Apocalypse, empire, and universal mission at the end of antiquity: world religions at the crossroads

Shaddel, M.

Conclusion: Supersessionism as Ideology of Universal Rule

This essay has offered an examination of universal ideologies at the end of antiquity. The first three chapters constitute its first case-study—to wit, Islam, its emergence, its elevation to the status of an imperial religion, and the changes that came about with empire. In the first chapter, it attempted to show that the message of the Quran, the founding document of Islam, is non-supersessionist, although classical Islam as we know it is indubitably a supersessionist persuasion, even if a minority of (particularly modern-day and liberal) believers hold the faithful of the other Abrahamic traditions to be rightly guided. The chapter argued that given that virtually all other sources we have for Islam come from after this supersessionist turn, we ought to focus our enquiry on the Quran, and concluded that Islam had initially emerged as an ethno-religious movement but soon claimed universal validity for the ambit of its messenger's operation, although it never transitioned to supersessionism before the closure of the text to additions and alterations. The transition to supersessionism, then, must have occurred in the fog of that first century of Islam's rapid expansion and metamorphosis.

In order to further pinpoint the process of this transition, the second chapter turned to a most significant document from the turn of the second Islamic century, an edict purportedly issued by the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar II ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, commonly called his Fiscal Rescript in modern scholarship. After a detailed reconstruction of the nature of the fiscal regime in the Umayyad period and its reform by the early Abbasids, it was shown that the Fiscal Rescript must have been issued by a mid-Umayyad-era high-ranking official, if not ʿUmar II himself, as the problems it wishes to tackle are peculiar to this time-period and are not in line with the type of pious tales that the figure of ʿUmar in mediaeval Islamic literature is likely to attract to itself. The chapter further argued that the Fiscal Rescript is the first extant incontrovertibly supersessionist document issued by the early Islamic state, and attempted to shed light on the socio-economic factors that potentially played a role in Islam's transition to supersessionism.

The third chapter followed up on the first two to cull evidence to demonstrate that the first Islamic empire was a world imperium (that is, an empire with global aspirations, as defined in the introduction), and that its universal ambitions oftentimes took a supersessionist hue. In so doing, attention was paid to royal art, in particular the iconography of what is left of the palace complex built by al-Walīd II in Quṣayr ʿAmra, where the kings of the world go to do homage to him, and an attempt was made to further demonstrate the triumphalist message of the imagery by analysing its potential Sasanian antecedents and inspirations. In addition, the

testimony of court poetry was also discussed, where caliphs are presented as commanding the respect of other kings of the earth, as was caliphal titulature, which leaves no doubt about the universal nature of their bearers' ambitions. In particular, the title *khalīfat allāh* was shown to have inevitably come with pretensions of global rule as it depicted the caliph as the monotheistic God's representative on the whole earth—something that some of this title's recurring collocations leave little doubt about. But evidence for such universalist ambitions are not limited to the documentation emanating from the caliphal court: early Islamic jurists had globalist dreams of their own, which is apparent from the nomenclature they used for their conception of the world order—'the abode of Islam' and 'the abode of war'—thus insinuating their hope for Islam to take over the entire world. Finally, this chapter turns to that richest of all repertoires of evidence for universalism—that is, apocalyptic literature. The witness of apocalyptic compositions shows these ambitions to be much more widespread and of a supersessionist brand, and it concludes by observing how the ideas of universal empire once again go hand-in-hand with a supersessionist approach.

In the final chapter, this essay embarks on its second and final case-study, ethno-religion. Focusing on Jewish and Zoroastrian apocalyptica of Late Antiquity, it demonstrates the existence of a universalist strand in them. It then attempts to show that this turn to universalism finds renewed urgency in this period in response to Islamic and Byzantine Christian universalist claims. In the case of Judaism, in particular, it shows that its omnipresent universalist tendency has, for the first time, taken a supersessionist turn whereby all non-Jews are either to be extirpated or to convert to Judaism at the end of time, and argues that this is an outcome of the universalist ambitions of the texts' authors, who hoped for the establishment of a universal kingdom of Israel at the moment of the eschaton. This, once again, shows universal empire and supersessionism to be inseparable from each other, and that both ambitions are more likely to exhibit themselves in apocalyptic literature. But it seems that monotheism and the idea of one universal God (or, in the case of Zoroastrianism, dualism and the idea of one universal force for Good) has a role to play too, inasmuch as, it will be recalled, the Umayyad caliphs' universalist aspirations were part stoked by their claims to be the representatives of the One True God.

In conclusion, I would like to remark that the legacy of late antique universal empire is still with us: Francis Fukuyama may have first expressed his conviction that the victory of the liberal democratic world order in the Cold War would usher in a worldwide utopia towards the

tail end of the Cold War,[1] after the section of the Iron Curtain separating Hungary from Austria was breached and Tadeusz Mazowiecki assumed office as prime minister of Poland, but this 'Christian eschatology', as Jacques Derrida derided it,[2] announcing the end of the normal cycle of history and the start of an everlasting messiah-less utopian era was already in the zeitgeist. It had indeed been in the air ever since the end of the Second World War, both in the east and the west. Both the eastern and western blocks were fighting for what they considered was the fate of humanity, to offer the human race the best it deserved. The culmination of this struggle and the ultimate victory, each side hoped, would bring about the end of a cycle and establish an earthly paradise, or at least the closest it can get to it. It did not take long for this triumphalist declaration of the invincibility of perhaps the most successful universal ideology of all time to be reversed: in the summer of 2021, when an increasingly polarised world was still reeling from the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, Fukuyama declared that the American hegemony had had its moment under the sun and averred, in hindsight, that decline had begun with financial crisis of 2008.[3] History, it appears, does not end so swiftly, but repeat itself it may do.

[1] It first appeared as a piece in the National Interest in the summer of 1989: Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' *National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18, before being expanded into a book some three years later: Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York 1992).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Morning and the New International* (New York 1994), 76.

[3] Francis Fukuyama, 'Francis Fukuyama on the End of American Hegemony', *The Economist*, 18 August, 2021. Available online at https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/08/18/francis-fukuyama-on-the-end-of-american-hegemony (last accessed 7 May, 2024).