

**Donner, Fred M. *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. 280 pp, hb \$25.95, ISBN: 978-0-674-05097-6.**

The field of early Islamic history has been dominated – some would say held back – by contentious debates about authenticity, reliability and origins: the authenticity of the massive number of oral traditions attributed to the Prophet (called *ḥadīth*), the reliability of relatively late Islamic sources for providing us information about the seventh century, and the precise nature of Islamic origins – what was Muḥammad “really” up to? In the late 1970s, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone’s brilliantly provocative *Hagarism*<sup>1</sup> rejected *tout court* the Islamic tradition’s account of its own origins and attempted to write a history of early Islam based on non-Islamic sources. They sought to step outside the tradition and see what resulted when the religious movement started by Muḥammad was viewed as others saw it. The upshot was a flight of scholarly fancy that suggested Islam had its origins as a Jewish messianic movement, with early Muslims (or “Hagarenes,” as Cook and Crone called them, following the naming practices of early medieval Christian sources) eventually breaking with Judaism and striking out in a separate direction, in due course giving us what we call “Islam” today.

Apart from Internet enthusiasts and religiously-motivated polemicists, nobody today, not even Cook and Crone themselves, believes that the picture of early Islam put forth in *Hagarism* is an accurate one. But the legacy of *Hagarism* has endured, for in one thin little volume, Cook and Crone put their fingers on a nagging problem in an electric way. It was a problem that Islamicists had been aware of for some time: the sources we rely upon to narrate about Islamic origins are late – sometimes written centuries after the events they claim to describe, they contradict one another, and they show signs of sectarian coloring and religiously-motivated redaction and omission. If the same stringent and skeptical standards as have been applied to early Christian history were applied to the sources of early Islamic history, much of the traditional account of Islamic origins would be turned to sawdust. John Wansbrough, an American scholar who taught Crone when she was an undergraduate at SOAS, attempted to apply the techniques of biblical and literary criticism to the early Islamic tradition, but the recondite opacity and (apparently intentionally) delphic nature of his work has bequeathed it the status of being cited much more often than it is actually understood.<sup>2</sup> As a book making a specific argument, *Hagarism* was ultimately a failure,<sup>3</sup> but in its stimulus of further research, writing, debate, and especially by challenging Islamicists to look beyond the confines of Arabic sources to the rich literatures of the Middle East that existed before, during, and after the rise of Islam, *Hagarism* was one of those rare books that changed a field.

A skeptical approach to the historical reliability of the Islamic tradition went back well before Wansbrough, Cook and Crone. Most notable among their predecessors were Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), a towering figure in the history and study of Islamic law; and before Schacht, to Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), a man who in many way stands as the godfather of modern Islamic studies

in the West.<sup>4</sup> Both Goldziher and Schacht showed that many of the oral traditions which had been attributed to Muḥammad and regarded with canonical authority by Muslims were actually late fabrications which reflected the cultural and political situation in the Middle East long after the Prophet had died. Cook and Crone merely took the skepticism that Schacht and Goldziher had applied to oral traditions in Islamic sources, especially legal sources, and directed it towards history; Schacht and Goldziher laid the egg that Cook, and especially Crone, hatched.<sup>5</sup>

Fred Donner teaches in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago and is one of the leading historians of the early Islamic period in the English-speaking world. Donner made his name with his first book, *The Early Islamic Conquests*,<sup>6</sup> a study which, though now-dated, is still the standard work on this topic, thirty years after its publication. If the field of early Islamic history can be roughly laid out into opposing camps of revisionists (who view our Arabic source material's historical reliability with distrust on account of its manifold difficulties), and traditionalists or anti-revisionists (who take a more positive view of these sources' reliability), Donner would fall in with the anti-revisionists. Indeed, he might possibly be their doyen. Donner has expended a good deal of energy articulating an approach to early Islamic history which takes a *via media* between the stark burn-down-the-house skepticism of Crone and an uncritical embrace of the traditional narrative.<sup>7</sup> If you want to think critically about Islamic origins, acknowledge the problems that are there in the sources, and yet still be able to use those sources to say something, Donner is the historian for you. And, in the generation of English-speaking scholars born after the Second World War, Donner and Crone stand out as antitypes representing two contrasting and conflicting approaches and attitudes towards the early Islamic tradition and its usefulness for historical reconstruction.

It is in this scholarly context of debates about the reliability of the early Islamic tradition that Donner's most recent book, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (hereafter *MB*), should be read. *MB* has no footnotes, only a "Notes and Guide to Further Reading" at its end, and is written in an easy-going and highly-accessible style. Donner's audience is the interested non-specialist and over the course of 224 pages, Donner re-tells the story of early Islam, into the early eighth century, mixing standard views of what took place with his own revisionist interventions into the traditional narrative.<sup>8</sup> Many parts of the book – especially Donner's descriptions of the early Islamic conquests, one of his areas of expertise – are the clearest, easiest-to-understand accounts I know of for different aspects of early Islamic history.

Donner starts *MB* with a preface in which he announces his intention in writing such a book: Western scholars have traditionally tried to explain the origins and rise of Islam through reference to a variety of factors – economic, sociological, nationalist – none of them religious. What sets Donner's approach apart, however, is that early Islam was a religious phenomenon and that the actors who made early Islamic history were driven by religious motivations: "It is my conviction that Islam began as a religious movement – not as a social, economic, or 'national' one; in particular, it embodied an intense concern for attaining personal salvation through righteous behavior. The early believers were concerned with social and political issues but only insofar as they related to concepts of piety and proper behavior needed to ensure salvation" (xii).

This conviction that religion, and not something else, lies at the heart of early Islamic history is a constant factor throughout *MB*. At one level, the work can be seen as an act of systematic redescription: at every point, even where other explanations of behavior seem to be equally if not more plausible, Donner opts to read things as having been motivated by religious and pious factors.

Like many books and college courses about the origins of Islam, we are given in the first chapter a discussion of the political and cultural situation of the Middle East and Arabia just before the start of the Prophet's mission. It is a familiar cast of characters – there are Dyophysites and Monophysites, Byzantines and Sasanians, and an Arabia sandwiched between two great powers and organized along tribal lines.

It is in Donner's second chapter, "Muhammad and the Believers' Movement," that his own unique take on early Islam becomes increasingly apparent. There is a skillful summary of the Islamic tradition's received understanding of the life and career of the Prophet, followed by a very frank discussion of the problems that attach to such an account (e.g., "The vast ocean of traditional accounts from which the preceding brief sketch of Muhammad's life is distilled contains so many contradictions and so much dubious storytelling that many historians have become reluctant to accept any of it at face value" (51)). But Donner is not willing to throw the baby out with the bathwater: there are problems with the Islamic sources, but amidst all the chaff, there is some wheat which, he suggests, goes back quite early and can be used in historical reconstruction.

Near-contemporary non-Islamic sources provide comforting confirmation of the most rudimentary elements of the Muslim story – that Muhammad in fact existed and led a movement – but for Donner, the most important source for history is the most important religious source as well: the Quran. Views that even the Quran has a late(r) origin, well after the death of the Prophet, are rejected and it is upon the rock of Islam's scripture that Donner constructs his profile of what the earliest beliefs of Muhammad and his religious movement were: here is the key lying behind all other moves Donner makes in the book. Adhering closely to the Quran, the story Donner wants to tell is of an Islam which, initially, was not self-consciously "Islam" at all. It was, rather, an ecumenical, monotheistic, religious reform movement which had an emphasis on piety and a strong belief in an imminent Last Day. It was only decades after the Prophet's death that something corresponding more closely to what we call "Islam" today began to peak its face out from behind the covers of history as the Islamic tradition, as it attempted to separate itself out from other Middle Eastern religious groups.

If Muhammad and his followers did not see themselves as "Muslims" in our sense of the word, what exactly were they? They would have identified themselves as "Believers," not "Muslims," Donner contends: in the Quran itself, the word "Muslim" occurs less than seventy five times, while "Believer" shows up in nearly a thousand places. Monotheism was the key and foundational belief in Muhammad's movement: "Above all else, Believers were enjoined to recognize the oneness of God. [...] The Qur'an tirelessly preaches the message of strict monotheism, exhorting its hearers to be ever mindful of God and obedient to his will" (58). The

Quran gives us other insights as well into the worldview of these earliest Believers: they believed in prophets and prophecy, they believed in written revelation from God, they believed in angels, too.

But there was more than a set of doctrines or ideas that animated this movement – there was also a demand for particular kinds of behavior: Believers had to live a righteous life; they were expected to be humble, to help the poor, be diligent in prayer, to fast during Ramadan, to make pilgrimage. Donner also cites Quranic injunctions to dress in modest ways and abstain from eating pork or drinking alcohol, among other things, as evidence to suggest that Believers adhered to a strict code of personal morality which put them at tension with the iniquity they saw everywhere around them: “the Believers,” as he puts it, “were concerned with what they saw as the rampant sinfulness of the world around them and wished to live by a higher standard in their own behavior” (66). There was a certain moderation to the rigorous piety of the early Believers, however: although they held to high moral standards, they were also careful to avoid the world-denying ascetic withdrawal that characterized prominent strains of Late Antique Near Eastern Christianity. Believers were very much meant to be in the world.

One of the most important features of the early Believers’ movement was that it was “ecumenical,” according to Donner. Believers may have seen themselves as different from the sinful people around them – polytheists, Christians, or Jews – but, Donner claims, a Jew or a Christian who had the correct standard of behavior could be part of the movement because they, too, were monotheists. “The reason for this ‘confessionally open’ or ecumenical quality was simply that the basic ideas of the Believers and their insistence on observance of strict piety were in no way antithetical to the beliefs and practices of some Christians and Jews” (69). One could be a Believer and be a Christian and one could be a Christian, yet not a Believer. One could be a Jew and a Believer and, in the same way, one could be a Jew and yet not a Believer. And, too, one could be a Believer, yet not a Christian or a Jew. The badge of belonging was belief in one God and adherence to a strict standard of morality. And at this very early stage, the label “Muslim” referred to only a subset of the Believers’ movement. A “Muslim” was a “Quranic monotheist” who came from neither a Jewish nor a Christian background. It was only subsequently that the word would evolve to refer to a person who belonged to a religion distinct from Christianity or Judaism.

Donner picks out several other characteristics of the early Believers’ movement: Muhammad was its leader and seen as a divinely-inspired prophet; it was also a strongly apocalyptic movement, with Believers apparently thinking that the End was near. This intense sense of apocalypticism and an imminent Last Judgment was fundamental in the Believers’ movement’s ability to mobilize its adherents to action: “Convinced that the world around them was mired in sin and corruption, they felt an urgent need to ensure their own salvation by living in strict accordance with the revealed law, as the Judgment could dawn at any moment” (79). If we accept, Donner points out, the traditional division of Quranic verses into Meccan and Medinan, it becomes evident that most of the strongly apocalyptic passages in the Quran are to be found in the Meccan period. This leads him to suggest that “by establishing their community in Medina,

[the early Believers] were ushering in the beginning of a new era of righteousness, and hence that they were actually witnessing the first events of the End itself” (81).

A final characteristic of the Believers’ movement was militancy: Believers were expected to do more than cultivate virtue and pious behavior in their own lives. They were to be actively promoting God’s law in the world around them, even through force: “this sounds like a program aimed at establishing ‘God’s kingdom on Earth,’ that is, a political order (or at least a society) informed by the pious precepts enjoined in the Qur’an and one that should supplant the sinful political order of the Byzantines and the Sasanians” (85).

Once Donner has outlined the lineaments of the Believers’ worldview, the rest of *MB* is spent tracing the community of Believers as they gradually turn into Muslims. Telling the story of this transformation takes Donner through the first decades of what is traditionally seen as “Islamic” history – conquests, disputes over succession, civil wars – but his telling takes something of a twist: he is careful to speak of the actors as “Believers,” not “Muslims,” and at every turn, he explains their actions with reference to the profile of the “Believers’ movement” he has laid out earlier in the book. Viewing the earliest Muslims as belonging to a “Believers’ movement” has, for Donner, some useful consequences. It can, he suggests, explain how Muhammad’s followers managed to conquer large amounts of territory very rapidly and do so with apparently very little violence. On Donner’s view, this is because the Believers themselves came as monotheists and were encountering monotheistic populations, asking them only to pay taxes, believe in one God, and adhere to pious standards of behavior that they themselves would have also held up as ideals. What is more, as an ecumenical phenomenon, the Believers’ movement was open to be joined by Christians and Jews in the conquered populations.

Speaking of these early Believers as “Muslims” and calling their movement “Islam” before the late seventh or early eighth century would actually be, Donner contends, “historically inaccurate” (195). It was not until this late period that a subtle redefinition of terms began to take place and a narrowing of the Believers’ movement to exclude Jews and Christians happened. Donner places this restriction and redefinition during the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik (685–705); it was during ‘Abd al-Malik’s rule that the second Civil War came to an end and, after more than a decade of brutal fighting within the community of Believers, the leader of the community was able to at last return his focus to pursuing the original goals and ideals of the Believers’ movement. So, for example, ‘Abd al-Malik began to again send out military expeditions whose aim was to conquer territory and expand the amount of territory under the authority of God’s law. But, Donner suggests, in the wake of years of civil war in the Believers’ community, merely going back to the basics of the Believers’ movement was not enough for ‘Abd al-Malik: he needed to find a way to reunite, reenergize, and refocus the fractured community and also prop up the legitimacy of his rule and that of his family, the Umayyads. It was this need that led ‘Abd al-Malik to initiate a series of measures and shifts in emphasis that would lead to the emergence of Islam. “Believer” was redefined to make it synonymous with “Muslim” and exclude Christians and Jews in a way that it had not previously done; there was a concomitant increase in emphasis for Believers/Muslims on the importance of Muhammad and the Quran in their

worldview, evidenced very clearly, for instance, in a redesign of coinage that witnessed the jettisoning of Byzantine and Sasanian imagery, which Believers/Muslims had previously used, and its replacement by slogans from the Quran which were often anti-Trinitarian in their implication; also part of this policy of emphasizing the Quran, Donner suggests, was ‘Abd al-Malik’s taking of a title with Quranic resonance, *khalīfat Allāh* (“Deputy of God”), to refer to himself. There were other movements which indicated that the circle of inclusion in the Believers’ movement was being drawn more closely: certain distinctive Christian doctrines, especially the Trinity, were rejected, most conspicuously in the construction of the Dome of the Rock, which prominently featured anti-Trinitarian passages from the Quran. Practices such as prayer, fasting, and the pilgrimage, which had their origin in the life of Muhammad, were elaborated and fixed in this period, and other practices, such as Friday prayer, may have even had their origin in this time. The Umayyads also encouraged the composition and elaboration of a distinctively Islamic salvation history which set up for the community a story of its own origins which emphasized its Muslim character, not its Believer one; conquest narratives similarly told their stories from the perspective of Muslims, not Believers. Where there had once been a monotheistic reform movement that was open to anyone who believed in one God and was committed to righteous behavior, there was now a new religion, Islam, which was a rival and competitor to Christianity and Judaism.

“There is no historical task,” Albert Schweitzer wrote, “which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps something similar might be said of the life of Muhammad. Donner’s endgame in writing a work such as *MB* is not difficult to divine: apart making moves in the context of specialized debates carried out among Islamicists, it is evident that his hope is to help create and legitimate a space for an inclusive, tolerant Islam in today’s world by finding such an Islam in the seventh century, when it all began. If the earliest Islam was ecumenical and open to anyone who believed in one God and supported the idea of pious and good behavior – if it bore an uncanny resemblance in certain respects to a contemporary mainline Protestant church – then such a discovery would be an enormous boon to liberals in the West and would make today’s Muslim reformers the true *salafis*, for they, not Wahhabis or the Muslim Brotherhood, would be seeking to return the Islamic community to its true beginnings.

Nevertheless, good politics and good history are not always easy bedfellows, and however laudable Donner’s goal might be, *MB* unfortunately suffers from a number of serious defects. The first and perhaps most serious problem is the lack of evidence for many of the claims that Donner makes;<sup>10</sup> the brittleness and shallowness of the evidentiary basis of much of Donner’s picture is obscured to the non-specialist by the text’s lack of footnotes, but at times it is even apparent from a plain reading of *MB*. For instance, a major assertion – that the words “Believer” and “Muslim” were redefined under ‘Abd al-Malik to exclude Jews and Christians (203–204) – is backed up by only passing references to the naming practices of unspecified non-Arabic sources and by what is essentially a discussion of the logic behind the use of the words “Believers” (*mu’uminun*), “Emigrants” (*muhajirun*) and “Muslim” without clear reference to any particular texts, apart from the Quran itself. “In the present state of our knowledge,” Donner

writes, “we can only speculate about why this shift in the identity of the Believers occurred” (204). In other words, a major claim is made, little in the way of evidence is offered to support it, and then it is followed by self-confessed speculation as to why the shift in self-identification – never proven in the first place – actually occurred.<sup>11</sup> Such guess work is not an isolated incident, either: *MB* is populated by speculative “may haves”<sup>12</sup> which have little, if any, supporting evidence and which give the reader little confidence in the verisimilitude of the picture Donner attempts to paint. In other cases, claims Donner makes seem to be actually contradicted by what evidence we do possess: Islam, according to Donner, is supposed to have emerged from the Believers’ movement in the late seventh and early eighth century and it was at this point that the movement began to exclude Christians and evince an attitude that was more hostile towards Christian doctrines. But the *Maronite Chronicle*, a Syriac document dating from the 660s, reports that already by the year 660, the Caliph Mu’āwīya attempted to issue a coinage on which the Christian cross had been removed, an omission which meant that people refused to use them.<sup>13</sup> Could it have been the case that early Islam was not more explicit in its outward manifestations of sectarian identity because as a small, fragile minority beginning rule over a much, much larger majority, it had to be mindful of how overtly triumphalist and provocative sectarian acts – such as de-Christianizing coins – might have been received by the mass of its non-Muslim population?

The main piece of evidence driving *MB* is Donner’s close reading of the Quran and the image of a Believers’ movement which he teases out of it. But Patricia Crone has engaged in a similar close reading of the Quran of her own – undertaken, like Donner’s, without reference to other primary sources. In Crone’s instance, she used her close reading to suggest that the Quran itself was actually composed, at least in part, outside the Arabian peninsula,<sup>14</sup> a view which Donner would no doubt be unsympathetic towards.<sup>15</sup> Close readings of the Quran, therefore, can produce quite radically divergent results. What is more, Donner’s close reading suffers from a problem of context: there is absolutely none whatsoever for any of the verses he picks out as illustrative of the early community’s beliefs, and yet the verses of the Quran are supposed to have been revealed to Muhammad in a number of different contexts over the course of decades and the Quran can evince different attitudes towards the same subject.<sup>16</sup> What is more, the Muslim tradition has recognized tensions between verses in the Quran and sought to deal with these by specifying that some verses abrogate, or cancel out, others. “One should not,” one important manual of Quranic study states, “interpret the Book of God until after one knows what is abrogating and abrogated from it.”<sup>17</sup> A text without a context, the old saying goes, is a pretext and this is a clear and present danger throughout Donner’s use of the Quran in *MB*.

Apart from issues of (missing) context, what is even more fundamentally problematic with Donner’s reading of the Quran is his reliance on moving from an “ought” to an “is” in his argumentation: he takes a normative document and uses its prescriptions and proscriptions to make statements about real peoples’ actual beliefs and behaviors. But it is not clear just how many people actually believed and acted on the things which the Quran made pronouncements

about: for all we know, the community of Believers who form the basis of almost all of *MB* could have been only a handful of people, or perhaps only Muhammad himself.<sup>18</sup>

Donner's argument about this shadowy, undefined (and undefinable) community becomes even more problematic when he begins introducing into it ideological divisions in order to deal with passages that do not sit well with his vision of the nature of the Believers' movement; these divisions serve the function of epicycles intended to preserve the integrity of his theory. The Believers' movement which Donner envisions was initially supposed to have been ecumenical and open to both Christians and Jews. One immediate problem with such a view is that the Quran contains verses which criticize the doctrine of the Trinity – precisely those verses which were placed prominently on the Dome of the Rock and which Donner even reproduces in an appendix to *MB*. Such verses suggest that, from a very early period, the “Believers' movement” cannot have been nearly as ecumenical as Donner holds it to have been. The importance of such sectarian verses is initially downplayed in *MB*,<sup>19</sup> but later on, we find out that “for those Believers who were inclined to be sticklers on the question of God's oneness, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity must have always been a problem” (213).<sup>20</sup> So, it seems, there were some Believers who were open to Christians joining the movement and there were others who were not; there was, apparently, an anti-ecumenical wing of the Believers' movement which somehow managed to get its views represented in the text of the Quran. But there is no evidence to support any of this apart from realities created by Donner's exegesis of the Quran. And again, with no way of knowing how many Believers there actually were, it is impossible to get a sense of what any of *MB*'s references to the makeup of their community mean precisely: we have some sort of tension or schism created solely by means of exegetical construct.<sup>21</sup>

This problem becomes even more acute when we look to the traditional sources to try to get an idea of how many people there may have been in the community of Believers. When Muhammad and his community emigrated to Medina in 622, the community would not have numbered more than one hundred persons; when he returned to Mecca eight years later, in 630, to conquer it, by contrast, he led an army of some 10,000 men.<sup>22</sup> Most of the new Believers entered the community closer to 630 than they did to 622; as it became clear that Muhammad had gained hegemony in Western Arabia, entire tribes started converting, in groups, to Islam. Indeed, the year 630 is known in the Islamic tradition as the “Year of the Delegations” for all the conversions of tribes which took place then. If these sources are to be trusted in any way, it is hard to see how Donner's idealized community of rigorously pious Believers is to map onto a large group of people who converted *en masse*. Donner does acknowledge that most early Believers were probably illiterate and knew actually very little about the content of the movement they had recently joined (77), but the implications of such an important admission are never fully drawn out in *MB*. Indeed, the phenomena of mass conversion, illiteracy, and ignorance of much of the actual content of the Quran and Muhammad's teaching can explain many of the same issues that Donner's more complex theory of an ecumenical, monotheist reform movement which silently drops off the historical radar screen and has its tracks effaced



by the subsequent tradition does, in a much simpler and elegant (though perhaps less politically useful) and better documented fashion.

Throughout *MB*, Donner uses the term “monotheist” and “monotheism” as one of the bases for what the Believers’ movement was all about: Christians and Jews could join in the movement because they, too, were monotheists. But it is not clear that Muhammad himself was even a monotheist at the beginning of his Prophetic mission: in the famous “incident of the Satanic Verses,” Muhammad recited as part of the Quran a piece of revelation which sanctioned intercessory prayer to three local Meccan deities; that Muhammad did not realize that such prayer was inappropriate until he was later corrected by the angel Gabriel suggests that he believed in the existence of more than one God at that point in his career. The verses were abrogated from the Quran and we only know about them from the Islamic tradition itself, which would have hardly invented such an embarrassing story.<sup>23</sup> What this means for *MB* is that the Believers’ movement could not have been monotheistic, at least initially, in the way that Donner wants it to have been.

But there is a deeper problem with Donner’s very use of the categories “monotheist” and “monotheism:” they are early modern inventions and their use in a late antique context is anachronistic. “Monotheism” was first used by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More in 1660 and “monotheist” was first used by the Platonist Ralph Cudworth in 1678.<sup>24</sup> There is no word for “monotheist” or “monotheism” in Syriac<sup>25</sup> and the Greek words for “monotheism” (μονοθεΐα), “monotheist” (μονοθεΐτης), and “monotheistic” (μονόθεος) do not occur at all in the standard Greek-English dictionary of Liddell, Scott and Jones.<sup>26</sup> “Μονοθεΐα,” which today means “monotheism,” is attested one time in Lampe’s *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, where it is understood to mean “single divinity;”<sup>27</sup> searching for these three terms in the monumental *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* – which contains over 100 million words and seeks to be comprehensive in its coverage of Greek authors from Homer to the fall of Constantinople – has μονοθεΐτης (“monotheist”) and μονοθεΐα (“monotheism”) occurring only once each, both times in the fourteenth-century *Historia Romana* of Nikephoros Gregoras. It is not clear that Christians, Jews and Believers/Muslims in the seventh century would have proleptically viewed themselves as belonging to certain categories found in early modern typologies of religion and as a result felt a certain kinship with one another. The opposite is actually more often the case: the more similar people and groups are, the more acrimonious their small differences can become.<sup>28</sup>

When Donner refers to “monotheism,” he presumably has the Arabic term ‘*tawhīd*’ in mind, but the term does not occur in the Quran, nor does the verb it derives from, *wahhada* (“to unify,” “to make one”).<sup>29</sup> Rather than translate *tawhīd* as “monotheism,” it would be more proper to translate it “unitarianism,” a rendering which brings out its contrast with another, related word, associated with Christianity – *tathlīth* (“Trinitarianism”) – and which makes the sectarian coloring and sharp edge of the term immediately more apparent. *Tawhīd* is related to the word for “one,” “*wāhīd*,” and *tathlīth* is related to the word for three, “*thalātha*.” One can see the contrast in these two in such verses of the Quran as 5:73: “Those who say that God is the third of three (*thālīth thalātha*) have disbelieved; there is no god but the One God (*ilāh wāhīd*).” If one

were to replace the words “monotheist” and “monotheism” with the words “unitarian” and “unitarianism” throughout *MB*, the ecumenism of the unitarian reform movement might not look so ecumenical and open to Christians any more. It is clear that belief in One God is something which Christians, Jews, and Believers all shared; what it is not clear and something which Donner does not show is that Christians, Jews, and Believers all had a shared unitarianism, ever. To prove his ecumenical hypothesis, Donner needs to make a case for widespread unitarian sympathies among Late Antique Near Eastern Christians, which he fails to do.<sup>30</sup> Donner does attempt to speak of Monophysite and Nestorian “formulations of trinitarian doctrine” which may have made them more amenable to Believer/Muslim unitarianism, but he does not seem to realize that Nestorianism and Monophysitism – both unhelpful terms<sup>31</sup> – were Christological positions and disputes between Nestorians, Monophysites and Chalcedonians centered on the issue of Christ, not the Trinity.<sup>32</sup>

And there are additional serious issues. The Believers, according to Donner, are motivated to expand territorially because they want to spread God’s law to the sinful world around them, but sin, sinfulness, and holiness do not seem to be major themes of the Quran,<sup>33</sup> nor is there much law to be had there, either. Of the more than 6,200 verses in the Quran, it has been traditionally held that some 500 of them actually deal with legal topics, but scholars differ as to the precise number of legal verses: 350 has also been suggested, as has 600.<sup>34</sup> Of these verses, most deal with Islamic cultic issues and perhaps only 80 deal with actual legal topics.<sup>35</sup> What is more, the Quran’s legal pronouncements are not set out in the manner of a code which attempts to cover all aspects of human life, but rather, as Coulson has put it, “they often have the appearance of *ad hoc* solutions for particular problems rather than attempts to deal with any general topic comprehensively.”<sup>36</sup> Donner’s repeated references to the Believers’ need to spread God’s law should to be read in light of these numbers; they should also be read in light of other numbers as well – the large numbers of late, mass converts to the Believers’ movement, which I mentioned above, converts who, by Donner’s own admission probably had only a very rudimentary knowledge of Islam/the Believers’ message and the 80 or so verses of God’s law that might have been relevant to the large non-Muslim populations who were conquered by armies of Believers. Indeed, one wonders at times whether Donner is writing about early Muslims or whether he is writing about Essenes who were zealous for the Jewish law, living apart, and seeking holiness: “The fact that Believers were sometimes required to make such purification payments, however, underscores how the community was, in principle, focused on maintaining its inner purity, on being as much as possible a community that lived strictly in righteousness, so as to set themselves apart from the sinful world around them and thus to attain salvation in the afterlife” (64). “But on the whole,” writes one prominent scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, “the Qur’ān confirmed and upheld the existing customs and institutions of Arab society and only introduced the changes that were deemed necessary.”<sup>37</sup> Another prominent authority on Islamic law has pointed to the widespread consumption of alcohol documented among Muslims, even among experts in Quranic legal matters, as indicative of the fact in the early period, “one can safely assume that, apart from certain highly regulated areas in the Quran (marriage, divorce,

inheritance, etc.), there was little concern at the time for an Islamic system of legal morality.”<sup>38</sup> All of this brings us back to an earlier question: just who were these Believers that Donner speaks so much about? How many were there? Where were they located? Where were they to be found among the mass of mass converts, of people who knew little about the actual content of the Quran? What was the precise content of the Quranic law they were trying to spread and how did that law set them so starkly apart from the “sinful” Byzantine and Sasanian regimes<sup>39</sup> which Donner refers to on more than one occasion?

Fred Donner has written a clear and lucid book and has skillfully told a compelling, even feel-good story which will be easy to understand for any non-specialist and which will be met with gladness by those sharing his political ideals. It is a story, however, which is as radically revisionist as *Hagarism* and equally as fanciful. But lacking proper documentation, bereft of the impressively learned footnotes that the authors of *Hagarism* deployed, and indulging deeply in historical speculation, in *Muhammad and the Believers* Donner, who has devoted much energy to combating revisionism, has ironically told a tale which is in many respects less historically plausible than the book by Cook and Crone which has in some ways symbolized a scholarly impulse that has served as a foil for much of his career.

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## Notes

1. Crone, Patricia, and Michael Cook. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
2. See John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; repr. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004) and *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978; repr. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006). See Andrew Rippin’s anecdote (2004, xiii) about Wansbrough being unapologetic for having written a “difficult” book with *Quranic Studies*.
3. Wansbrough himself gave the book a critical review; see “Patricia Crone and Michael Cook: *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978), 155–156.

4. Other scholars, like the massively erudite Belgian Jesuit, Henri Lammens (d. 1937), might also be mentioned, but it is the skeptical work of Goldziher and Schacht on *ḥadīth* that has cast the longest shadow in the field.
5. Crone, more so than Cook, vigorously applied a skeptical approach to Islamic origins in subsequent publications. See, e.g., her *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980) and *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Her article, “How did the quranic pagans make a living?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68 (2005), 387–399, is a more recent example of her skeptical and subversive orientation towards the traditional narrative of Islamic origins. Cook also continued his skeptical approach to early Islamic history in his *Early Muslim Dogma: a source-critical study* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
6. Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
7. See his *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
8. A more scholarly presentation of some of the key ideas in *Muhammad and the Believers* can be found in Donner’s “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community,” *Al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003), 9–53.
9. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 1910), 4.
10. At times, the undocumented historical speculation reads a bit like historical fiction, e.g., “‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, who perhaps had more influence than anyone with the population of Medina, must have been torn, as he believed himself to be more entitled to the office ‘Uthman held” (157).
11. A shift in how outsiders label a movement does not necessarily correlate to a shift in self-identification and self-labeling by that movement.
12. For instance: “One source of Muhammad’s difficulties with Jews, who controlled one of Medina’s main markets, may have been his desire to establish a new market in Median to assist the new Meccan Emigrants” (45); “For a short while, Muhammad may have called his movement ‘Hanafism’ (*hanifiyya*), presumably in reference to a vague pre-Islamic monotheism, but this usage does not seem to have become widespread” (58); “some Jews may have balked at the idea that Muhammad, whom they knew and could see and hear, was to be put on the same plane as their revered patriarchs of old” (77); “Indeed, *hijra* in

this larger sense may have served as the decisive marker of full membership into the community of Believers, much as baptism does for Christians” (86); “some Believers may have felt an urgent need to try to secure control of the city of Jerusalem. [...] The Believers may have felt that, because they were in the process of constructing the righteous ‘community of the saved,’ they should establish their presence in Jerusalem as soon as possible” (97); “We have also considered the character of the expansion, arguing that the sources’ emphasis on the military dimension of the expansion has obscured its nature as a monotheistic reform movement that many local communities may have seen little reason to oppose, because it was doctrinally not obnoxious to them” (142); “Such apocalyptic convictions may have been the force that impelled some Believers to abandon their usual day-to-day concerns and enlist in the distant and arduous campaigns to spread the writ of God’s word that are usually called the ‘Islamic conquests’” (197); “He may even have wanted to advance for himself the claim to being that final, just ruler in whose day the Judgment would begin and who would deliver to God sovereignty over the world. [...] His desire to honor this scenario may have been what led him to order the construction of one of the most magnificent works of early Islamic architecture, the sumptuous building in Jerusalem usually called the ‘Dome of the Rock’ [...] It therefore seems plausible to suggest that the Dome of the Rock and attendant buildings may have been constructed to provide a suitably magnificent setting for the events of the Judgment” (199).

13. See Andrew Palmer, et al., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 32. Donner makes a possible allusion to this passage (213), but does not dwell on it, presumably because it poses difficulties for his attempted reconstruction of the history of the Believers’ movement.
14. See her “How did the quranic pagans make a living,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68.3 (2005), 387–389. Crone’s focus in this article is only on the question of how Muhammad’s pagan opponents made a living. Their apparent cultivation of olives and the inability of olive cultivation to take place in Western Arabia lead her to intimate that parts of the Quran must therefore have their origins outside of western Arabia.
15. See his comments on the “late origins” hypothesis with respect to the Quran, 54–56.
16. For example, in 4:43, it seems that Muslims are not to pray while intoxicated; 2:219 has a mixed attitude towards wine, saying that it has both great sin but also profit for people, with the sin outweighing the profit, and 5:90–91 calls wine the work of Satan which is to be shunned. At the same time, 47:15 places “delicious wine” in paradise.
17. See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-qur’ān*, vol. 2 (Damascus/Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2000/1460), 700 (quoting unnamed *imāms* approvingly).

18. See the evidence that Goldziher amassed for there being widespread ignorance of the actual contents of Islam among many early Muslims in his *Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien)*, vol. 2, trans. C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 39–40. Such evidence can be easily multiplied.
19. There is a reference to “The small number of Qur’anic verses that explicitly attack the idea of the Trinity” (77).
20. Note the “must have.” There is no evidence for such a claim.
21. References to Jews as turning into pigs (e.g., 2:65, 5:60 and 7:166) might presumably reflect the views of another wing of the Believers’ movement which was uncomfortable with the inclusion of Jews in the community?
22. See W. Montgomery Watt’s article, ‘*Hidjra*’ in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), where Watt puts the number of emigrants – not counting Muḥammad, Abū Bakr, ‘Alī and their wives – at about seventy. For the size of Muhammad’s army, see A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 545.
23. For the Satanic Verses and Muhammad as a henotheist, see Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, trans. Anne Carter (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 96–97, 106–107. Also see W. Montgomery Watt’s discussion of this incident and whether it shows that Muhammad was a species of polytheist at this point in *idem.*, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesmen* (London: Clarendon, 1961), 60–65. On the incident of the Satanic Verses in general, see Mohammed Shahab Ahmed, *The Satanic Verses Incident in the Memory of the Early Muslim Community. An Analysis of the early Riwayāhs and their Isnāds*, (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1997).
24. See Nathan MacDonald, “The Origin of ‘Monotheism,’” *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, eds. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E.S. North (London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 204–205.
25. For example, it only occurs one time in Jessie Payne Smith’s *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), not as a definition, but as a translation in the sentence: *men ḥad Alāhā maṣṭe’ lan*, “he turns us aside from monotheism” (372, s.v., *sṭā*). But *ḥad Alāhā* is more properly and literally translated, “one God.” “Monotheism” does not occur in the Latin index to K. Brockelmann’s *Lexicon Syriacum*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Halle: Niemeyer, 1928), either.
26. See H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

27. See G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 882, s.v. *μονοθεΐα*
28. See Anton Blok, “The Narcissism of Minor Differences,” 115–135 in *idem.*, *Honour and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
29. See D. Gimaret’s article “*Tawhīd*” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. He may also have in mind the word *hanīfiyya*, though as he recognizes (71), it is a word whose meaning is not entirely clear (see W. Montgomery Watt’s article, “*Hanīf*” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).
30. He could have attempted to look for Jewish Christians in the seventh century, as did, e.g., Shlomo Pines in “Notes on Islam and on Arabic Christianity and Judaeo-Christianity,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984), 135–152. Donner does make a reference to “(non-trinitarian) Christians” (70), but this point is never pursued or elaborated.
31. See, e.g., Sebastian P. Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A lamentable misnomer,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78 (1996 [1997]), 53–66.
32. The “Trisagion” controversy is perhaps an exception to this statement and provides an instance where Trinitarian and Christological controversies overlapped. Nevertheless, it has been a standard (and, to my mind, equally misguided) argument to make that Nestorian or Monophysite Christologies in some way made the Middle East’s Christian population more willing to accept the diminished Christology of the Quran, but no one I am aware of and certainly no theologian I am aware of has ever made this argument about Nestorian or Monophysite Trinitarianism.
33. The Arabic words for sin, *ithm* and *khaṭī’ā*, and their derivatives, occur less than 50 times in the entire Quran. Words and verbs related to the notion of holiness (Q.D.S) occur only ten times in the Quran.
34. For 350, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 26. For 600, see N. J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964), 12. For a view that the Quran contains, proportionally, as much legal material as the Pentateuch, see S. D. Goitein, “The Birth Hour of Muslim Law? An Essay in Exegesis,” *The Muslim World* 50 (1960), 24. Though, however, it should be pointed out that in absolute terms, the Quran, being shorter than the Torah, still contains far less legal material than the Mosaic Law.
35. See Coulson, *History of Islamic Law* 12.
36. Coulson 13.

37. See Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* 26.
38. See Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 40.
39. See, e.g., 85, 88.