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

This dissertation is an attempt at interrogating the relationship between world empire and universal ideology in Late Antiquity. It argues that universalism is a recurring, and almost inevitable, condition of any aspiration for global domination, a pattern that emerged in early Christianity and still animates political ideologies of today—such as liberal democracy and socialism. It also argues that the nature of such global ambitions requires the universal ideology they espouse to be supersessionist, which invariably results in an ideological, and occasionally physical, clash with other systems of thought. Furthermore, it posits that such beliefs most commonly manifest themselves in eschatological and apocalyptic thinking, for the obvious reason that in commenting about the end of the world and the fate of humanity, it is impossible to avoid talking about 'the other'.

The first, and most important, case-study of this thesis is nascent Islam, as its founder, the Islamic prophet Muhammad, was as much of a statesman as he was a man of religion, but also because of the fact that it emerged as a universalist yet non-supersessionist epistemological system that in no time transitioned to supersessionism. In order to vindicate this contention, the project attempts a stratigraphy of the text of the Quran, the founding document of Islam, dissecting it to three strata: the first and oldest is a stratum that is broadly monotheistic but confessionally indeterminate, in a fashion similar to contemporaneous epigraphic material discovered around Muhammad's hometown of Mecca and in South Arabia, where the local population had converted to some form of Jewish-inspired monotheism in the two centuries prior to the rise of Islam. This material, the study contends, constitutes what the formative quranic community and the community from which they broke away agreed on, and was thus adapted by Muhammad and his followers. The second stratum marks the beginnings of Muhammad's career as a religious leader and of Islam, but only as an ethno-religion, inasmuch as this stratum of the Quran styles him a messenger sent to a particular ethnic group, the Ishmaelites. In the third stage, we witness a transition to universalism, whereby Muhammad is now a messenger sent to the totality of humanity, including Jews and Christians. But to Jews and Christians he is a prophet in the Israelite tradition of prophecy, belief in whom does not necessitate renunciation of one's former religious identity. Muhammad has only been sent to warn them against their malpractices and remind them of the 'true' form of their own creeds, without superseding their earlier creeds.

The transition to supersessionism occurred after the community acquired an empire, in the wake of which the message of the Quran was transformed into an imperial ideology. The first unequivocally supersessionist document emanating from the early Islamic state, the study submits, is the so-called Fiscal Rescript of the caliph ʿUmar II (r. 717-20), whose authenticity is corroborated through an in-depth study of its contents against the backdrop of fiscally-motivated social upheavals of the period. A revision of the nature of the fiscal regime in the early Islamic empire and the terms of membership in the conquest society is proposed here, which concludes that the early Muslim conquerors of the Near East established a caste system of which they were at the very top by virtue of the feat of arms that carried them to power, and they closely controlled admission to their ranks through the institution of *hijra*, that is, leave to settle in the *coloniae* (*amṣār*) they had established throughout the empire. With the passage of time, however, there was both increasing pressure and need for allowance to be made for further inclusion in the top decile of the pyramid of social hierarchy, thus necessitating ʿUmar II's reforms in the form of his Fiscal Rescript. The Rescript also attests to how socio-economic realities of imperial life impinged upon the nature of imperial ideology: given their character, ideologies of rule cannot provide for the coexistence of competing sources of constitutional principles without jeopardising the legitimacy of their claim to monopoly over power. This claim to monopoly over power and its universal ambit is well-attested in Islamic eschatological traditions and apocalypses dating to the period. The ambition to dominate the whole universe is also attested to by discussions concerning international relations, where foreign lands are constantly lumped in together as the 'abode of war' (*dār al-ḥarb*) in the legal literature, thereby indicating that they were deemed subject of warfare and conquest.

In the final part, the dissertation turns to the traditions that are traditionally conceived of as ethno-religions, namely Judaism and Zoroastrianism. Bringing to light unexploited textual testimonia in the form of apocalyptic compositions from Late Antiquity, it shows that there was a universalist and supersessionist strand in these two religions, at least when it came to reflecting upon the eschaton. In addition to inviting a reconsideration of the notion of ethno-religion in the light of this evidence, the study asserts the indispensability of political and religious universalism to the eschatological *imaginaire*.

It then concludes by arguing that ideologies of government are akin to constitutions insofar as they both lay out the theoretical underpinnings of the government model. And just in the same way that a state cannot have two constitutions, it may not espouse two alternative ruling ideologies, and it is this monopoly of the ruling ideology that translates into supersessionism.

Prior to the age of monotheism, this principle manifested itself in the form of the destruction of the cultic centres of defeated enemies in the ancient Near East, thus subjecting the god(s) of the subjugated people to the god(s) of the victors. After the emergence of universal, monotheistic gods, it took the shape of supersessionist universalism, and eventually gave way to secular ideologies with claims to universal validity, which resulted in such confrontations as between the Communist bloc and the 'free' (i.e., liberal democratic) world in the Cold War.