

Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; xvii+525 pages.

Against prevailing historiographic discourses that tend to sequester Islamic history apart from a more comprehensive consideration of the unfolding of world history, Aziz al-Azmeh argues for the need to consider developments in Islam as being integral for a proper understanding of the greater history of the world—and vice versa. Within this integrated framework, what is commonly held as being history of *Antiquity* becomes exposed as being the *history of the Judeo-Christianity*, in which Christianity and Judaism have become two important components for constructing a world apart from Islam. Resisting this bifurcated depiction of history, the author works to show that the history of Islam remains integrally part of any *history of Late Antiquity*, a thesis pursued in the book by way (*inter alia*) of historical, artifactual analysis.

The present review will focus upon two methodological steps the author takes to structure his argument. The first step entails the Arab's calling upon God as concrete assumption of God's uniqueness, i.e., as the only God. Al-Azmeh discusses this worldwide worship of God-as-Supreme Being, specifically how this sensibility had emerged as one of a number of localized contexts, wherein each locale had held its own specific deity—whether Theos, Yahweh, Alaha, Deus, or other names—to be ultimate and unique (xii). As such, the Arab depiction of the Supreme Being can be seen as similar to claims by other (practically) monotheistic religious groups, thus suggesting a kind of competition of uniqueness among the deities with only one God to emerge as victor in the contest. Supporting this zero-sum notion of monotheistic competition, al-Azmeh points to cultic worship practices that champion one unique deity in exclusion to the rest (183).

In a second methodological step, al-Azmeh considers the geography shared in Late Antiquity between Islamic communities and the those neighboring (3). Within these overlapping areas, Islamic communities arose with the undeniable influence of Hellenism in the background. The author wonders why, for example, Morocco and

Greece are commonly categorized respectively as Oriental and as Occidental. Examples of quasi-syncretistic influence include the number of historic Arab tribes that worshipped heavenly bodies—viz. how the Ḥimyar worshipped the Sun; the Kināna praised the moon; the Lakhm and Judhām, Jupiter; and Asad, Mercury (186). And al-Azmeh notes the Qur'an does interestingly contain oaths by the sun, the moon, the stars, twilight and sunrise—in references like Q.91:1; 74:32; 84:18; 53:1; 86:1; 84:16; 89:1; 74:34; 91:1; and 93:1 (186).

Al-Azmeh has summarily proposed to emphasize Islam as being a historical religion, born and developed within certain and specific spaces and times—particularly that of Late Antiquity. So al-Azmeh calls for readers to acknowledge Islam as a sociohistorically-situated reality, open to influence and impact by way of Islam's interactions with other, similarly-located, communal realities. But such a contingent depiction of Islam will certainly draw objections from Muslim scholars who consider Islam primarily, or even exclusively, as a theological reality, rather than historical entity or cultural product. Al-Azmeh's proposal resembles that of Richard M. Eaton, whose work (1993) argued for privileging Islamic history as a global history. Eaton had cited trade activities between the Arabs and the Indians, starting with the Arab conquest of Sind in 711 C.E. At base, therefore, al-Azmeh's proposal is no novel concern in the field of history, nuance notwithstanding.

Being perhaps a weakness of this text, the pressing question becomes whether the author's proposals have any true purchase or meaningful relevancy within the discourse of Islamic studies. Al-Azmeh's work is positioned to present serious challenges to the customary approaches of traditional Muslim thinkers who subscribe to a conservative theological fundamentalism. Will they engage Al-Azmeh's work within their own work? What further influence might his thought have among them? How excited or motivated are Muslim scholars to consider Al-Azmeh's proposals—when his work not only presents a competing methodology but also posits a paradigmatic shift that may effectively rewrite the history of Islam?

The historiographic significance of what al-Azmeh has tried to achieve in this book—namely that of a proposed framework situating Islam as integral for understanding properly the period of

Late Antiquity—deserves attention and critical assessment from many scholars. A challenging book, I recommend this as a must-have book to read.

Abraham Silo Wilar

An editorial member of the Indonesian Journal of Theology