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Religion and Society in the Quran and Their Relationship to Pre-Islamic Arabia

Náboženství a společnost v Koránu a jejich vztah k předislámské Arábii

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne

Abstract:

My goal in this thesis is to concentrate on the origins of Islam as we can understand it from the Quran itself, without using other, later sources. At the same time, I am interested in the relationship between pre-Islamic Arabia and early Islam. My method will be based primarily on Mary Douglas and her grid-group analysis.

This British anthropologist attempted to analyse different social situations, in which various systems of understanding the world are formulated, using the parameters of "group" (the degree to which the borders of a group are defined) and "grid" (the number of rules by which an individual is controlled). These two parameters then made it possible for her to classify different cosmologies according to their ideas and their social reality.

Applying this method, I will attempt to extract from the Quran – not primarily a narrative text – a description of the change of early Muslims' social situation and development of their religious ideas which is connected to it, and I will attempt to use Mary Douglas' anthropology to explain how such a transformation happened and could happen.

Key words: Mary Douglas, grid, group, cosmology, Quran, society, early Islam, origins of Islam, Muhammad

V této práci bych se ráda věnovala okolnostem vzniku islámu tak, jak je můžeme vyčíst ze samotného Koránu, bez použití jiných, pozdějších zdrojů. Zároveň mě také zajímá naznačený vztah předislámské arabské kultury a raného islámu. Metodologicky hodlám vycházet především z Mary Douglas a její metody skupiny a sítě.

Tato britská antropoložka se pokusila různé typy sociálních situací, v nichž jsou rozličné systémy rozumění světu formulovány, analyzovat pomocí parametrů "skupiny" (míra, v jaké jsou vymezené hranice určité skupiny vůči zbytku společnosti) a "sítě" (množství pravidel, kterým se jedinec musí podřizovat). Tyto dva parametry jí pak umožňují roztřídit různé náboženské světonázory podle toho, jaké ideály v těchto dvou směrech vykreslují a jaké požadavky na jedince kladou.

Aplikací její metody v této práci se pokusím z Koránu, který není primárně narativní textem, extrahovat popis změny společenské situace prvních muslimů a vývoj jejich náboženských představ, který s ní souvisí, a konečně se pokusím pomocí antropologie Mary Douglas osvětlit, jak k oné transformaci docházelo a mohlo dojít.

Klíčová slova: Mary Douglas, skupina, síť, kosmologie, Korán, společnost, raný islám, vznik islámu, Muhammad

Contents:

1. Introduction

When seeking to understand a phenomenon, we frequently turn to its origins in hopes that its evolution will help us comprehend it. Very often, presumably, that is untrue. Just as there is no particular reason to believe that examining, say, the first attempts at democracy in ancient Greece will help us in any significant way to understand its modern problems, so there is equally little hope that study of the historical beginnings of Islam will be of much assistance in unravelling the challenges it faces today. And yet it still seems somehow more reasonable to assume so than simply picking a point at random in the history of the phenomenon we are examining, for all it would be closer in time to that which pertains to us more directly.

The great advantage of beginnings over middle points is that they appear to be a break in chronology, and so, it would seem, there is no 'before' that we need to study. Should we decide to devote ourselves to the 15th century history, the 14th century would keep intruding with causes and roots of events of the fifteenth, and in the same way, when we study medieval Islam, the origins of its world-views and practices insist on being hidden in its earlier history. Studying the early form of anything promises to spare us this trouble.

Of course once we actually start on such a venture, unless our field of study is prehistory, we end up disappointed, because there is always some 'before' to be studied, and the seeming breaks in chronology become invisible when we look more closely. More often than not, too, it proves that understanding the origins sheds very little light on the end result.

Concentrating on early Islam certainly brings both of the aforementioned disappointments. Given the importance of the Quran in it, studying the circumstances of the book's revelation certainly brings some degree of understanding of even contemporary Islam, but there are so many layers of traditional interpretation upon it that studying some other historical period would have been just as fruitful. As for the break in chronology, both the actual origins of Islam and the traditional narrative of it are so firmly rooted in pre-Islamic Arabia that one finds one can do almost nothing without detailed information about it – which is unfortunate, because there are almost none to be had, let alone detailed. So one ends up with more trouble than if one chose to start in the middle, rather than less. Given that they fail to deliver on both accounts, why study the roots at all, then, and the roots of Islam in particular?

My personal answer is that it should be on their own merit. Not because we want to understand something that happened later, but because we want to understand that particular

historical time. As much as any break in continuity is illusory, a great change clearly did happen at the time, lending it more interest than a randomly chosen point in history. To some degree, that change is mapped in the Quran. It would be too much to hope that it is a direct and immediate witness, carrying a literal recording of Muhammad's utterances, and all of his relevant utterances. But it is some witness. A little unreliable it may be, remembering instances from some years ago (even the traditional account admits that there was a gap between the Prophet's death and writing down the text of the Quran, and without explicit religious faith, we have no reason to hope that no changes happened), but it is still far more reliable than any other sources at out disposal. All the others are more reminiscent of witnesses telling the stories their mothers were told by their mothers, and so can hardly be called witnesses at all. For this reason, I decided to work exclusively with the Quran, and try and convince it to part with as much information as I will be able to coax out of it.

My goal here is twofold: I want to extract, from the Quran, the story of early Islam and try and make it comprehensible and perhaps even relatable narrative without having to resort to the traditional tales that had the same goal, but for an audience from a different time and place, and so might obscure more than enlighten today; and I want to see how much of the story I can glimpse if I really limit myself to only one source. In this second goal I differ from the traditional Muslim storytellers and biographers, for I do not attempt to rely on the orally transmitted traditions supposedly preserved from the time of the Prophet.

Methodologically, this thesis will be relying mainly on the work of Mary Douglas, specifically her grid-group analysis as presented in *Natural Symbols* and elaborated on in the second edition of the same title and in "Cultural Bias". My reasons for this choice are that Douglas offers a uniquely complex approach to correlating a society's cosmology and its practical habits, from central religious rituals to such seemingly unimportant details as gardening. That is advantageous when dealing with a culture where little is known and we have to grasp at every tidbit of information available to us. Douglas' approach allows us to attempt to use every such little piece of knowledge to make our image of the emerging Islam more comprehensible.

2. The method

Just now, I mentioned how Mary Douglas' method is ideal for this endeavour because of its comprehensiveness. However, there are, naturally, dangers in her uniquely complex approach. The main one being that we might be tempted to make everything fit too well, especially dealing with a culture on which there is only one rather fragmentary source of knowledge at our disposal. The Quran was not written with the purpose of detailing information about the society it helped create, and the lack of data makes it easier for any author to make what they have fit with the rest, because it is so open to interpretation.

There are also some problems with Douglas' idea itself, as with all classification – it tends to oversimplify things, to ignore the detail in favour of the aesthetic of the whole. No cultural reality can be fully described by putting it in a graph, as Douglas does in her method.[1]

This danger, then, has to be borne in mind in my endeavour.

2.1 The point of Departure

The basic idea behind Douglas' work in *Natural Symbols* is that there is correlation between society's theory and practice, so to speak – between its cosmology and its social order. She attempts, as Spickard puts it, to "develop a sociology of the plausibility of belief."[2] The influence goes both ways, however – cosmology forms a kind of matrix for society, and society, people's actual life experience, influence how they conceive their cosmology. And the relationship is more complicated than just arguing that if there is one common God, there should be one common ruler, for example; indeed, the correlation works down to unexpected details.

Of course, with such a circle of mutual influence, one has to pick a starting point – will it be society, or cosmology? Mary Douglas picked society, being, after all, Durkheim's pupil for all practical purposes. As a tool for measuring it, so that the correlation was easier to show, she chose two factors she decided to call 'grid' and 'group'. The exact definitions of these categories changed, but essentially, group indicated social cohesion and grid the internal

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[1] The critics were quick to point this out. Cf. Richard Fardon, *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography*, London – New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 122-123.

[2] James V. Spickard,, *Relativism and Cultural Comparison in the Anthropology of Mary Douglas: an Evaluation of the Meta-Critical Strategy of her Grid-Group Theory* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1984), p. 354.

structure of a society. Based on those two factors, Douglas described four basic types of society – ideal types, if you will -, with corresponding cosmologies. By her description, she enabled later anthropologist to attempt to deduce society's cosmologies from its practical workings, even if there would not otherwise be enough data for it. That is the basis of her method.

Douglas' grid-group method has been criticized many times from many positions, ever since it has been published for the first time.[3] Even more criticism can be raised when we look at some of the applications of her method, which is, sadly enough, often done without proper understanding.[4] Admittedly, Douglas does not make it easy for her would-be followers. Each of the works mentioned above presents a significantly different version of the grid-group analysis, and she never clearly states what the differences are,[5] making the most common mistake of application simply not distinguishing between the versions, or not distinguishing properly. For the sake of simplicity, I will be working with the latest version, as described in her article "Cultural Bias," because it is, in my opinion, the most viable one, not least because it actually provides each ideal type with its own society, or at least a significant portion of society. I might sometimes refer to the ideas contained in the other volumes, since the basic underlying theory remained unchanged, but my definitions of the two key categories, group and grid, will be taken from her last work on the topic.

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[3] Fardon, *Mary Douglas*, p. l03; Timothy L. Carter, *Paul and the Power of Sin: Redefining ‚Beyond the Pale'*, (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, 115), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 27-28; Spickard, *Relativism and Cultural Comparison in the Anthropology of Mary Douglas*, p. 354-358.

[4] E.g. Jerome H. Neyrey, "Body Language in 1 Corinthians: The Use of Anthropological Models for Understanding Paul and His Opponents", *Semeia* 35 (1986): 129-170; Walter Houston, *Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law*, (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series, 140), Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993; Pamment, Margaret, „Witch-hunt", *Theology* 84 (1981): 98-106; Ramirez, Guillermo, „The Social Location of the Prophet Amos in Light of the Group/Grid Cultural Anthropological Model", in S. B. Reid (ed.), *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, s. 112-124.

[5] Cf. James V. Spickard, „A Guide to Mary Douglas' Three Versions of Grid/Group Theory", *Sociological Analysis* 50.2 (1989), p. 152.
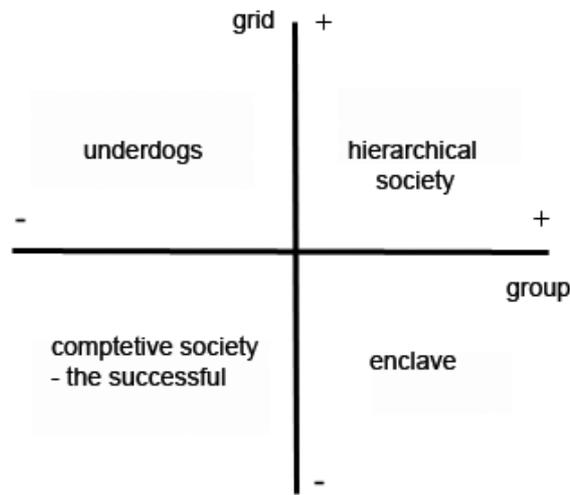
Fig. 1: Four ideal types according to "Cultural Bias"

2.2 Cultural Bias

This version of the model defines group as entailing some kind of membership, outside borders, and rights as well as duties it bestows upon its members[6] - effectively, as a clearly defined social unit, or in the same way as the first version,[7] which makes referring to thoughts from Douglas' older works easier. However, the definition of grid was slightly changed and indicates the number of rules individuals have to contend with in their social interactions.[8] Douglas herself says that in 'Cultural Bias,' group represents the common part and grid the individual part.[9] That means a traditional, hierarchical society would be described as high-group, high-grip, because it has clearly defined outer boundaries in addition to many rules regulating its interactions. A stereotypical sect, or what Douglas sometimes calls enclave, would be an example of high group and low grid, outer borders being the most important feature, with relationship between members staying undefined. The successful in a competitive, individualistic society inhabit the lower left quadrant, where they have to deal with no rules and they have no significant group boundaries. Their subjects, however, are in the quadrant above them, having no group boundaries either, but being subject to many norms of behaviour. It is not only them, though – foreigners in traditional Indian society or in Ancient Greece, for example, would find themselves in that quadrant too, even though the societies they lived in would be upper right quadrant and lower right quadrant respectively.

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[6] Mary Douglas, „Cultural Bias", in M. Douglas, *In the Active Voice*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2011 (1982[1]), p. 191.
[7] Mary Douglas, *Collected Works, Vol. III: Natural Symbols*, London – New York: Routledge, 2003 (1970[1]), s. viii.
[8] Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 192.
[9] *Ibid.,* p. 190.

Douglas was subject to criticism of too much individualism with this version, and specifically, it has been pointed out that it is not applicable to cultures of the past, from which we do not have any autobiographies and thus cannot guess at the individual experience.[10] However, I see little grounds for such an estimate. Or rather, naturally it is not easy to determine all of the factors we need for safe classification, and it would be much easier if there was a number of detailed autobiographies at our disposal. But that is true about every version of Douglas' model, and indeed, about every attempt to determine social reality of a culture no longer in existence. It is true that using the version from Cultural Bias, we would often have to estimate the situation of an average individual in the given culture, but is that really so different from determining the situation of the culture in general, which we would have to do if we used the other versions? Society is, after all, formed by people. Such estimate would obviously not hold for every individual member of the society, but that, again, is true for all versions of the method. We are only able to say what the situation of the majority of people was, or the majority of a certain class, not of each individual. But the second would be too ambitious even for studying contemporary society, and so its impossibility within this model is not an argument against its use.

There is, however, something important missing from the way Douglas describes the model in "Cultural Bias" - fluidity. Societies are not just this or that type, they are also more so and less so compared to each other. So it can happen that from an extremely hierarchical point of view, a society might show some traces of the individualist quadrant even though it is actually in the high group, high group one, as, for example, European middle-ages would to an Indian Brahmin. Also, the model as Mary Douglas presents it in a simplified form simply supposes we ascribe plus or minus to each culture in both categories, without attempting a more subtle distinction. That is problematic too, because a culture might have, generally speaking, both high group and high grid, but the group might play a much more important role, and so the culture will tend to show some characteristics of a high group, low grid culture. Take traditional Judaism, for example. Generally speaking, it is a high group, high grid culture, since the Books of Moses speak of many internal stratifications and rules that complicate interpersonal relationship. Yet the outer boundaries are clearly much more crucial, and became even more so whenever the Jewish society was confronted with an aggressive surrounding culture, as in times of Hellenism or in Christian Europe. And looking at it, we indeed find that it displays some characteristics of a high group, high grid society, and some of a low grid, high group one. This missing fluidity is emphasized more in the 2nd edition of

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[10] Carter, *Paul and the Power of Sin*, pp. 38-39.

Natural Symbols, so since I will be adapting it, it could perhaps be said that I take a leaf out of that book, too.

2.3 The Cosmologies

After I have described the elementary social characteristics of the four basic types of society Douglas recognizes, I should now attempt to capture their typical cosmologies and practical workings to show the ways in which this kind of analysis is useful.

First, the high-group, high-grid society, the example of which could be traditional India. Everything about cosmology of this culture is likely to be highly ordered, containing hierarchy and strict rules for each part of life. India really is a useful example, from its literal cosmology – the worlds ordered around Mt. Meru, every age having a precise number of years to it – to its highly technical rituals which require professionals to perform them in a language no one speaks any more, and to clearly stated number of years a Brahmin is supposed to spend in every stage of his life. Of course, we still have to bear in mind that this is simply a general view, dealing with how most members of that society would be identified. Douglas insists that her system, when all is said and done, applies to the individual, and many individuals in traditional India would probably find themselves in quite a different place. Tantric Shivaists, for example, might feel rather less bound by the society's grid, and Untouchable women might identify with the group rather less strongly, moving them in the direction of the depressing upper-left quadrant. We will get to that one later.

Next is high group, low grid society, the quadrant of the stereotypical sect. A typical product of such a cosmology are various forms of witch-hunting. The society with clearly defined outer borders but no internal structures perceives itself as clean, and the rest of the world as unclean. However, when something bad occurs within such a society, it lacks a way to deal with it, having no applicable rules. The only way to cope is expulsion of the evil outside its borders. The most straightforward way is simply exiling the guilty party – exile was the popular punishment in Greece, for example, which was very much this type of society. That, however, does not cover most of the cases, where the perpetrator is not clearly apparent. Yet the misfortune must have been caused by some outside evil that has somehow found a way inside the clean society – a witch. Such witch must be found and eliminated, and then everything can return to the desired pristine state. A slightly more sophisticated version of this is the institution of a scapegoat, or the Greek farmakos, which do count on the option

of there being some evil inside the society - Judaism, as I have said, was technically high grid, though with some low-grid features, and even Greece was too sophisticated and simply too big to operate purely on the sectarian system, so the idea was acceptable to both cultures – but dealt with in a very high-group manner. In particular, they make all of the evil concentrate on one person, or animal, and then exile that person or animal, therefore making the rest of the society clean again.

Myths of these societies usually contain an important aspect of describing foreigners and defining them as very foreign in some typical way. Rituals tend to be relatively uncomplicated, with a tendency for "anyone can perform them". Highly trained religious professionals are rather exceptional.

Now to our own quadrant (but also that of the Big Men of Papua-New Guiney), the competitive society low group, low grid. The emphasis here is on individual power and skill, both in mythology and in practice, and religious specialists are non-essential Misfortunes are treated as individual failings. Fixed-form rituals are uncommon.

And last and, unfortunately, also least, there is the high grid, low group quadrant, the quadrant of the underdogs. Their cosmology reflects this. It talks about the evils of this world and about future salvation – millennialism is typical for this quadrant. It ignores the unpleasant now for the more optimistic future. Rituals are unstructured because structure is seen as part of the evil world that oppresses. However, borders between this quadrant and high group, low grid might sometimes be thin, even though they are on opposite ends of the graph. Because the low group, high grid situation is precisely the situation where sects thrive, but once a sect is established, it becomes a salvation in itself, a refuge from the world, because it has the desired opposite traits. There are clearly defined outer borders, giving the members a sense of group identity, and there are no internal structures that would remind them of the evil outside world – in the enclave, all are equal, brothers and sisters. But pinpointing when exactly a group born out of a low group, high grid situation starts being a high group, low grid society of its own, when membership of the group becomes more important than the evilness of the outside, is a difficult task, especially because there are so many intermediate stages. A group can, paradoxically, exhibit signs of both at the same time, being millennialist and showing witch-hunting tendencies, for example. It shows the limits of the graphic representation, and helps to remind us that is it, after all, just a model, an approximation of the complex social and cultural realities. Because such a group, in this intermediate state, is impossible to locate on the graph. We would have to place it in the zero point, but that would make it equally close to high group, high grid and low group, low grid

quadrant, with which it has very little in common. Douglas mentions this in Cultural Bias,[11] pointing out that many cosmological ideas are common to various quadrants. This serves to remind us that, in the end, the grid-group model is, as Mary Douglas says, just constructed, fabricated, thought up and invented.[12]

In closing, let me make one note on cosmologies in general. For all they may seem like a less intellectual variation on philosophical systems, it is not so. In spite of them being theoretical, they are focused on practice. That means that what to us, conditioned as we are by philosophy, might seem as contradictions simply means looking at one thing from different points of view, which the cosmology finds no need to attempt to reconcile.[13] That is less true of the Quran, being a text that went through some editing, than of so-called primitive cosmologies, but it still holds and needs to be taken into account.

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[11] Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 232.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 190.

[13] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, with a new preface by the author, London – New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 111.

3. The Emergence of Islam

In spite of all my declarations to the opposite, for a long time it was believed we had a relatively accurate picture of the emerging Islam. There is that famous quote by Ernst Renan that "Islam was born in the full light of history," and it sums up what used to be the prevailing scholarly opinion for many decades. But in mid-20th century, a number of academics came with reform views of the period, their main common trait being radical scepticism towards the traditional ideas and traditional sources. None of their views were universally accepted, but they each did their job in shaking the field – unfortunately to such a degree that it does not seem like it has got back up on its feet, not even now, forty years later. I will now attempt a short summary of the traditional view, and then present the most important revisionist ideas.

3.1 The Traditional View

The tale of the origins of Islam, as told by Muslims, is straightforward enough. Muhammad was born in Mecca in Hejaz (central Arabia) and received the first revelation in 610 AD, when he was forty years old.[14] From then on, parts of the Quran were revealed to him from time to time, through Archangel Gabriel. He slowly started to gather a small following, even though most people in Mecca did not believe in his prophethood and treated him with scorn.[15] Later, when the number of Muslims grew, they faced persecution and decided to leave for Yathrib, a settlement 320 kilometres north of Mecca. The town was consequently renamed Madinat an-Nabi, the City of the Prophet, after Muhammad. There, Muslims established a successful religious community with Muhammad as its ruler.[16] They embarked on many military expeditions, most notably conquering Mecca, but also getting most of Arabian Peninsula under their control. During all this, they were guided by continued revelations of the Quran, which gradually turned from focused on hereafter to the necessities of ruling a town, and later an even wider area. Muhammad died in 632,[17] and after his death, the Quran, to that date transmitted only orally, started to be collected and was finally written

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[14] Fred M. Donner, „The Historical Context", in J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 25. The facts mentioned in this section are a matter of fairly general knowledge, so I only refer to Donner's summary in *The Cambridge Companion*. For further information, see for example Abdullah Saeed, „Contextualizing", in A. Rippin (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, Malden – Oxford – Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 36-50 or Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 18-30.
[15] Donner, „The Historical Context", p. 25.
[16] Ibid., p. 26.
[17] Ibid, p. 29.

down in times of caliph Uthman, some time in the first half of 650s. One canonical version was created, and all the others were destroyed. The text that came to be in this way lacked vocalization and even punctuation, making it open to different readings, which is how the tradition of different qira'at was born.

Western scholars used to accept this version, on the whole, with the exception of the supernatural parts of the tale. It is perhaps a little paradoxical that our scholarship so readily cut out any mention of divine interference, yet for a very long time, it did not occur to it that anything else might not be historical fact.

At any rate, in the 1970s, academics finally started to appear who dared to suggest that all might not be precisely accurate in Islamic confessional accounts, and that, just perhaps, confessional writing was not the most reliable of historical sources. After all, early Muslims had very good reasons to embellish the stories they received from their forefathers, given that they needed basis of interpretation of unclear Quranic passages and answers to questions that were left out in the holy book.[18] This is when the revisionists appeared.

3.2 Revisionists

The first to promote a radically new view of the origins of Islam was Gunter Luling[19] in his book *Uber den Ur-Qur'an* in 1974.[20] His theory states that the basics of the Quran are formed by Meccan Christian hymns. In a way, in breaking away from one tradition, Luling continued another one, for the accusation that Muhammad copied his message from Christians and/or Jews is as old as the relationship between those religions. However, Luling approaches it rather more scientifically – though some would perhaps say the difference is only slight. He proposes that Muhammad was actually originally a Christian who disagreed with the Trinitarian doctrines and decided to break away from the church he was a member of. That in itself is curious, because the frequent supposition is that if this was indeed true, he would have been an ebionite – a group notable for its unitarism. Additionally, Luling's method consists mainly of making small or bigger changes to the reading of the Quran to get at the 'original text' or the Ur-Quran. The main points of criticism have always been that the way in which he chooses to adjust the text of the Quran is arbitrary and is

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[18] Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge, Mass. – London, Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 51.

[19] Fred M. Donner, „The Quran in Recent Scholarship: Challenges and Desiderata", in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, Oxon – New York: Routledge, 2008, s. 30.

[20] Gunter Luling, *Uber den Ur-Qur'an: Ansatze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Quran,* Erlangen: H. Liiling, 1974.

determined by his hypothesis, not the other way round.[21] So it is understandable why this theory never gained widespread acceptance. Nevertheless, its impact has been enormous.

Just three years later, *Hagarism*[22] appeared, written by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. The authors argue that Islam was not originally meant as a new religion (a point that is hardly contested and with which even the most conservative Muslims would agree, in their own way), but rather it was a form of Jewish messianism which offered, even for non-Jews, a way to join in without having to actually convert to Judaism. Crone and Cook describe this early version of Islam, Hagarism, as an Arabic variant of Judaism and Judaism's religious ally. What would be important for us is their argument that the Quran was not composed in Mecca in the 6th and 7th century, but rather it is a compilation of older materials from multiple traditions, formed in the 8th century.[23] If true, this would undermine the entire method I intend to employ in this thesis. Of course this hypothesis is now invalid, since it is almost certain that the Sana'a manuscript of the Quran dates to the first half of the 7th century.[24] Beside this, the authors were criticized for misrepresenting the sources and putting too much store in them (for the method of this work is relying on non-Muslim testimonies only, which leaves the authors with materials rather polemic in nature, and opens them to the criticism of Orientalism in the pejorative sense) – John Wansbrough, whose revisionist work will be mentioned next, went so far as to call their book eccentric,[25] Oleg Grabar made do with arrogant.[26]

The very same year, Wansbrough's book *Qur'anic Studies* was published.[27] His theories, too, would be a serious blow for the method of this work, since he believes that the Quran evolved in the course of two centuries in Mesopotamia.[28] His idea was received rather more warmly that Crone and Cook's, partly because he himself only calls his work 'essays' and seems very aware of its limitations.[29]

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[21] Donner, „The Quran in Recent Scholarship", p. 33.

[22] Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge - New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

[23] Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, p. 17-18.

[24] Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, „The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qurʿān of the Prophet", *Arabica* 57 (2010), p. 348. Though it should be pointed out that not everybody agrees with this assessment. Cf. Fred Leemhuis, "From Palm Leaves to the Internet", in J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 146.

[25] John Wansbrough, "Review of Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World by Patricia Crone; Michael Cook", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 41.1 (1978): 155–56.

[26] Oleg Grabar, "Review of Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World by Patricia Crone; Michael Cook", *Speculum* 53.4 (1978): 795–99.

[27] John Wansbrough, *Quranic studies: sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

[28] Donner, „The Qur'an in Recent Scholarship", p. 32.

[29] William A. Graham, "Review of Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation by John Wansbrough", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100.2 (1980): 137–41; Edward Ullendorff, "Review of Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation by John Wansbrough", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 40.3 (1977): 609–12; Leon Nemoy, "Wansbrough's 'Quranic

These, then, were the first three dissenting books that caused a great deal of uproar in their time. None of the theories presented is accepted today, but they deserve a mention as the group of scholars who first shook up the traditional view.

At least another two works should be mentioned. One is Christoph Luxenberg's *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran*.[30] As the name suggests, Luxenberg attempts to read the Quran not as a wholly Arabic book, but rather as a book that originally contained passages in Syriac. In some ways he is of the same school of thought as Luling, assuming strong Christian inspiration in the Quran, but his approach is markedly more academic and also convincing.[31] He applies his Syrian reading solely to passages which pose some problems in understanding, and then looks to see if he can shed some light on them with Syrian. In a surprising number of cases, he actually can. This is mainly important because if we accept that part of his argument, it implies relatively strong Christian presence in Mecca – if we choose to still believe that that is indeed where the Quran originated - which influences our image of the religious situation there. It has always been known that there were Jews present, but Christians are a novelty, one that could change the religious situation rather substantially, since they are known not to keep to themselves with their faith.

The last work I intend to mention here is Patricia Crone's *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*.[32] The most important conclusion of this book is that Islam was not founded in Mecca but in northern Arabia, based on the deduction that Mecca was not in fact a wealthy trade-center as the Islamic tradition tells us. She goes in minute detail over different accounts of Mecca, but has been accused of bending them to fit her own theory.[33] In any case it is true that her hypothesis rather begs the question of why, then, has the tradition came up with the idea that Islam was actually born in Mecca, if it was not an important center in any sense and thus, presumably, there was no reason for the fabrication. But some of her analyses of the data we have available for Mecca is worth our attention.

3.3. Problems

In this thesis, I will be working exclusively with the Quranic material. There is one marked problem in this endeavor, which is a problem of modern orientalistics. There is no critical edition.

Studies'", *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series* 68.3 (1978): 182–84. Ullendorf in particular is effusive in his praise.
[30] Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000.
[31] Donner, „The Qur'an in Recent Scholarship", p. 33.
[32] Patricia Crone, Mecca *trade and the rise of Islam*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987.
[33] R.B. Serjeant, "Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam: Misconceptions and Flawed Polemics", Journal of the American Oriental Society 110.3 (1990): 472-486.

To make it clear what is the present situation, I will describe it in more detail. The original text of the Quran was in all likelihood not written down during Muhammad's lifetime, at least not in its entirety;[34] but it was probably done relatively soon after his death, sometime towards the end of the 7th century (or even earlier, if we are to believe the dating of the Sana'a manuscript). But this first version was, as I have said, only the bare line of Arabic text, without vocalization and without the diacritical marks that often differentiate between letters in Arabic (there can be as many as five different letters which appear identical without the use of diacritics).[35] There was enough of a gap between the canonization of the basic text and the vocalization and diacritics that different readings arose. Traditionally, there are fourteen, or rather seven and three and four, the last group being considered uncanonical. So for most of Islam's history, those ten legitimate readings – qira'at – had equal standing. Then, in the 20th century, Egypt decided to print a proper edition of the reading that was most popular there, to make the Quran readily available for everyone.[36] So a proper edition of that one qira'at was made, and distributed. What no one expected was that this one version soon gained dominance over the whole of Islamic world, and nowadays any Quran one can get one's hands on is going to be based on this particular reading. There was no careful deliberation behind which version to choose for this standard one, no compromises, no scholarly theological debates – just historical chance. Knowing this makes working with the text as is at our disposal now rather frustrating. Imagining what new meanings could be discovered if one could base an analysis on a proper critical edition is best avoided, because it can lead to academic depression.

Secondly, what of chronology? There is, again, a traditional Muslim one that has been made extensive use of by Western scholars. However, there is no broad consensus.[37] The long-standing rough division of the suras into Meccan and Medinan periods is based mainly on common topics, so much so that it seems that if the chronology was true, the listeners would inevitably get bored by the Prophet's utterances, which would be extremely repetitive. The classification proposed by Theodor Noldeke works with three Meccan and one Medinan period and is widely accepted, but not universally. Obviously, the scholars who do not believe in the Quran being composed in Mecca in the seventh century are not going to agree with this division either, but even some of the more conservative ones protest. Noldeke did base his findings on the traditional Muslim ones rather

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[34] François Déroche, „Manuscripts of the Qur'an", in J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 3, Leiden: Brill, 2003, p. 255.

[35] Claude Gilliot, „Creation of a fixed text", in J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 47.

[36] Gabriel Said Reynolds, „Introduction", in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, Oxon – New York: Routledge, p. 2.

[37] For a brief but detailed discussion of the topic, see Nicolai Sinai, „The Qur'an as Process", in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx (eds.), *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, pp. 407-416.

strongly, especially al-Kafi's version,[38] so that in itself might raise some doubt for the skeptical-minded. It is clear enough that the suras which are considered Medinan did not come into existence in a new religious community, and the early Meccan are fairly easy to identify too. The in-between is more complicated, however, and there is no consensus.

That brings us to another problem, of possible reduplications of the same suras.[39] It is not so crucial for an analysis like this one to know if different version of the same utterances were noted down, but it still would be of interest to know whether the topics in question were so crucial for the Prophet himself that he repeated them so often, or if it was merely a matter of them being important for later editors, or, alternatively, the later editors being unable to decide which version to include and so deciding to include all to be safe (after all, if the chronology is true, then it is relevant that most repetitions occur in the second and third Meccan period, which are the periods of longer suras – and therefore harder to remember – but still without the institutional support Muhammad would have towards the end of his life which would presumably help in preserving his utterances. So assuming that suras of this period would be the ones that were remembered with the biggest discrepancies is perhaps not wholly unreasonable.)[40]

And last but not least, there is the question of the suras themselves. There is one major problem with classifying suras by their date of origin, and that is the assumption that suras are closed units. That is not only by no means certain, it is exceedingly unlikely.[41] There is no guarantee that the verses were really uttered by Muhammad in the groupings in which we find them now, and indeed, there are so many semantic rifts in the longer ones that it is in fact probable that he did not. In some cases, that is admitted by the Muslims themselves, when they speak of some verses from Medina being included in suras from Mecca, for example.[42] Especially the longer ones are considered to be a compilation of several shorter – sometimes the breaks in the topic are quite clear[43] – but there is nothing to prove that a similar thing has not happened to the shorter, supposedly older suras. The whole of it might come from a similar time period, but it might not have originally been the same text unit. That means that not only we have to think of the suras

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[38] He sorted the Meccan suras into more categories, but as far as which are Meccan and which are Medinan goes, he is in almost complete agreement with al-Kafi. Cf. Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, London: SCM Press, 2003, p. 69 and 77.

[39] Cf. Donner, „The Quran in Recent Scholarship", p. 34-35.

[40] On the other hand, it may also simply testify to the authenticity of these suras as opposed to the „later" ones – after all, it would be natural for different versions to crop up, and if the editors really did include more of them, then the suras that do not resemble anything else in the text suddenly become suspicious, especially when they are similar in content to what later appeared as hadiths. However, there are some such unique suras (or parts of them) which are so personal in nature that fabrications seems unlikely.

[41] Cf. Salwa M. S. El-Alwa, *Textual Relations in the Qur'an: Relevance, coherence and structure*, Oxon – New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 17-20 and 24-25.

[42] Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an*, p. 70.

[43] The break between 4:43 and 44 may serve as one example of very many.

outside of the assumed chronological frame, in and of themselves, we also have to think of the individual verses – or rather, semantic units – in the same way. Often we encounter verses that seem inserted in the flow of the text, and it is possible that they were, because the editors could not find any other place where to fit them. That makes reading verses "in context" extremely difficult, because we in fact have no idea what the original context was.

All in all, analysing the Quran means practising extreme bracketing of every foreknowledge – that there is some traditional narrative of the origin of Islam (which ties very well into the Quran, naturally, and so is extremely suggestive), or that there is an established chronology or division into suras. It is a task in which I am very likely not always successful, but I am trying my best.

I want to make as few assumptions as possible in this work, which means I choose to ignore a good part of what is traditionally believed about the Quran. However, taking the text as one unit that was created at approximately the same time in approximately the same place (or two places, as the case may be) is already a big assumption. It is one that is necessary to go through with the analysis I have planned, but I want to make it clear that I am aware this is not obvious, and am not in fact even making any particularly strong claim to believe it. This thesis can be read as an exercise in what if – what would be the results if we decided to analyze the Quran as a unit, and explore the social realities and cosmologies described in the self-image it provides, to whatever time period it may actually pertain

Apart from that, I will be mostly ignoring the dating of the suras, with the exception of the occasional reference to some more obvious things (like the aforementioned early Meccan and Medinan contrast, which comes in useful as a basis for determining what was the first stage of Islam and gives some very rough framework), and certainly ignoring the traditional context given to them.

There is one more thing, and that concerns the language used in describing the emergence of Islam. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as neutral words in this case: either the employed vocabulary implies belief in divine origin of the Quran, or it declares its skepticism. My intention is to do neither, and therefore I will occasionally make use of both registers, though probably more heavily of the skeptical one. That is not any kind of statement of my metaphysical views, merely paying respect to the wider academic tradition.[44]

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[44] That brings me to another matter I would like to mention, though it is not precisely customary. I am aware that on first glance, the unvoiced presupposition of this work seems to be that the Quran is not divine in origin, and therefore this kind of analysis can be used on it. But actually, it can be done even if we believe it is the word of God, because God addresses his people in such a way that they can understand him. Just as the message was in Arabic, it would have a cultural form that would be understandable, too. After all, researching the context of revelation of individual suras is a traditional Muslim scientific discipline. This is essentially attempting the same thing, only speculating based on the Quran itself, not on any external sources. Things that make sense in the context of a hierarchical culture do not work for an individual trapped in the underdog situation of a competitive society, and an omniscient God would certainly know that, and insofar that he wanted to be understood, would have made the message culturally understandable too.

4. Analysis

4.1 The Group and Its Origins

Islam was not created ex nihilo, so to speak, not even in its earliest form. It came to be in a particular society and culture, that of pre-Islamic central Arabia. Even traditional Muslim scholars always paid special attention to this fact, something that is perhaps curious when we take into account how strictly Islam emphasizes complete divine authorship of the Quran. Nevertheless, it at the same time acknowledges that individual verses were revealed as a response to situations faced by Muhammad, and in case of the early verses, that means as a response to situations arising in the surrounding of pre-Islamic Arabia.

For scholarly enquiry, this is a curse and a blessing at the same time. It is a blessing because it means that far from being destroyed, mentions of pre-Islamic customs were treasured and gathered to explain unclear Quranic passages, and so, perhaps, some valuable pieces of information were preserved that would have otherwise been lost. It is a curse, however, because what little information was kept has been embellished upon in such a manner that it might very well be hopeless to try and reveal what, if indeed anything, was the original basis.

Little is really known about pre-Islamic Arabia. Much is guessed, expected, traditionally assumed, but little is known with any kind of certainty. That is a definite and serious obstacle when studying the historical origins of Islam, but if we move our field of enquiry just a little, it stops being so insurmountable. Because what we do know is the Muslim idea of pre-Islamic Arabia, and while that is of limited value for the study of facts, it is very valuable for the study of the Islamic worldview, the Muslim cosmology. And that, after all, is what I am doing in this thesis.

I must not forget, of course, that the picture of Al-Jahiliyyah was produced a century or two later than the Quranic cosmology I am studying. This difference is not negligible, and it would be a mistake to assume that the worldview in both of these phases of Islamic history was identical. We know it was not. Nevertheless, the late picture of pre-Islamic Arabia is the only one we have at our disposal, and so, making my reservations apparent, I will have to work with it. After all, there is at least a reasonable hope that while the image of the period before Islam would not be identical in the 7th century and in the 9th, they would not be directly contradictory. What does the picture look like, then?

Traditionally, the main source of knowledge about pre-Islamic Arabia were Muslim sources from later times. Prominent among those has always been Kitab al-Asnam, or The Book of Idols. It

was written by Al-Kalbi sometime at the end of 8th or beginning of 9th century,[45] roughly two hundred years after the advent of Islam. There are other, lesser literary sources that contribute, too, however most of them come from similar period, or from an even later one.[46] The picture of Arabia they paint is clear enough.[47] It was a polytheistic world, and of no very high degree of sophistication. Natural powers were revered, idols were worshipped, and though there was some hierarchy to the pantheon and the Arabians knew a god named Al-Lah even before Muhammad, it was no monotheism, or henotheism either. The only exception to this were the hanifs, the pure monotheists who stayed faithful to the faith of Ibrahim, or who discovered the truth of monotheism on their own, without being part of an organized religion. There were also some Jewish tribes present in the region, safeguarding the Holy Scriptures, and a few Christian monks and ascetics, at hand when Muhammad's prophethood needed to be recognized and confirmed.

We get more clues about the society of this world from the Quran. As it wants to paint it, it was aggressive and merciless, the clan system falling apart, only individual ambition emerging from its ruins. It was a world where profit was the only goal, religion simply a means to that end, where widows and orphans and the sick and the weak were left to fend for themselves – and more often than not, to die in poverty. It was paradise for the ruthless, and cruel to all others, to whom Islam came as deliverance.

This dramatic picture is injected with color by my emotional words, but they are no more emotional than what we find in the Quran. Contrast with a proper Other is always a popular way for a culture to create its own identity, and what better Other than a disorganized, primitive, polytheistic religion, set in a culture of selfishness? The image was poetic. And as much as it likely changed during the centuries after the emergence of Islam, probably most of what happened was that it increased in intensity. The less people remembered the actual pre-Islamic Arabia, the more extremely could the pictures be painted. But they started to be painted straight away, and likely, the direction did not change too drastically once it had been set out on. So, all in all, there is some hope that even the parts of this picture that find no support in the Quran are in some way relevant to the early Muslim self-image that I am trying to reconstruct in my thesis. This was, in a way, the point of departure for the story of early Islam that is told in hints in the Quran, and that I will attempt to flesh out here to gain some insight into the early Muslim cosmology and mind frame.

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[45] Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the coming of Islam*, London – New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 10.
[46] G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 88.
[47] Muhammad Mustafa Al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'anic Text from Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments*, Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003, p. 22-23 may serve as one example of a modern version of such confessional description.

4.2 The Group and Its Beginnings

First, let us look at what we can glimpse of the position of Muhammad and the very first Muslims in the society of Al-Jahiliyyah. Generally, it fits well with the already described picture of ruthlessness and selfishness, Muhammad being represented as a victim of this cruel society, rejected not only for his novel (and too ethical) ideas but also for his low social standing. One he started prophesying, he was considered mad, relegated to an even lower position in society than before he came with his message. The few who joined him suffered, at first, the same kind of treatment. Later, however, the situation clearly improved, the esteem in which Muhammad was held was raised and his financial situation got better too. And eventually, of course, we get to the suras where he is clearly in a position to dictate society's laws, implying a marked elevation in status indeed.

Seen in more detail, a difficult social situation and general dissatisfaction with the world, which, according to Mary Douglas, is typical for millennialist groups[48] (or precisely the kind of cosmology we find in the suras we can identify as the earliest with something close to certainty – but more on Judgement Say later), is implied in 90:4, where man is said to be created in "toil and struggle."[49] 93:8 talks about the Prophet being made self-sufficient by the help of God, while he was poor earlier. 43:31 indicated that Muhammad was not an important man at the time when he first received the Message. It is frequently implied that Muhammad was considered to be possessed or mad,[50] called a poet or a diviner,[51] accused of making up his utterances,[52] and 73:10 asks him to patiently bear what others are saying about him. 83:29-32 describes how the believers are being laughed at, and accused of having been led astray,[53] and 15:95-97 speaks about their being scoffed at, too.

It is implied that at least some of the enemies of the Prophet are of a good social standing,[54] and one sura paints a rather vivid image of listeners turning from the prophesying Muhammad, walking away and shaking their heads.[55] However, at some point in the early history of Islam, it started to be taken a bit more seriously and became a topic of discussion.[56]

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[48] Douglas, Mary, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, with a new introduction, London – New York: Routledge, 1996, p. xxxvi.
[49] Unless stated otherwise, the Quranic verses are quoted according to the Yusuf Ali translation.
[50] 81:22, 68:2, 68:51, 44:14,
[51] 69:41-42, 52:29, 37:36. In 26:221-226 Muhammad retaliates by saying that satans descend not on him, but on poets and liars.
[52] 52:33, 53:2-3
[53] Similarly believers (or just Muhammad?) are asked to be patient with what „they say" in 20:130.
[54] 74:11-19, 73:11, 20:131, 15:88,
[55] 81:15-29. A similar scene can be found in 75:32-33.
[56] 78:1-3.

There is one story, mentioned without context, of some believers in God dying a martyrs' death in a pit of fire. Punishment is then promised to those who tortured them.[57] This story is likely not about Muhammad or any of his followers, but it is relevant that it is told, because it implies that the Prophet and the group around him could relate to the situation somewhat.

When it comes to authority, in one place it is said that one should not obey sinners or unbelievers "among them,"[58] presumably meaning among Muhammad's clansmen and neighbours, and people with some authority too, otherwise there would be no need to talk about obeying them. That gives an interesting and relatively unique perspective on the view of earthly authority, and seems to come from at least a little later – the group of Muhammad's followers had to be big enough and confident enough to be able to afford such an approach. There is also one scene that seems to mock the authoritarian approach, when pharaoh is scandalized that his sorcerers started to believe in God of Moses before he allowed them to.[59]

The Quran shows certain distrust of the riches of life, perhaps a mark of its distrust of the people who had them at their disposal too. For example 84:13-14 or 77:46 look down on careless enjoyment of things, and 100:6-8 criticizes loving wealth too much, as well as the entire sura 102 and 89:20. 79:38 gives censure to those who prefer this life over the next.[60] Pride is also frowned upon,[61] and is seen as the sin of Iblis, who considered himself better than humans and was cast out of God's presence for it.[62] Loosely connected to this is the frequent disparaging of vain talk (لـغوًا).[63] The 'Ad people are criticized for building landmarks and castles for themselves.[64] All in all, the new religion championed the under-privileged quite clearly, and stands (unsurprisingly, given what I said in the introduction to this analysis) in sharp contrast to the pre-Islamic Arabia we know, in which poetry that shone with confidence and praised poet's own brave deeds was quite common, and the weak were hardly worth a mention.

It shows directly, too, in the Quran's criticism of those who were not part of the emerging group – the unbelievers. They are accused of refusing to feed orphans, for example, and verses where the rich are frowned upon are very common.[65] Giving alms is also usually listed as one of the characteristics of people who will end up in Paradise after death,[66] sometimes along with freeing

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[57] 85:4-10. Or perhaps the perpetrators have already been punished – the first verse say that "those of the pit were killed", or "owners of the pit were killed" (قُتِلَ أصحـٰاب الأخدود), and so it is not clear whether it refers to the martyrs or the torturers.

[58] 76:24

[59] 26:49, 20:71

[60] Also 75:21.

[61] 75:33

[62] 38:73-77

[63] 78:35, 56:25, 19:62, 23:3

[64] 26:128-129

[65] 104:2-3, 56:45-46, 69:28-29,

[66] 70:19-35, 51:15-19, 76:5-8

slaves and feeding orphans.[67] Oppressing orphans and driving away beggars is forbidden.[68] 89:17-19 criticizes those who do not feed the poor or honour the orphans and those who devour inheritance. 53:34 even condemns those who only "give a little."

There is a rather interesting argument against charity from the unbelievers, who say that they will not give anything to the poor because if God did not want them to be poor, he would give them himself.[69] This argument is not precisely rebutted, but it is clear it is considered a sign of moral corruption of the world without Islam, another sign of ruthlessness that early Muslims are turning away from, a case of using religion to promote one's own evil inclinations.

4.2.1 Tradition

I have indicated that Muhammad and his followers are painted as essentially revolutionaries or at least rebels, to begin with, living in a clan society that is falling apart. Many of the rules of such a society are mostly traditional, and so one would expect Muhammad to make a stand against tradition in such a situation. But does he? The answer is – partly.

There seems to be a kind of ambivalent approach to tradition in the Quran. On one hand, unbelievers are often criticized for clinging to their fathers' belief even though their fathers were no religious experts,[70] on the other, the Quran is defended from the accusation of being some novelty by saying that other prophets were sent to Arabs before,[71] even though other verses explicitly state that Muhammad is the first prophet to come to the people in question.[72] Also, unbelievers discard the Quran by saying that it is only "tales of the ancients,"[73] which would male Muhammad the defender of tradition and his opponents bold innovators. Part of the purpose of this objection is clearly to disvalue the authenticity of the revelation – tales of the ancients likely refers to the prophetic tales and it is implying that it was not revealed by God to Muhammad, but rather, he simply heard it from other people and is passing it on. However, the accusation of conservativism is implicit. It is rather ironic that the 'Ad people defend their idolatry by saying that it was a custom of the ancients, joining the ranks of the conservative unbelievers, but doing so in almost the exact same words as the critics of Muhammad who put him in that category. In establishing particular social laws, referring people to usual customs abounds in sura 2, for example, so the dislike for tradition was clearly not so strong at this point.[74]

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[67] 90:12-18.
[68] 93:9-10.
[69] 36:47
[70] 26:71-76. In 38:4-7, 43:22-3 people reject Muhammad's prophecy because it has no support in Tradition.
[71] 37: 167-171.
[72] 32:3.
[73] E.g. 25:5, 6:25, 8:31, 16:24, 83:13, 68:15,
[74] 2:228-241.

Through these changing approaches, we can map the development of Muhammad's position in society. As a bold revolutionary, he scorns those who follow tradition, as we would expect. Later, as he gains more followers and his movement turns less radical and 'fringe', he seeks some measure of support in tradition in search for even broader following (and is mocked for this seeming inconsistency by those who never meant to follow him in any case). And at the point where his position is strong enough to set down rules, he parts with most of his revolutionary attitude and where he has no particular agenda to pursue, does not hesitate to refer to established customs.[75]

4.3 The Group and Its Borders

Now that we have seen a group emerge from the isolated followers of one ostracised man, let us look at its contours, at what defines it and who is inside or outside of it. Some of it are the dregs of society, those who were trampled on in its mad rush for money and power and could not find anything that would make them identify with it, and so they heard Muhammad's call. It is not only them, though, not any more – they were joined by the not-so-hopeless and not-so-desperate, once the voice of that strange collection became loud enough that they could actually be heard, giving them more ties to the outside, to the mainstream society, so to speak. Only then could a mix of outcasts and underdogs form a proper group with its own goal (though, paradoxically, that was also the time when the forming group borders were in danger from the aforementioned ties), only then could the Prophet say things like 'do not listen to the immoral,' and only then he had someone to call Believers, for that was the name used most often for the group in question. Less frequently it was also "Muslims" (submitted to the will of God). It is possible that the name by which it was called changed through time, but if so, it is not obvious from the dispersing of the terms in the Quran – "Muslims" appear from sura 3 to sura 72, and "believers" from sura 2 to sura 85. Nor can it be said that "Muslims" is used in a more narrowly confessional sense – for example, Solomon asks the Queen of Sheba and her people to come to him "as Muslims"[76] and Jesus' disciples declare themselves to be Muslims.[77] So for the moment, I will assume that Believers and Muslims are interchangeable.

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[75] Here again I face a problem of language. I am aware that this paragprah, as well as many that will come, make it seem that I view Muhammad as some kind of master manipulator. Thta is not what I wish to convey – I have no basis for any kind of assumption about the Prophet's personality, and I do not mean to say that he did the things I describe consciously. Nor do I view them as malicious. So long as he was not unfaithful to what he viewed as the truths of his mission, it would be natural to choose the strategy that would gain the most converts. And after all, there is no need for revolutionary attitude any more when the society of believers is already estabilished. I will not repeat this disclaimer again, but it applies to all similar statements through this work.
[76] 27:31
[77] 3:52

4.3.1 Believers and Unbelievers

What is certainly not interchangeable, however, are Believers and Unbelievers – a statement that is somewhat less self-evident in Arabic, where the terms in question would be *mu'minuna* and *kafiruna*. This division is used repeatedly through the Quran,[78] and I will devote more time to what it is said to entail later. Here, I would just like to mention the few things that are directly connected to the strength of the group borders, and, consequently, the ties that could bind any members of the new community to the outside world.

Generally, there is a consistent tendency in the Quran to separate oneself, and the supposedly pure community of believers, from sinners. Muhammad's message is said to be only for those who will listen. There are many who will not, and from them we are told to turn away and leave them to their destitution.[79] We only see small hints of what we could call a reality check – when the young Muslim society proves to be not quite so free of sin after all, the sinners are simply cast out, at least the grave ones. But that is later, when Muhammad's position is strong enough to be making rules, and when the borders have materialized enough that there is some outside to be spoken of. So in sura 24, the punishment for adultery (or fornication – it is not clear) is said to be, among other things, the impossibility to marry a believer – but the perpetrators can marry idolaters, something, as stated in the same verse, believers cannot do, thus implying that the adulterers are not one of them any more.[80]

Most problems, as far as defining these borders goes, come with The People of the Book. Sometimes they are specifically declared to be unbelievers, like in 5:17,[81] including one case when they are at the same time evaluated positively – Christians are called "best friends of believers" in sura 5.[82] However, in at least two places, it is said that The People of the Book do not need to worry about the Judgement,[83] implying they do not rank as unbelievers, because it is explicitly stated many times that unbelievers' fate in afterlife is the Fire,[84] in some cases even specifying that their works

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[78] Sura 109 makes it its special business to firmly divide believers and unbelievers from each other, unfortunately without defining what each category entails.

[79] 37:174, 178;

[80] 24:3. It is well in accordance with the statement that unbelievers follow their lust - 54:2-3; in 45:23, someone is even accused of making „vain desire" his god. 7:175-176 speaks of someone who turned away from one God and followed his desires.

[81] In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ, the son of Mary. (لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللّٰهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ) Blasphemy here would be more exactly translated as unbelief.

[82] 5:82. It needs to be mentioned that in the same sura, Jews are called the worst enemies of believers, together with those who join other gods with Allah. Also, this verse seems to assume that all Christians believe in Muhammad's prophecy.

[83] 5:69, 2:62.

[84] 103:2-3, 92:14-16, 95:4-6, Sometimes, though, it concerns only those who do not believe in the Day of Judgement, like 77:15, 19, 24, 28 and further

will be in vain and God will not take them into account on the Day of Judgement.[85] There is even a place where it seems that People of the Book will be given their reward twice for persevering; however, it probably only concerns those who believe in Muhammad's prophecy too.[86] 30:2-4 seems to indicate that the Byzantines are counted as believers, but it is not clear at all.[87] Interesting in this context is 22:17, which says that on the Day of Judgement, God will judge between "those who believe (in the Qur'an)", "those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians, Christians, Magians," and those who add other gods to Allah. Only the word translated in the Yusuf Ali translation as "judge" (فصل) has various meanings. The relevant other one here is "distinguish, distinct, part." It seems to imply relatively clearly that all the various peoples of the book are somewhere in between idolaters and believers, and probably their fate after death will be somehow in the middle too – but nothing clearer is said on the topic.

Many passages also indicate that some of the Christians and Jews around Muhammad accepted him as a prophet, while the rest refused his legitimacy and criticized him – for example 3:110, which calls only some of People of the Book believers and which also seems to equal unbelievers with sinners. The verses that are kind to The People of the Book, however, do not seem to concern only that "believing" group – the address is general. On the other hand, on one occasion, Muslims are even asked not to make friends with Jews and Christians, lest they risk "becoming one of them" (5:51). So, in short, the situation is not very clear at all. An obvious explanation of this confusion is that the Prophet's approach to other religions changed through time, and these verses reflect that. Certainly he would not have opposed the other monotheists too sharply at the beginning, when his main enemy was elsewhere and when his message was mostly about the Day of Judgement, something they would not have argued with him about. Not even in the later stage, when he gained some more followers and some more confidence and used their tradition to support his claim – even though this could have elicited some protests from their side, because Muhammad's versions of the traditional stories differed from the ones in the Gospels and Tanakh. We do not hear about these protests, though, or at least not in the Quran, which in itself tells us that at this point, likely, it was not the Muslims' intention to create any conflict with Jews and Christians around them. Only later, when their position improves even further, they can afford to explore the

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[85] 18:105; 39:65 says the same thing about those who join other gods with Allah.

[86] 28:52-54. The relative pronoun is extremely unclear in this case, verse 52 stating that those whom we have given Scripture before this believe in it (ٱلَّذِينَ ءَاتَيْنَـٰهُمُ ٱلْكِتَـٰبَ مِن قَبْلِهِۦ هُم بِهِۦ يُؤْمِنُونَ), not specifying whether „it" refers to „this" – probably the Quran – or the earlier Scripture. However, the following verse speaks about „it" being recited to them, so that makes it almost certain that the subject in question is the Quran.

[87] Specifically, it says that „The Roman Empire has been defeated in a land close by; but they, (even) after (this) defeat of theirs, will soon be victorious within a few years. With Allah is the decision, in the past and in the future: on that day shall the believers rejoice." So either the Byzantines are counted as believers, or at least close enough for believers to be happy about their victory. It is also interesting that the victory was likely over Zoroastrian Persian Empire, so it seems that Zoroastrians were not counted as believers in this verse.

differences in teaching and ideas about society. It is a paradox that, only when Muhammad stops being a rebel, he takes a stand against the last traditional force that he left unattacked until then – the Jews and, to a lesser extent, the Christians. No longer much needed allies, they become dangerous rivals.

The People of the Book did not belong to the group of believers proper but at the same time, by their mere existence, blurred the lines that separate the believers from the rest of the world, lines that should be very clear if we want to see the early Muslim society as having what Douglas would term strong group. Perhaps that is one of the reasons for the occasional strong animosity towards the People of the Book – by their very nature, they are a danger. Strong group societies are characterized by their fear of outsiders that would infect the "clean" inside of the group by their uncleanness.[88] It is not hard to guard the outside borders from straight-out polytheists who oppose Muhammad, but People of the Book stand somewhere in between and, by their ambivalence, represent the possibility of infection.

The easiest solution of this problem, naturally, would be to simply and unequivocally declare the People of the Book unbelievers, thus purging the group of their danger. However, the Muslims could not afford to really seal the borders, because that is impossible for any religious group that gains members by conversion. We know virtually nothing about how that process worked in early Islam, but it is unlikely that it was a very ritualized one – since not much ritual is connected with that even in later Islam.[89] Simply declaring your faith in God and Muhammad three times in front of witnesses is a suspiciously easy way to become a member of what we want to call a strong group culture, however. Comparison with early Christianity comes to mind. Relatively early after Jesus' death, conversion became a complicated process involving a several years long preparation period, someone who would vouch for the convert and confirm that they are honest and genuine, and a complicated ritual which soon came to consist of several stages.[90] If, on the other hand, we decided to compare the emerging Islam with "Christianity" during Jesus' life, the problem would be that, as it seems from the Bible, there were absolutely no traces of strong group in evidence. The teaching appears to have been open to anyone.

The Quran, on the other hand, addresses believers in particular too much for the same idea to be plausible here. Perhaps the difference is that Muhammad was in sharper opposition to his surrounding than Jesus in a prevalently Jewish society. At any rate, there must have been a group

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[88] Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 215.
[89] In Islam shortly after Muhammad, conversions became subtly discouraged by at least part of the Arab elites (Cf. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, p. 200); there are no signs of that in the Quran, however, and all the stories about conversion contained therein make it seem like a simple matter.
[90] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the early church: history, theology, and liturgy in the first five centuries*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009, pp. 855-6.

formed, however loose it might have been. What is more, if we assume that verses are composed into suras at least with some regard for chronology,[91] then the group in question was formed very early on. And since that group was declared to be the exclusive occupants of Paradise at some point, it could not have been quite so loose. In this context, the lack of mention of any ritual for entering the group is a little puzzling. Presumably the conversion would be manifest by the new believer coming to prayers – one ritual that is described in relative detail in the Quran – but it is still rather unsatisfactory, especially as there does not seem to be much of an anti-ritualistic streak to early Islam.

No, it seems that early Islam simply had a strange combination of a group identity emphasis for a group that did not have very strong borders – perhaps precisely because they were blurred by People of the Book, an ambivalent category of religious practitioners who was half outside, half inside, and constantly represented both danger and an inspiration. Islam could not have declared People of the Book straight-out unbelievers because there was too much it accepted from those religions, and because it could not do that, it could not "close" its outside borders properly.

4.3.2 Group Importance

Precise border firmness aside, how important was the existence of a group of Believers in the first place? In a clan society, group membership should count for a lot, but then again Muhammad was rebelling against this society – but on yet another hand, the society he rebelled against was a clan system in its state of decomposition. So it seems that here, his rebellion could have gone either way, as far as ideas go. In a way, it went both.

Groud importance can mainly be seen negatively, in repeated mentions that on the Day of Judgment, the unbelievers will turn against each other and accuse each other of being the origin of disbelief,[92] and then complain about having no friend.[93] Also, their idols and other things they worshipped beside God will turn against them, bearing witness to their sin while trying to save themselves, stressing that they did not ask to be worshipped and ignored the veneration.[94] The unbelievers will attempt to save themselves by sacrificing their closest relatives and their kin.[95]

It is said that the enemies fight only as individuals, that their hearts are not united.[96] The enemy camp in militarily conflict, too, is accused of not sticking together and of one part, the

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[91] Something that seems more likely, on balance, than completely random composure, especially as what is called suras of the first Meccan period are mostly homogeneous in style and often distinguishable from the rest.
[92] 37:22-32, 43:67.
[93] 26:101.
[94] 10:28-29, 19:82.
[95] 70:11-14.
[96] 59:14.

hypocrites, betraying the other when Muhammad and his followers turn against them.[97] This passage is interesting because very clearly, the treason is condemned by the Quran, even though it was treason in the enemy camp and in Muhammad's favour. This verse apparently comes from a stage where group membership and loyalty were crucial, but the view of the Muslim community was no longer so idealized that it would be plausible to say that a betrayal in their favour was of course all right. In other words, the last stage we can observe in the Quran.

The Book urges believers to help their brothers and sisters in faith to settle their disputes.[98] There are also some subtler hints in the metaphors it uses as well. 100:5 talks about penetrating into the midst (of some unspecified group) as one, or together. The context indicates that it is talking about raiders, but important here is the contrast between the togetherness and the fact that they managed to penetrate the centre of the opposing group.

There are frequent mentions of sects and divisions in the Quran, usually in the negative light. Apparently it is a universal phenomenon – even the Jinns have this problem.[99]

As far as importance of family goes, we see different approaches in different verses, but generally, it is an example of the other way Muhammad's religious revolt went as regards the importance of group membership. While being a member of the new group, Believers, was emphasized, the old group memberships were disparaged, and this means mainly clan – or, in other words, family. In the story of Noah, one of his sons drowns and when he asks God about it, reminding him that he promised to save his family, God replies by saying that the son in question was a sinner, and so not really part of his family.[100] That implies two things: first, that people should not consider sinners part of their family any more, and second, that God will not spare anyone punishment – not even the one in this world – for the sake of his believing friends or relatives.

There is very clear – and rather understandable – command that one is to respect one's parents, unless they want him or her to join other gods with Allah, in which case one should not listen to them,[101] but should be still kind to them.[102] This specific direction, repeated twice, seems to indicate that it was a common problem, and in other words, that at some point emerging Islam was a youth movement, fought against by conservative parents. On the other hand, there is also one verse about the opposite situation, probably from a later stage, where a son refuses to convert even though his parents beg him to, and declares resurrection to be "tales of the ancients".[103] This is

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[97] 59:11-12.
[98] 49:9.
[99] 72:11.
[100] 11:46.
[101] 69:8. 41:49 tells the story of Abraham's conflict with his father, which illustrates the same point.
[102] 31:14-15.
[103] 46:17.

presented in a juxtaposition to the ideal person who is respectful towards his or her parents and at the same time believes in God.[104] Here, again, is likely a verse from the stage when Muhammad already had a solid group of followers, but was not quite secure in his position yet, and when he could already use disobedience as a negative trait without sounding absurd in his revolt.

9:23-24 states that one should not even be friends[105] with one's father or brothers if they are unbelievers, implying that whoever considers his family dearer to him that God will not fare well on the Day of Judgement. Abraham is said to have prayed for his idol-worshipping father,[106] but only because he promised he would, and he later realized that it was wrong and stopped. Likewise, believers should not pray for idolaters even if they are member of their own family.[107]

52:21 probably says that one has to go to the Gardens on one's own merit, that merely being part of a believing family will not do – the children have to be believers and have – presumably good – deeds to qualify, because "each individual (is) in pledge for his deeds,"[108] reiterating that clan membership counts for nothing. On the other hand, the same verse is obviously trying to reassure the worried family members[109] that if their children believe, they will get into heaven – perhaps there was some fear that those who have not suffered through the original difficulties of early Islam would not deserve the Gardens? But that is pure speculation. Believers (or Muhammad) *are* told to warn their close family, likely about the Day of Judgement,[110] but then since we are talking about a religion that encourages conversion, that is hardly surprising.

The changes that happened through time when it comes to group importance can be nicely illustrated on the story of Abraham's relationship with his father. In one version of the tale, he is simply said to be praying for him, the implication being that it is the right thing to do. In another, he is said to pray for him only until God makes it clear that is not desirable. Now, even disregarding the traditional chronology, it seems obvious that the first version would be the older one – once it was stated it was wrong to pray for sinners in this way, there could have hardly been a verse that allowed for a prophet to do so without some kind of justification. The first version is relevant to the stage when Muhammad had some followers already, but was not quite secure in his position yet, just like the verse I mentioned that praises filial obedience together with belief in God. But in the second version, we can clearly see bigger importance being placed on being member of the new religious group. Loyalty to a senior family member becomes less important than being a believer.

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[104] 46:15-16.
[105] The word (اولِيَاء) can also mean protector, helper, defender and other related things.
[106] 19:47
[107] 9:113-114.
[108] كُلُّ امْرِىءٍ بِمَا كَسَبَ رَهِينٌ.
[109] See also 52:26-27, though it could merely mean that life in the Gardens is free of any worries, including worries about one's family.
[110] 26:214.

The group lines are being drawn more and more clearly as the group forms and takes a more tangible shape. The borders become the end of all old things, and the beginning of everything new; no relationships can transcend them, not even those of filial loyalty. Once inside the group, however, the relationships begin to have value once again, and later a very precise and structured one, as indicated by the rules of inheritance.[111] This is a mark of the last stage we can observe in the Quran. The authority of unbelievers can be denied earlier, in the stage of a less certain position for the Muslims, because these ties are not as tight as the familial ones, and so can be challenged sooner.

The obligatory exception is, again, the People of the Book. Because believing men can marry their women,[112] somewhat stepping over that border that appears to be getting clearer with the passage of time. That exception, in turn, strengthens the possibility of the People of the Book being perceived as something of a fifth column – they are the only ones who are allowed to infiltrate the exclusive group of the believers. Talking about sickness, Mary Douglas says[113] that in a structured society,[114] the people with weakly defined social roles are to blame. If we transfer this to misfortune in general, it seems to fit well with the accusations of treachery levelled at the Jews at one point[115] – their social role was weakly defined in the sense that they were neither real believers nor "proper" unbelievers, and their group membership was certainly ambiguous. They would have been regarded as intruders in a way.

4.4 The Group and Its Structure

Going back to my survey of method in the previous chapter, it becomes obvious that most of what I have dealt with until now has to do with what Mary Douglas calls the group indicator, the external boundaries of the early Muslim community. It is not my intention to ignore the question of internal structure, and now that I have established that there was at least something of a group, I can proceed to devote a little time to its inside and decide whether there was, in any of those stages, any relevant degree of internal structuring.

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[111] 4:11-12.
[112] 5:5.
[113] Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 219.
[114] Or, in this case, a society that has very clearly defined leadership that, in these matters, supplements a more complicated structure; more on that later.
[115] Made explicit only in later traditional historiography, but there are certainly enough unsympathetic verses to be found in the Quran, accusing the Jews of unbelief and defaming the religion. Cf. 4:46, 5:41, 5:82.

The preliminary answer is no, and what is more, structure seems to have mostly negative associations.[116] For example, there is only one mention of any stratification in Paradise, and that is a group of the "foremost" we come across in sura 56.[117] They are awaited by an even better reward than regular good people. Apart from that, the rewarded all seem to be in an equal state of bliss. Hell is more stratified, which seems to imply that structure is associated with evil, while the eternal bliss is unstructured. That is of some interest – pre-Islamic Arabia, as Muslim tradition paints is, was not precisely an exactly structured society, and it was the epitome of all evil, at least at the beginning, so one might expect that it would reflect in the Muslim idea of hell. But then again, early Muslim group was not structured either, and it was not in Muhammad's interest to paint Hell as similar to the society of Al-Jahiliyyah either – the ones who were supposed to go there *liked* their surrounding culture. So hell, instead, takes shape of yet another kind of social situation, one that is entirely foreign to everyone involved.

6:138-139 criticizes a variety of ritual rules concerning food, and 145 admits only pork, dead animals and blood as forbidden, as well as food dedicated to other gods. However, even these rules are not in effect when someone is forced to consume it, meaning the ritual aspect is somewhat tempered with an ethical dimension. Sura 6 also declares kashrut to be punishment for Jewish disobedience, and 3:93 declares it to be a Jewish invention which appeared before God's communication in the Torah. The scene after which The Sura of the Cow is named, taking place in 2:67-71, also seems to be almost a parody of ritual rules as presented in Leviticus. In "Cultural Bias," Douglas says that "the criterion of edibility will depend on the synecdochial pattern which projects social structure and moral values onto nature."[118] This short remark is particularly fitting in case of early Islam, which has but the five quoted dietary restrictions, and additionally, admits only the food over which the name of God was pronounced. Especially two of these are notable: just as only the idol-worshippers are explicitly excluded from "good company" and only the believers are considered members of the group, so the food sacrificed to the idols is forbidden and only the food which has been blessed in God's name is admissible. As for the rest, the criticism of kashrut indicates the dislike of too much structure that I have described, while the remaining food limitations probably point to the break up with Judaism not being quite so sharp, or at least not being quite complete at the time when those verses were revealed.

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[116] This is in accordance with what Douglas says about high group, low grid society and what I have mentioned in 2.3 describing it.
[117] 56:7-10.
[118] Mary Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 215.

4.4.1 Role of Muhammad

The person of the Prophet was clearly what held the group together since the beginning, even before it actually was a proper group, and association with him was probably one of the few defining traits of membership. But apart from that, his role seems to be changing through the Quran. In most verses, he is simply said to be an admonisher, and not a ruler in any sense.[119] However, there are also cases like 4:59, which explicitly says that a sign of a believer is that he lets his arguments be decided by God and his Messenger, and 24:56 puts listening to him in the same line as prayer and giving charity. 33:36 goes as far as to say that once the Messenger of God decides something, believers have no say in it any more,[120] and 24:62 even says that believers are those who ask the Prophet for leave before they depart from his presence, and only those. 49:1-5 specifies other special rules of conduct that apply around Muhammad. 48:10 states that those who swear allegiance to the Prophet are in fact swearing it to God. There is a claim to exclusivity in 5:41, where those who listen to others beside Muhammad are frowned upon. Other prophets, the mythological models for Muhammad, ask their people to "fear God and obey them" in sura 26.[121]

It is of some interest that there are only four mentions of Muhammad by name in the entire Quran.[122] In the rest, he is either the recipient of the message and so present in the language in second person, or he is talked of as The Messenger. It is, perhaps, indicative of his initial social insignificance – by the time he gained quite some personal respect and power, his role as the messenger of the omnipotent God was far more important than any other personal identity. The title that indicated his personal unimportance at first (though in what are presumably the earliest verses, there is not even a mention of that) became a honorific.

There is little mystery in the changes in the Prophet's position through the Quran – we could, without greater difficulty, assign the cited verses to the different stages of early Islam, from the shunned and ignored 'admonisher,' a voice of one calling in the wilderness, to the confident ruler with a number of devoted followers to obey and a group big enough to have some who disobey, too. The strengthening of his authority occurred at the same time that the importance of group membership was on the rise, and mostly in the third phase, when he became an actual ruler. The Prophet's governing role is the only clear indication of any kind of social stratification in the early Muslim community. He and his wives clearly form a social caste of their own.[123] Should we

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[119] 88:21-22: „Therefore do thou give admonition for thou art one to admonish. Thou art not one to manage (men's) affairs." - فَذَكِّرْ إِنَّمَا أَنتَ مُذَكِّرٌ لَسْتَ عَلَيْهِم بِمُصَيْطِرٍ (Though in this particular case, there is an exception for unbelievers, but it is not clear how exactly Muhammad should „manage them", since the verse is followed merely by the promise of punishment by God). 50:45 says Muhammad is not to force anyone.

[120] The same idea is repeated in 24:51.

[121] 26:163, 179.

[122] 3:144, 33:40, 48:29 and 47:2.

[123] 33:32 and other less blatant examples.

closely follow Douglas' list of characteristics of different cultural types from "Cultural Bias,"[124] we could say that thanks to the Prophet's privileged role, the instruments for resolving intra-group conflicts were not as scarce as in an ideal enclave society, or unstructured group society, which then protected the early Muslims from some of the dangers of this cultural type, like necessarily small group, extremely strong boundaries and all ill-will concealed and driven underground. However, because the Prophet's authority is effectively the only tool of social stratification, there are not that many ways to solve internal conflicts – and indeed it would seem that if members of the group tried to invent some to raise the number of options and so improve the group's chances of survival,[125] it was rejected by the Prophet, considered a threat to his authority.[126]

4.5 The Group and Its Identity

So the group we have here is not quite clearly marked – but it *is* something of a group nevertheless – and does not have much of an internal structure. What was their purpose then, what did they strive for? Certainly in part, it was rebellion against the established order of things, as I have already mentioned many times, but that alone never carries a movement too far, and neither does millennialism (which could be called the religious face of rebellion against established order anyway, with some little hyperbole). That was the beginning of it – but what came later? Some of it, the picture tells us, followed logically from the vices of the society in which the group grew, like the emphasis on social justice I have already mentioned. Not all things, however, were quite so straightforward.

What it means to be a believer, and what it means to be an unbeliever, is frequently specified – in many varying ways. Thus sura 80 equals unbelievers with sinners and sura 107 (and less clearly also 92:8-9) with those who commit social injustice and lack mercy (see above). They are also accused of following their lust.[127] Believers are usually declared to have faith in God and Judgment Day at least[128] (those who do not believe in it are called liars.)[129] 4:136 names God, his Messengers, angels, scriptures and the day of judgement as the minimal requirement for belief. In

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[124] Mary Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 205.

[125] According to Mary Douglas, anyway – and when we look at the fate of the umma in the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and decide to believe traditional history, it does appear that she was right, at least in case of Islam. The religion certainly persevered, but it is equally obvious that the lack of structured leadership and clear succession has hurt it and caused much mayhem and murder

[126] 5:41.

[127] 54:2-3; in 45:23, someone is even accused of making „vain desire" his god. 7:175-176 speaks of someone who turned away from one God and followed his desires.

[128] 4:39, 2:126 and others.

[129] 51:10-12.

one place, those who will face punishment are defined as joining gods with Allah, not paying zakat and denying the hereafter.[130] We learn that proper believers pray, avoid vain talk and give charity,[131] they keep their word[132] and they have sex only with their wives or their slaves.[133] Asking for more is sinful. Also, one should speak the truth and be honest in business.[134] Slandering is also wrong, as is being cruel.[135]

Some definitions of believers are rather narrower. I mentioned the cases where proper respect for Muhammad is considered a necessary sign of belief, and in one place it is said that anyone who is reluctant to fight for God is an unbeliever.[136] Often, talk about believers implies not belief in God, but belief in the prophetic role of Muhammad.[137]

All of these mixed messages probably signal development, but more importantly, they indicate that there was not any clear cut idea of what one had to believe in if one was to count oneself among the Believers. They were those who associated themselves with Muhammad, and at least the belief in God and Judgement Day was probably expected (but what exactly does that mean, anyway? I will come to the problem of the crucial beliefs in a moment), but beyond that, nothing much seems to have been specified. Most of the rest is an idealized picture of the perfect community, thrown into a sharp contrast – again – with the sinful surrounding society.

There are, however, several topics that seem to be important enough for early Islam that we could perhaps say that they defined it, the ideas that were the heart of the early Muslim identity and that should help us, as such, to understand it better. For example, one of the typical and also more interesting ideas in the Quran is the notion of the "golden middle way." It is not, of course, unique in any way, but it is rather interesting to have it so prominently represented in a religious text, and one that deals with eternal punishment for unbelievers to boot. 79:37 criticizes those who "had transgressed all bounds" – the verb used here, طغى, has many meanings, but it is somehow connected to exceeding boundaries. 74:37 warns against both "pressing forward" and "following behind," and 25:67 represents the servants of the Most Gracious as those who, "when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just (balance) between those (extremes)". Believers are encouraged to give alms, but not so much that they would come to ruin.[138] There is

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[130] 41:6-7.
[131] 23:1-4.
[132] 23:8.
[133] 70:29-31, 23:5-7.
[134] 70:32-33, 83:1-3, 26:181-182.
[135] 68:11-13.
[136] 9:45. There is some logic behind it – the disbelief here is specifically mentioned to be „in God and the Day of Judgement," because if they truly believed in blessed afterlife for believers, they would have no reason to fear death in battle.
[137] 90:19-20, 84:20-21, 73:17.
[138] 2:195. The meaning of „make not your own hands contribute to (your) destruction " (وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ) is, however, rather open to interpretation.

also an invitation to speak "neither aloud, nor in a loud tone" during prayer[139] and a statement that God does not love the extravagant.[140] Prophets ask Lord for forgiveness for their excesses.[141] People of the Book are told not to go into excess in their religion,[142] and Islam is presented as the middle road between Christianity and Judaism.[143] Clearly this was not an idea promoted in the earliest stages of Islam, when Muhammad was still a lone voice considered mad by most, but given its prominence through the Quran, it likely emerged relatively soon nonetheless, when Muhammad first started to refer to tradition and gained enough followers to become relevant at all. It could have easily become one of the arguments against both those who accused him of being too revolutionary and those who accused him of being too traditional.

4.5.1 God's Greatness and Human Condition

The emphasis on God's power is another of the thought cornerstones of early Islam. It is one of those handy cosmological ideas that, as Mary Douglas says,[144] have their place in many different social situations. At the beginning, it was used by Muhammad in contrast with the worldly power to throw it into perspective and to encourage revolt, because God is the one people should be really afraid of, not persecution from the ultimately insignificant clan leaders around them. Later, Muhammad's connection to the omnipotent God as his Messenger legitimized his authority and made it unquestionable. The fall of one set of political leaders was the making of another. This double way of connecting divine authority to the human one came to light later in Islamic history, when the discussion about respecting sinful khalifs started.

Precisely because it can be used across social situations, it is one of the recurring topics through the Quran, especially in verses that compare God's power with how weak humans are. The entire beginning of sura 55, up till the verse 29, is devoted to this, as well as 56:57-74. 68:17-27 contain a parable about how uncertain everything in human life is, and how much under God's control. God is also compared to idols, or 'that which is associated with him', and said to "exalted above it."[145]

There are two main positions to be found in the Quran concerning this matter. Either the various gods are essentially declared to be non-existent (frequent mentions of how idols cannot answer prayers),[146] or they are said to exist, but to be servants of God, far from the same order of

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[139] 17:110.
[140] 7:31: إِنَّه لايُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ
[141] 3:147.
[142] 4:171.
[143] 5:66.
[144] Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 231.
[145] 52:43.
[146] 26:72-74, 29:17.

being as him. In the latter case, they are usually considered to be jinns.[147] Sometimes the idolaters talk to them during the Judgement or afterwards, accusing them of their misfortune.[148] These two positions are again tied to different stages of early Islam. At the beginning, when the goal was to tear down everything old in the fires of Judgement Day, God was the only one, with everything else melting into nothingness, including other deities. Once Muhammad became involved with tradition a little more, and became a little less extreme, the other deities started to have their own identities, merely subservient to God, just like humans are, or should be. It is a message for the unbelievers – just like your gods actually worship Allah, so should you.

Human weakness is elaborated on in many forms. There are a few mentions of humans being easily replaceable by God if he decides to do so.[149] Man is said to be created anxious or impatient (هلوعًا), fretful in misfortune and niggardly in fortune.[150] 51:53 could be read as refuting original sin, but it is very open to interpretation. Complete purity is not expected from believers – the good people are described as only "falling into small faults."[151] 19:71-72 says that on the Day of Judgement, all people will go down to Hell, but those who guarded themselves against evil will be saved. This too seems to indicate the view that fundamentally, all people are deserving of punishment – no one is good enough to go to Heaven on their own – but those who tried will be saved nevertheless.

There is also definite mistrust of the human ability to come to the right conclusion about the metaphysical – opponents of Muhammad are asked what is the source of their information, if they listen in on God, implying that if they do not, they have no claims on any knowledge about the transcendental. Revelation is the key, without it people have no credibility.[152] Crucial part in this plays the human soul, which is – somewhat unexpectedly for western readers – usually seen as the initiator of evil in humans. 50:16 says it whispers evil suggestions to him, and in 20:96, his soul is what makes Samari come up with golden calf worship.

This, again, is a mix of several different positions. On balance the view of the human nature seems rather negative, but then we learn that the angels were told to bow down to humans, which they did with the exception of Iblis,[153] and that we have "something of God's spirit" in us.[154] At the beginning, when Muhammad was a lone voice against the tidal wave of unlawfulness, the view of human nature would have been naturally negative, because everyone, or almost everyone, around

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[147] E.g. 37:158, 6:100.
[148] 26:97-98.
[149] 76:28.
[150] 70:19-21.
[151] 53:32.
[152] 52:37-38, 53:28.
[153] 20:116-117.
[154] 15:28-29.

him was living in sin, body and soul. Later, as the religious group began to form, its members were made into the exceptions to this rule, as shown in all those passages about the outstanding ethical qualities the Believers have. And later yet, when there were more Muslims and they formed their own community, the reality of their not-so-perfect lives led – fittingly, in Islam – to the middle position, when the human nature is seen as somewhat corrupted (falling in small faults), but with enough of God's spirit left that the good overweights the bad, at least in Muslims.

Another interesting problem is the power Satan has over people. The general idea seems to be that once a human slips from the right path of his or her own accord, Iblis gains power over him and brings him further into sin.[155]

Connected to that is the question of exactly how much free will humans have. Again, it appears that frequently, after we make the first wrong decision, God keeps us on the wrong path if he so chooses, but that the first decision is actually ours – it is not very clear, however. Sometimes it is said that Muhammad should not try too hard to convince the unbelievers because "Allah guideth not such as He leaves to stray."[156] It is said explicitly that it is only in the Prophet's power to make those who already believe listen.[157] Verses like "I have no power over any harm or profit to myself except as Allah willeth"[158] seem to indicate radical determinism, but can actually be interpreted in a more moderate light too. Some are harder to weasel out of, though – 57:22-23 states that people should not either rejoice over good fortune or despair over bad one, because everything is "recoded in a decree" already before it happens. That seems to be clear enough, but it does not fit well with some other passages.

74:54-6 mixes determinism and free will in a rather interesting way – first, it is said that who wished to should remember the reminder from God, but right after that, it clarifies that people can remember only if God wishes them to.[159] However, there are other places where it is said that whoever wants to will remember the reminder, without the later specification.[160] 37:161-163 is probably a deterministic passage, but rather interestingly phrased: "For, verily, neither ye nor those ye worship can lead (any) into temptation concerning Allah, except such as are going to the blazing Fire!"[161] The determinist reading would suppose that there is an intended "already" before "going", but actually it could also be understood as "once someone is led astray, they will go to the blazing Fire".

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[155] 43:36-37, 15:42.
[156] 16:37.
[157] 30:52-53.
[158] 10:49; لَا أَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِي ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ
[159] 81:27-29 brings the same contradiction, as well as 76:29-30.
[160] 80:12, 78:39, 73:19.
[161] فَإِنَّكُمْ وَمَا تَعْبُدُونَ مَا أَنتُمْ عَلَيْهِ بِفَاتِنِينَ إِلَّا مَنْ هُوَ صَالِ الْجَحِيمِ

God seems to be deliberately giving people some space for free decision in 26:4, where he says that if he wanted, he could have sent such signs that would make it impossible to stay unbelieving.

Lot's wife, who dies with the Sodomites in the Quranic tale, is said to have been condemned to staying behind by the three angels who came to Sodom (or by God himself), without any reason being given for this decision.[162] In 43:20, unbelievers argue that if God wanted them not to worship the idols, he would have simply made it so. They are called ignorant for such a statement, even though it seems rather in accord with the Quran's general approach to free will. God's providence is clearly not to be used to excuse one's bad behaviour. As I have mentioned already in 4.2, that was precisely the sort of thing the unbelievers were wont to do.

Some discussion also seems to have been going on about the power of intercession. It is not banned outright, but servants of God – in this context probably mostly past prophets – are said to pray only for those whom God accepts.[163] 38:19 invites to pray for forgiveness of sins of the praying person as well as other believers. 4:105 forbids praying for traitors, and just two verses later, we read "plead not on behalf of (people) who deceive themselves." In 23:28, God forbids Noah to pray for the wrongdoers. 63:5 marks refusing Prophet's prayer for forgiveness of one's sins as a sign of pride, and yet the following verse goes on to state that it does not matter, because even if the Messenger had prayed for the people in question, it would not have done them any good, because God would not have forgiven them anyway. Likewise in 9:80, it is said about hypocrites and those who make fun of charity-givers: ask for forgiveness for them or do not. "If thou ask seventy times for their forgiveness, Allah will not forgive them." However, you can pray for those who admitted their sins and are therefore a mix of good and evil.[164]

Usually when we came across mixed messages like these, I tried to sort them by the stage of early Islam's development to which I considered them to belong. Here, I will not employ that strategy, because I do not see several clearly distinguishable positions. Instead, I would say that the matter of free will was never settled into a clear-cut idea, leaving later philosophers with a headache-inducing confusion – but then the Quran in not a philosophical text. It is a bit of a paradox, because as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, God's clear omnipotence is one of the most marked topics of the Quran, and something on which there was no change through the evolution of the holy book. In such a situation, one would expect the problem of human free will, which is certainly connected, to be solved in the same breath. Instead, it is left more or less an open

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[162] 15:59-60.
[163] 21:28. 53:26 says the same about angels – their intercession will be in vain unless God likes the person in the first place. 20:109 states the same – the only effective intercessions are the ones from those whom God allowed to intercede.
[164] 9:103.

question. My explanation here is that for a religion the founder of which went from a shunned underdog to a respected political leader, at least partly by his own merit, as well as his companions, the idea of complete determinism was not quite acceptable. The early Muslims knew they worked for what they had at the end. No outside force came to their rescue. Or, in the earlier stages, they needed not to rely on this kind of rescue too much, because that would have made them unable to help themselves. On the other hand, no God as overwhelmingly omnipotent as the one in Islam can easily tolerate the notion of fully fledged free will. And so both approaches find support through the holy book, depending on what needed emphasis at the moment, and the question was left unclear – in the Quran, that is.

4.5.2 Scripture

The importance of Scripture in the early Muslim theology is apparent at a glance.[165] The Quranic belief system is extremely scripture-centric, so much so that I would dare to say it was unparalleled anywhere else – rather paradoxical considering that according to the traditional story, Muhammad prophesied aloud and it was only written down after his death. For example, we can find passages discarding unbelievers' claims merely by saying that "they have no Scripture."[166] Scripture is also considered proof enough of God's existence and the Day of Judgement. It is declared that Muhammad does not need any miracles because there are enough in the older holy books.[167]

The Scripture-centrism is a mark of the second stage of the emergence of Islam, when the seeming contradiction between finding anchor in tradition and continuing to fight against the mainstream society occurred. The pervading religion had no texts to rely on, so that was a kind of fixture Muhammad could easily use against it, with all the authority it entailed (there is something holy about holy scriptures, even for religious outsiders). Later, when his relationship with The People of the Book grew more complicated, only having a Scripture was no longer enough – that is when the accusations of changing it to suit one's purpose appear,[168] to discredit those whose disagreement with the Prophet was supported by precisely the holy books he used to hold above all else.

The Quran is referred to as "Arabic Quran" in 20:113, and two key attributes used together are often "Arabic and clear",[169] to differentiate from the other holy texts, which are not Arabic and

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[165] Cf. Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 13.
[166] 43:21, 68:37-38, 37:157.
[167] 20:133.
[168] 2:75.
[169] 26:195 عَرَبِىّ مُبِين.

likely are not considered clear either. In accordance with what I wrote about initial unreserved acceptance of Jewish and Christian texts, none of the differentiating factors is anything along the lines of 'more truthful' or 'holier'. That came only later.[170]

One of the repeated topics in the Quran is the warning role of the Messenger of God and the cyclical nature of occurrences like this. After stating that he came to warn his people of the dangers of disbelief – namely, the eternal punishment – the Quran regularly proceeds to tell the stories of older prophets who faced the same task, and who were ignored by the majority, which was later destroyed by God[171] (sometimes the prophet wants to spare them, sometimes he asks God destroy them himself.)[172] The prophets in question are usually characters from Tanakh, plus Jesus and John the Baptist from the Gospels. There are, however, some other characters too, Arabic in origin – prophets who came to different groups of Arabs in the past to bring them the faith in one God. Most of these stories have been reshaped to fit the pattern mentioned above – and so to Abraham's tale is added a conflict with his own father and people,[173] Noah tries to convert others before being saved on the Ark,[174] in Moses' tale, the most prominence is given to his conflict with the Pharaoh, trying to convince him of God's reign over mankind with signs Pharaoh keeps denying.[175] All of this makes Muhammad sit more firmly in an unshakeable traditional line of prophethood that still – by the virtue of the said social function – leaves him enough room to be revolutionary. In this sense, the criticism of his contemporaries was completely misplaced. When one is using prophets as one's mythical role model, one can certainly be a traditionalist and a rebel at the same time, exactly what Muhammad needed to be at what I would call the middle stage of his journey. And so he can not only use the prophets from the non-autochthonous holy books (as I have already said, they are ideal for this endeavour), but also figures from Arabic folklore, as long as they are prophetic enough.

Some differences between the prophets' stories in Tanakh and in the Quran are less predictable than simple moulding into one universal shape. For example, Noah's people blame him for being followed only by the lowest people,[176] something that is reminiscent rather of Jesus; significantly, he responds by saying that he is not going to drive away believers and that their account is with God and not with him.[177] The sorcerers Pharaoh calls on to compete with Moses

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[170] 2:75 contains the only accusation of altering the text of the scriptures, and it only concerns one group of Jews, if it concerns Jews at all (the context is unclear). 2:79 deals with direct forgery of scripture, but seems to have no tie to the People of the Book.

[171] They are frequently listed in short (or not so short, sometimes) mentions, like in 89:5-13, 69:4-10, 51:24-46, 54:9-42, 37:73-148, 50:12-14.

[172] 71:26.

[173] Abraham is even in danger of being burned at stake for striking the idols. He is saved by God. 37:83-98

[174] 11:25-26.

[175] E.g. 79:15-26, 73:15-16.

[176] 26:111.

[177] 26:113-114.

convert to monotheism after being defeated, and it is implied that they die a martyr's death afterwards.[178] The Queen of Sheba converts to Islam after visiting Solomon,[179] and Moses being chosen as a prophet is interpreted slightly more as a conversion, a sharp turn from his previous life – the murder he commits in Egypt was when he was still "one of the ignorant."[180] Virgin Mary's tale is very fragmentary, but it seems to imply that she has been a cast out during her pregnancy and birth,[181] after thinking that the Spirit of God, who appeared as a man, came to attack her.[182] What is missing is the moment of her decision to accept her role to bear Jesus – the Spirit simply announces that she will become pregnant, and she does. In one version of the story about the golden calf, a mysterious figure of Samiri appears to seduce Israel to idol worship. Aaron, whose role is rather negative in the Tanakh account, tries to discourage his people from sin in the Quranic version of the story.[183] Solomon does not end up in sin and idolatry as he did in Tanakh. The sharp difference is best illustrated by 38:30-33, where he realizes he has sinned by buying large amounts of expensive horses (one of the three sins he is mainly criticized for in Tanakh) and proceeds to cut their throats and repent. And Abraham tells his son about God's order to sacrifice him, and the son (it is not entirely clear which one it is in this rendering of the story) decides to let himself be killed willingly.[184]

All of the differences I list here can be tied to important aspects of the early Muslim identity. So Noah is followed by the dregs of society just like Muhammad likely was at the beginning, Mary is made an outcast like early Muslims while her free will is at the same time somewhat limited or at least less obvious, Moses converts just like Muhammad asks the people around him to convert (the stage when he used the traditional stories the most is also the stage when he tried to gain those of a better social standing – and so also, in his eyes, more sinful – for his new religion, thus the emphasis on Moses' moral change), and so do the sorcerers and the Queen of Sheba. In the rest, an unstructured society's problems with any kind of ambiguity come to light. It does not handle moral grey zones well, and needs its characters to be either good or bad – for a proper enclave, there is no ethical middle ground. Judaism with its society's more complicated internal structure was better equipped to deal with its heroes being villains at the same time. A case in point is Solomon's improvement compared to the Jewish version, but we can see the same mechanism at work in

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[178] 20:69-71. 26:49.
[179] 27:44.
[180] 26:20.
[181] 19:22.
[182] 19:17-18.
[183] 20:85-97.
[184] 37:102.

Abraham's sacrifice of his son – the son's agreement clears the father of any accusation of misconduct[185] - as well as the clearing of Aaron's character.

This way of using the older scriptures allowed Muhammad a degree of anchor in an alternative tradition while, at the same time, he began to slowly differentiate from the other monotheistic traditions in the area – paradoxically enough, by the same topics that made the new religion more intertwined with them than before.

4.5.3 Reward and Punishment

The Day of Judgement, its coming, and how dreadful it will be is one of the main topics of the Quran, mainly connected to the earliest stage, when Muhammad was still mostly a lone voice. It is a very effective way to cast doubt on the power of the ruling elite, after all, when you herald the end of the world in which they hold power.

There is a curious statement that on this day, neither money nor children will help anyone, except for those of sound heart.[186] It is also made clear that everybody will be on their own on this day, judged solely on his own deeds.[187] People will come to the Judgement accompanied by two unspecified beings, one to "drive" them and one to testify about them.[188] At least one of them appears to be a somewhat clandestine figure, as shown by 50:27, where he defends himself in front of God, saying that he "did not make him" – the human – "transgress." In general, there is quite a degree of ruthless competition associated with the Day of Judgement, as mentioned when I talked about the importance of group membership in 4.3.2. Since competitive society is seen as a negative model for the ideal Muslim community, and the Day of Judgement is consistently picture as a mainly negative and terrible occurrence, these mentions of competition connected to it are likely part of the horror-filled description of the end of time and serve as contrast to the idyllic paradise in which there will be no competition. It is, after all, said that everyone will be led to hell before the righteous are saved, so this kind of competition for salvation is likely a case of everyone having a small taste of hell before those who do not deserve it are taken to the Gardens.

The concept of afterlife is one of the crucial topics in the Quran too, and so it is discussed in relative detail, even though it is of interest that it seems that at the beginning, the Prophet concentrated mostly on Judgement Day, on ending the unjust world, and only later, when the religion gained more followers and became more hopeful, the focus shifted to rewarding the

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[185] The same argument could probably be made, though on less certain ground, about the Quran's rejection of Jesus' death (4:157). Here, it would be God who'd be cleared off all accusations, namely, why did he leave Jesus to die?'
[186] 26:88-89. This is another case of what I mention in 4.3.2 – the group borders are the end of all old and beginning of all new, but beyond them, the normal ties begin to work again.
[187] 53:38-41.
[188] 50:21. It could also be interpreted as a single being having two functions, especially in light of verse 23, where we switch to singular.

Believers and punishing the unbelievers too. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that people started joining who actually had something to lose, and so expected to have something to look forward to in exchange after the dreadful Day of Judgement, too.

Punishment is represented by the Fire, reward by the Gardens. Both fates are eternal (the idea of a time-limited punishment is explicitly rejected in 2:80, however, it is not clear whether this rejection is general or only concerning the group in question. Seeing that there is never any other mention of a time-limited punishment and it is said to be eternal multiple times, it is more likely that the rejection is meant to be universal). The Fire is said to include the tree of zaqqum, whose fruit is apparently something very unpleasant that the punished will be forced to eat, and then drink boiling water.[189] In another place, the damned are said to eat "the filth from washing the wouds,"[190] so likely pus. Part of the punishment is also being separated from God.[191] Sometimes, there are specific punishments promised for specific kinds of sins - for example, there is a mention of someone who was blind to God's signs in life being resurrected as blind.[192]

There are more descriptions of the Gardens – it is a pleasant place with rivers underneath it, where believers and their wives lie on sofas and eat and drink. There are also beautiful young girls present,[193] and pretty young boys too[194] – which throws the usual assumption of what is done with the maidens in perspective.[195] It is an altogether pleasant place. The rewarded apparently have the option of looking at the punished and even communicating with them,[196] but normally, nothing of the sounds from the Fire can be heard in the Gardens, so that it does not spoil the mood there.[197]

In other words, while the promise of punishment could be described as excruciating pain (as the Quran itself states, "an evil destination indeed," e.g. 2:126), the reward is not exactly ecstasy of Divine presence or anything of the sort.[198] It is closer to what could an ideal existence in this world look like if we were not burdened by any worries. Likely, that is significant – as I have said, at the point when afterlife became more important, Muhammad was gaining followers who stood to lose something, and so the idea if a completely different ecstatic Heaven was not a natural part of his cosmology. Those were people who actually liked at least some aspects of life, and so the point was

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[189] 56:51-55, 37:62-67 (here, the fruit is said to be like heads of devils).
[190] 69:36.
[191] 83:15.
[192] 20:124-126.
[193] 37:48.
[194] 76:19, 56:17, 52:24.
[195] 52:20 does specifically mention forming couples with the maidens – the verb زوج is used here uniquely in the Quran, but is likely to mean that – the substantive form is used to denote pairs that Noah takes on the Ark. The modern meaning „marry" is unlikely in this case, because in all other cases when the Quran talks about marriage, it uses a different verb.
[196] 37:54-57, 7:44.
[197] 21:101-102.
[198] The only mention of something along those lines is 83:22-24, where the righteous are said to be in bliss.

to show them that Paradise would be like those aspects they liked all the time, and better. Punishment for the unbelievers, on the other hand, could hardly be only mild inconvenience.

What things exactly will land one in the Fire or in the Gardens is not clear. As mentioned in the passage about believers and unbelievers, the line there is blurred. Often, lack of belief in Muhammad is said to be the cause of condemnation into the Fire.[199]

There is some change when it comes to punishment in this world. There are plenty of verses that speak of rich sinners, of money corrupting people, and of unbelievers enjoying many pleasures in this world because they will suffer in hereafter. On the other hand, there are also ones that mention that punishment awaits in this world, and then another, worse one after death.[200] 3:145 mentions a possibility of earthy reward from God and it is not entirely clear whether it is meant to discourage from wanting it or not, though it does seem to imply to one has to make a choice between a reward in this world and the reward in hereafter. The change is hardly difficult to understand – at the beginning, when Muslims were just outcasts and underdogs, there was no hope for an earthly punishment for all the sinners around them. Once Muhammad gained actual power, however, he necessarily needed to give out punishments, and it was supported by the Quran.

4.6 Summarising the story

What, then, have we learned about the early Islamic society and religion by studying the Quran, and just the Quran, in detail?

Islam seems to have gone through three basic stages before Muhammad's death. First, it was only the Prophet, shunned and scorned, preaching about the approaching end of the world, drawing in the underdogs and those who fell through the cracks of the system, which were getting bigger and bigger as it crumbled. He criticized the rich and the powerful and spoke mainly of destruction of all people knew. But then, slowly, his focus shifted, perhaps at first in reaction to comments from those who listened to him, and he began justifying his claims by tradition, speaking of the rewards for believers, seeking allies as he gained followers and a goal began to form, still distant and improbable, but not impossible to conceive any more. And then, later still, Muhammad emerged as a confident leader of a self-governing body of members of a new religion, the supreme authority, and with no more need to compromise or hold back, clarified his relationship to the People of the Book and their tradition, while at the same time accepting much of the mainstream tradition that he

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[199] 78:28, here together with not believing in the Day of Judgement.
[200] 13:34.

used to be so opposed to. During all this time, the new religious group took more and more concrete shape, its borders got firmer, and its identity became clearer. The new religion was born.

I have been relying on Douglas' observations about society and cosmology through this thesis, but now I would like to clarify how exactly I relate the different stages to the four ideal types I described at the beginning. As I have described the stages, the first one is straightforward enough to assign to the four kinds of society Douglas talks about – there was no group yet, only a lonely prophet and then a few followers recruited from the bottom of the social ladder, all trying to escape the ruthless pressure of the successful big men. The ruling class would represent the ideal type of the competitive and individualistic society, inevitably producing, from its unsuccessful members, the social type of the underdog, to which Muhammad and his first followers belonged in the earliest stage of Islam.

The second stage is slightly trickier. Something of a group has formed, a small enclave, making that type my first choice. It will be the final one, too, but with some reservations. The ideal type, in this case, is not quite so ideal. For one, Muhammad's goal here was to gain more followers, so the borders of this enclave were not quite as closed as we would expect from this kind of society. Also, as I have discussed already, the borders were not sealed to Jews and Christians, another thing that complicates this classification. It is the best fit we can find out of Douglas' four choices, but also shows one the model's weaknesses – it was not really made to map change. That is not to say that it cannot be used in such a manner. Quite the contrary, it is very useful for describing the options that are open to a changing society, for example. But the second stage of early Islam's development is a point on a journey more than anything else, and so cannot quite have the features of an established society. What we see of Muslims in this phase would be an enclave, but one with very open borders, and so also many of Douglas' descriptions would not quite fit it.

.The third stage becomes easier again, because the borders of the group have somewhat solidified. Presumably most people around Muhammad converted already, making the need to gain new converts less pressing, and even his relationship to the People of the Book began to clarify as he started to define them more as outsiders than insiders. It never got entirely to that stage, however. Muslims became an enclave with the particular feature of Muhammad's undisputable leadership, which was so important that it moved the society, in many of its traits, towards a traditional, structured one, even though there was not much structure to speak of apart from this. I have already mentioned the advantages this brought in section 4.4 – essentially, it strongly raised the chances of the group's survival. It might have also been one of the factors that led to the aforementioned reluctance to welcome new converts, which lasted until the social situation of Islam changed yet again.

Now that I have clarified with what ideal types of society and cosmology I associate different stages of early Islam, it remains to say what it actually means. I believe that the description I provided somehow helps to understand the process of the emergence of Islam, but there are some things I would like to note about what came later.

First, I would like to point out the variety of possibilities that were open to the early Islamic society. In "Cultural Bias", Mary Douglas talks about the "negotiating individual," who has a set of options open to him determined by the culture type he lives in, and he can, to a degree, change his position on the imaginary graph by his own actions and decisions.[201] But not only individuals are moving across the graph, whole groups and societies are too, especially the ones which recently underwent a radical change in cosmology, like early Islamic society did. There is an ingrained instability in a new cosmology, on principle, and there are more options open to it than to an older, established one. This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage, leading to new religions and ideologies so often seeking at least some degree of grounding in previous tradition, to anchor themselves and reduced the infinite possibilities before them somehow.

But a new religion that invents itself as an extreme movement located firmly in the lower far-right corner of the imaginary graph will have its options more limited too. It is not simple to break from self-imposed shackles. Islam, on the other hand, did nothing of the sort. While establishing a strong enough group, it kept the borders somewhat open, even in the third stage, and did not introduce much more structure than firmly establishing Muhammad's leading position and ordering familial relations very precisely (through inheritance laws). That meant that after the Prophet's death, a wide variety of options was open to the new religion, something that is evidenced, if we believe the traditional history, by the way sects immediately started to appear. It is sometimes said that it is telling that while in Christianity, the splits happen along dogmatic lines, in Islam, it was along the political ones. That is certainly true, but not in the slightly derogatory way it is usually intended. Because the split did not happen only along the political lines – the cosmologies differed too, as they would have to if we are to believe Mary Douglas. The political aspect is just more easily visible. All of the new groups exploited the wide range of possibilities that lay before early Islam. There was the majority that angled for a more egalitarian, though still not quite wholly open, approach of voting for their new leader. There was a group that preferred to move Islam more firmly into the structured realm with hereditary religious authority. And there was the group who insisted than nothing more than pure revolutionary attitude. The Islamic world at large settled into structure and heredity soon enough, not surprisingly if we take into account what Mary Douglas

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[201] Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 190-195.

says about the sustainability of non-structured larger societies.[202] The Islamic world had become very large indeed, and could not conceivably work without some internal organization. However, this particular openness about the right kind of society arrangement and, consequently, cosmology, has remained in the Quran (though it has been much subdued by the enormous corpus of the hadith literature) and has always served as a tool for various revolutionaries in Islamic history, be them of the conservative of liberal nature, because these are all options that the Quran allows for. Perhaps that is a necessary condition for a successful religion – to be open enough for its followers to have enough "wiggle room."

This open cosmology was not only a result of the Quran itself not being very definite on many questions, but also of people presumably coming with different backgrounds into the Muslim community. In many ways, Islam allowed them to keep their previous worldviews, not directly contradicting them in any way, and because their social situation has not likely always drastically changed once they joined, they did not have any immediate reason to abandon all of their cosmology. That brought many different views into the community, views that would have pushed it in many different direction after the death of the Prophet, the only authority.

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[202] Douglas, „Cultural Bias", p. 206.

5. Conclusion

Watching the story of Islam develop, we can observe that it has some similarities with how we generally imagine a new religion is created and also some differences. Certainly every prophet of a new religion is likely to start out shunned and ridiculed, and if he is successful, his position improves in time. In the most general way, the story of early Islam is merely a quicker version of what must always hold – from the underdogs to the ones who set the rules. It is not always, however, that we can see all this happen in the lifetime of the original prophet.

As we go through the Quran, we can see how every part of it changes in response to the developing social situation. The language itself changes, the topics change, the way the topics are discussed changes. We can see the biblical stories evolving in front of our eyes to accommodate the different cosmology that is the early Islam. We can see attitudes to different social groups developing, too (the prime example being the Jews). And hopefully, we can understand these changes, at least a little.

The goal of this thesis was to extract the narrative of early Islam from the Quran to make the story comprehensible and perhaps even relatable. It was also an attempt to see how much we can glimpse if we really limit ourselves only to the one primary text. I cannot properly judge if I succeeded in the first, since understanding is an unquantifiable, subjective sphere. As for the second, much depends on how far we allow our deductions to take us. If we attempt to be down to earth and only keep to what we can say with certainly (or as much certainty as there can ever be in interpretative work), the findings are going to be relatively modest. Note, however, that modest is not the same as non-existent. Making sense of the changes (or most of them) to the biblical stories certainly becomes possible without any great leaps of reasoning, as well as understanding what effect precisely Muhammad's role had on the otherwise unstructured group and what options were open to the new religious community after the Prophet's death. And if we allow ourselves to go further, unafraid to make the connections based on what Mary Douglas says are almost universal cultural rules, the whole story unfolds in front of us. It is, it its basic outline, not very different from the traditional tale of the origins of Islam. But that is not surprising – on the contrary, it would be surprising if it was not so.

The Quran is the founding text of Islam, and it would be looking down on early Muslims indeed if we assumed that they were unable to grasp the basic contours of the situation the Quran describes, especially as it was closer to their own than it is to ours. What is more, it would mean that the Quran failed as a religious text, because it was not understood in the broadest sense. No, it

is closer to being a method of verification that the story I discovered while looking through the Quran is not entirely fanciful.

Though that view is, I unfortunately have to admit, too optimistic, because it assumes that the traditional tale and my interpretation are entirely unrelated. As I explained in 3.3 when outlining the problems I face in my attempt, once I know the story as it is usually told, my success in bracketing this knowledge is always going to be only limited. Still, for every conclusion I made, there was a part of the Quran I was referring to, and no part of the Quran that directly contradicted it. That, I am afraid, is the best that can be done under such circumstances.

My hope is that this thesis is not just a repetition of the traditional story in different words, but that it also sheds some new light or shows the story of the origins of Islam from a different angle, allowing us to glimpse connections that were unseen before, some of them interesting for further exploration. For me, one such case is the question to what degree are the actual pre-Islamic sources, in self-descriptions, in accordance with what the Quran says about that society, and another case is, on the other end of the tale, how the different sects that formed after Muhammad's death dealt with the number of cosmological and social options open to them, and what different worldviews could be formed from the basis of the Quran.

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