definite character, so to speak, and yet, definiteness is not closure; our phenomenon admits of different readings and is—and was—open to possibilities other than the ones

(80) Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 12-13.

(81) Koselleck, *Modernity and the Planes of Historicity*, 14.

(82) *Ibid.*

(83) *Ibid.* Notice that he speaks of indifference, rather than tolerance.

(84) *Ibid.*, 14-15; emphasis mine.

that ultimately materialized. Indeed, it might have never materialized.⁸⁵

By that same historical logic, the secular and the religious were never in complete antagonism in Islam. In addition to the lack or attenuation of messianism, Van Ess teases out another crucial—“systematic and structural”—difference between the Christian and the Islamic traditions that might shed light as to why this is so: In Islam, he tells us, “orthopraxy is more important than orthodoxy”.⁸⁶ Van Ess calls this “a small but significant difference”.⁸⁷ It explains why, ultimately, jurisprudence took over, and Islam assumed a predominantly legalistic attitude. However, contends Van Ess, this is not a wholly negative outcome. In principle if not in actual fact, it makes the Islamic scholarly and lay communities—“all Muslims are laypersons”—more accommodating of differences and “innovations”. This might explain why, despite the fact that Islam and Christianity partook of the same processes, described by Al-Azmeh,⁸⁸ whereby Classical Antique syncretism gave way to Late Antique assimilation, assimilation did not become as powerful a penchant in Islam: it was less dogmatic. Van Ess could even still think of Islamic practices as syncretistic in nature as we have seen.

This too was further fashioned by history. Muslims grappled with the prospects of “ever-threatening ruin” early on. The death toll in the battle of Şifīn (657A.D) was unlike anything the Arabs have witnessed. “*Al-baqiyya, al-baqiyya*”, they shouted in concern, lest the slaughter wipe out what’s left of them.⁸⁹ Like the peace of Augusburg, to risk a loaded analogy, “the principle of politics” had to be born in the crucible of deadly violence. Politics, genuine politics, naturally mellows down orthodoxies. It brings with it another principle, the principle of tolerance.

(85) Speaking of his method, Aziz Al-Azmeh says, “Nowhere will the end product be used to colour the interpretation of emergence [of Islam in Late Antiquity], a process with no predetermined end in its beginnings”. *Emergence*, xii.

(86) Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 16.

(87) *Ibid*, 14.

(88) “[A]s the history of Paleo-Islam moved into the history of Islam, one can discern the re-enactment of transitions that were discussed in the foregoing pages: from deities of the instant to a named exclusive deity, propelled by the energy of dominion of œcumenical ambition, officiated by Caliphs bearing a sacred office, and overlaid by a theological sublimation”; *Emergence*, 99. Al-Azmeh captures the transition in one of his subtitles: “From pantheon to pantheos”; *ibid*, 87. See, also, pp. 65, 70, 76, 77 and 83.

(89) Ibn Muzāhim Al-Minqarī, *Waq‘at Şifīn*, edited with commentary by ‘Abd As-Salām Hārūn (Cairo: Al-Mu‘assasa Al-‘Arabiyya, 1381A.H.), 481.

According to Van Ess, the first civil war in Islam left its mark on the consciousness of the Muslim community in yet another way: a group of Muslims, the Khawārij (lit. those who walked out) declared themselves opposed to both sides of the strife. They considered themselves the only true Muslims and found it their duty to fight—to conduct a holy war, a jihad—against all other Muslim groups. They were present for a long period of time, but they were always on the periphery of the community. “The majority of believers considered them not only extremist schismatics, but also thugs (*bughāt*) and terrorists. [...] From that time on, it was the norm to identify the practice of *takfīr* [anathema] with exclusivism and extremism”.⁹⁰

One must warn against anachronistically considering those early centuries through the lens of a current situation replete with exclusivism and extremism. One must also warn, perhaps in the same breath, against casting the tolerance Van Ess speaks of in any nonrelative, let alone idealistic, terms. What we have here are very generic trends that do not dictate individual events nor shape historical circumstances down to the finest detail. They do have commanding power, however, and are capable of motivating the direction of things. In that respect, they afford us some explanatory power on account of which they are justified.

7.

The attenuation of messianism and dogmatism soften the opposition between the secular and the religious in Islam, which makes it possible for temporal and otherworldly categories to coexist. There are other factors that helped promote the drive to historiography in Islam, thereby disclosing the emergence of a true sensitivity towards the particular and the contingent, and an elaborate politics couched in a refined grasp of historical time.

Think of what follows as a rough appendix, liberally extracted from Khalidi’s *Arabic Historical Thought*, which lists some of these other factors—ideally, these claims will need to be independently substantiated.

The “providential” history of the Qur’ān, Khalidi tells us, was soon to give way to “communal history”, and “the overwhelming and monumental Qur’anic time to sequential time, dating and recording

(90) Ibid, 31.

the individual actions performed by members of a community that was beginning to *realize the merit of its progress in time*.⁹¹ This is, after all, the gist of the *Ḥadīth* movement that, by being keen on asking “who performed what action and when”, helped provide the early Muslims with “a time scheme which strove to *historicize* early Islam”.⁹²

The transition from *Ḥadīth* to history at the hands of Ibn Ishāq and Al-Wāqidī and others helped neutralize the “messianic-apocalyptic mood” and portrayed Muhammad “primarily [as] a political-military leader and only secondarily [as] a prophet-lawgiver”.⁹³ These historians worked under the patronage of the Abbasids, the second dynasty to assume the Caliphate, but their work does not betray the supposed “theocratic” tendencies of their patrons, as Goldziher puts it.

Another tributary is *adab*. In Pocock’s account of Renaissance Florence, humanist emphasis on rhetoric and grammar, the heightened “philological consciousness” of what he finds it apt to call “a republic of letters”, was crucial for producing an “intensified historical awareness”.⁹⁴ Likewise in second and third century Iraq and (to a lesser extent) Syria, “the climate of *Adab*” stimulated historiography by “encouraging the investigation of chronography and [...] transcending the traditional scriptural sources for the inquiry into ancient history”.⁹⁵ Many bureaucrats were themselves *hommes de lettres*, but their influence, as a class, was monumental in fostering a deep awareness of the particular, even irrespective of their *adabī* background.⁹⁶

In one sense of the word “secular”—the sense that does not beget strict opposition with the “religious”—these bureaucrats were a secular class. *Adab* endowed them with broad learning, with *paideia*, to the extent that they were not limited to religious education. But this secular class, often instrumental in running the state, also included physicians, engineers, astronomers, etc., that is philosophers, for the term was of a broad ambit. An excellent representative of the tradition of *falsafa*, according to Khalidi, a very Hellenized tradition to be sure, is Miskawayh (d. 1030) with whom, especially in his *Tajārib al-Umam*

(91) Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 34; emphasis mine.

(92) *Ibid*, 34.

(93) *Ibid*, 48.

(94) Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 58-64.

(95) *Ibid*, 121.

(96) *Ibid*, 59ff.

(The Experiences of Nations),⁹⁷ we see the emergence of a genre that can properly be called *siyāsa* (politics). The genre, however, owes as much to debates among elites as it owes to sectarian strife, and to anti-elite sentiment, whereby the different sects, having become “official” by the end of the tenth century, upheld their various accounts of *sharī‘a* (Religious Law), and pitted them against one another, and against elitist *siyāsa*. It is the latter that concerns us now.

8.

The debate between *siyāsa* and *sharī‘a* (politics and Law, with qualification) was becoming central as the different sultans—above all the Seljuk—were vying for power and trying to carve a niche out of the now declining Abbasid Caliphate. Two “moods” governed “Sunni political theory”:

a Hanbalite mood generally advocating obedience to the powers that be and idealizing the early-Islamic caliphate, and a Shafi‘i mood with a more pronounced interest in the qualifications and conditions of just government.

Khalidi goes on:

But beginning approximately in the fifth/eleventh century, the two currents drew closer to each other as both strove to accommodate the contemporary Abbasid caliphs within traditional theory, making room for caliphs with less than perfect credentials as well as for caliphs who could legitimately delegate part or most of their secular authority to deputies or helpers, such as the sultans.⁹⁸

These sultans could derive their legitimacy from their political skill, acting supposedly as delegates on behalf of the Caliph, the one invested with religious authority. It is very risky, and goes against the thesis of this essay, to cast the debate between *siyāsa* and *sharī‘a* as a debate “between *raison d’état* and canon law” as Khalidi puts it, albeit playfully.⁹⁹ The question is whether *sharī‘a* exhausts all moral and political considerations, and as such it alone—and its application to the situation at hand—is the proper object of the ruler’s concern.

(97) Ibid, 170-176.

(98) Ibid, 192.

(99) Ibid, 193.

In Al-Ṭurṭūshi's (d. 1126) contribution to the debate, we come to realize that "[a] state well ordained and firmly ruled, no matter what the religion of its ruler, was infinitely preferable to one ruled piously but incompetently".¹⁰⁰ There are considerations that "canon law", especially if essentialized, cannot overcome, and its *generic* decrees will fail to capture the significance of *particular* events motivating the political scene. Slowly, but steadily, *siyāsa* is asserting itself. The genre, however, will face a serious challenge as apocalyptic events encompass the 12th and the 13th century Muslim world.

9.

It was not only the map of the Muslim world that was compressed in the aftermath of the Crusades and the Mongol invasions; the sense of time was also compressed—warped, so to say. In the words of Ibn Al-Athīr, the advent of the Mongols was "the most important event, the most terrible catastrophe, the like of which the stream of days and nights has never brought forth".¹⁰¹ *Siyāsa*, gradually gaining in autonomy, needed to affirm itself again, to be, almost, born again out of the messianic mess encompassing the Muslim world in the wake of the sack of Baghdad. The old debate between *siyāsa* and *sharī'a* was reinvigorated.

The Ayyubids and the Mamluks, having emerged triumphant, prevailing upon the Crusaders and the Mongols respectively, could avail themselves of the *siyāsa* tradition, and were themselves master politicians, but they also sponsored some of the most ardent opponents of the said tradition, Sibṭ ibn Al-Jawzī, for whom "*sharī'a* is *siyāsa* perfected", and Ibn Taymiyya, the celebrated Shaykh Al-Islam, very popular nowadays among radical Islamist groups.

Ibn Taymiyya brings much erudition and a rare genius to bear on the very pertinent question of why Islam was depoliticized—a question more pertinent, Anjum tells us, than why is Islam (so) political—and what to do about it.¹⁰² He concludes that the injunction to command the right and forbid the wrong, so central to the very message of Islam and so ubiquitous in its founding texts, is the prerogative of the community. Ibn Taymiyya thus invests the community with enormous political

(100) Ibid, 195.

(101) Quoted in ibid, 185.

(102) Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

power. The Ulama, of course, retain a central position as they are the ones who define what is right and what is wrong. Shaykh Al-Islam, as it were, takes care to keep his profession in business.¹⁰³ More importantly, *sharī‘a* is vindicated.

To vindicate “Islam” is, arguably, a temperament that still has, and always had, its many supporters.¹⁰⁴ This “Islam”, however, is ahistorical. Many are too confident in having it in full, others are always seeking to retrieve it. One thing that the historical study of the unfolding in time of things Islamic shows is that time itself dictated destination, and that the sensibility to understand the development of destination in time was always there and was always being refined. It truly culminates in Ibn Khaldun, with his “detached” analysis of power and meticulous search for causes of events in history, but Ibn Khaldun builds on a rich tradition.

History and politics—and, concomitantly, secular stability and secular fulfilment—were always a possibility in Islam in a way they were not in Europe before “the Machiavellian moment”. Throughout its history, irrespective of how we articulate it, or how close we come to essentialize it, Islam accommodated an attenuated historicism that could not be posed as an external challenge with independent, supposedly higher, grounds for legitimacy.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, Muslims had no serious issue with “the succession of particulars in time”—they had and still have many other issues, but let us not conclude on a sad note.

* “I would like to thank Ebrahim Moosa and Dana Villa for supervising earlier versions of this paper. I’m also grateful to Hussein Abdulsater and Nicholas Roberts for their valuable comments.”

(103) Ibid.

(104) This is how Tarif Khalidi recaptures Ibn Taymiyya’s “trans-historical” “moto for reform”: “the present community will not be rectified except by that which rectified it when it first began”; Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 187.

(105) Iggers discusses what we might call a “third way” that was available to the Western tradition even if it never gained enough traction: “Nipperdey’s assertion [...] that historicism dissolved all transcendence and knew only “immanent historical processes,” [quoting Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1866-1918*, I, 637] clearly does not hold for German historicist tradition of historiography from Ranke to Meinecke and Ritter. For Humboldt, Ranke, and Droysen history is given coherence by “ideas” and “moral forces” (*Sittliche Mächte*) which reflect divine will. This will may operate mysteriously and remains inscrutable but nevertheless makes historical cognition possible”; Iggers, “Historicism”, 148.