# HAGARISM REVISITED

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In 1977 Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published their breath-taking account of the origins of the Islamic movement in the book *Hagarism. The Making of the Islamic World*.[1] Islamic scholars (both Muslim and non-Muslim) as well as Muslim intellectuals were not slow to react. Most of them – no matter what party they belonged to – unanimously condemned the over all picture of *Hagarism* as biased and ill-founded. Some admitted that the authors probably were on the right track, but that they went all to far. For several years the Crone/Cook book (or the Crook book, as someone called it) was often referred to in books, articles and reviews. It lingered on for a little longer as a convenient starting-point for small talk before dinner at Arabist and Islamicist conferences. For some years now one rarely comes across references to *Hagarism*. More often one comes across students of Islamology and the history of the Middle East who never have heard of the book and who know even less about the reactions towards it among subsequent scholars.

The more pressing I find it to mention Robert Hoyland – once the student of Patricia Crone – and his monograph entitled *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*. In his book, Robert Hoyland has made a fairly comprehensive inventory of the non-Muslim sources witnessing to the emergence of the Islamic movement. As a matter of fact, some would say that the most enduring result of *Hagarism* (i.e. the book) is the uncovering of a mass of contemporary non-Muslim texts in long-forgotten dusty volumes from ages when written historical sources were perhaps considered more important than today and the knowledge of ancient languages was more wide-spread among scholars than today. The rare texts that Crone and Cook dug up in writing the book *Hagarism* has now been carefully studied by

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Robert Hoyland whose book *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It* has not, I am afraid, received the attention it deserves.

Before returning to *Hagarism* and Hoyland's publication, I would like to share some thoughts of a more general nature. In all scholarly research one can go about in either of two ways, to simplify the matter in a sweeping manner. Both these views of what it implies to engage in scholarly research have their advocates today.

One way to look at research would be to regard it as a participation in a certain scholarly discourse. You learn the language of a certain discipline – its specific and untranslatable vocabulary, its presumptions, its metaphors of speech and its topoi. This language cannot be understood by someone from without. You have to learn it and get familiar with it. When you have learnt the code language of your particular discipline – be it biology or sociology – you are a full-fledged scholar participating in a certain scholarly discourse. And that is it.

Another way to look at research would be to regard it as a participation in a conversation on statements about the real world. This conversation is in principle open to anyone who desires to participate. The theory-laden terminology is in principle translatable and may be understood by people outside the discipline. If we did not acknowledge this translatability, then the whole idea of what we at Lund university, at least, call our "third task"[2] would be in vain.

If research, in a way, is a participation in a conversation on statements about the real world, this conversation is about statements that are either true or false. Deciding whether they are in fact true or false may indeed be a tricky matter, but is, nonetheless, in principle possible. Last, but not least, these statements are about the real world, which, of course, presupposes that there is something that can be called "a real world". Again, this is no simple issue, and if there is a world out there, it certainly is not exactly the way we perceive of it (that would be sheer naiv realism). The essential thing here, though, is that there is, in some fundamental sense, "a gap between judgement and reality"[3] as David Papineau has phrased it.

Of these two ways of looking at research, I tend to sympathise with the second one, i.e. that scholarly activity is, or should aim at being, a conversation on statements about the real world, and not merely a participation in a discipline-specific discourse. In defending this view, one has not only to acknowledge that there is a gap between judgement and reality, but also to distinguish between two functions of language. There are two distinct relations in which language stands to the world. Here I draw on Arthur C. Danto in his book *Narration and Knowledge*

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2    I.e., informing society about research results in a popular way (besides teaching and research).

3    David Papineau, *Reality and Representation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 5.

where there is a chapter called "Historical Language and Historical Reality" dealing with these matters.[4]

In one relationship, language is merely an element in the order of reality; it is amongst the things the world contains; and, so, relates to reality as the part relates to the whole. In its other relationship, language stands in an external relationship to reality, especially when language is used to represent the world, and semantical values as "true" and "false" are involved. In a corresponding way historical accounts may be viewed in two different perspectives. If an historical account claims to say something true (or false) about reality, it stands in an external relationship to reality. It is "history-as-science" as Danto calls it. But sooner or later this historical account, or representation of reality, becomes part of the reality other scholars seek to represent. In this manner, what was originally "history-as-science" becomes "history-as-reality", i.e. language that is internal in relation to reality. In this manner, every historical account that expresses semantic values is potentially both "history-as-science" and "history-as-reality".

Let us take the book *Hagarism* as an example. When I read it today it has become part of the history of Islamic studies, a rather recent part of this history, for sure (roughly 25 years), but nonetheless a unique account of a course of events. As such it is a part of reality like everything else in the world around me. It is "history-as-reality". My task here is to describe and to explain. Causality becomes an important concept. What are the origins of the views expressed in the book *Hagarism*? How did they come about? How are we to explain them? This is the genetic question, the *questio facti*. Whether what it says is true or false is irrelevant as long as we regard the book and its views as a piece of reality. Reality is never true or false, it only is.

But at the same time *Hagarism* is a statement (or rather a set of statements) about reality, about the actual events that took place in Arabia and Palestine and the surrounding areas in the seventh and eighth centuries. It is a representation of reality involving semantic values such as "true" and "false". Here it does not suffice merely to understand what Crone and Cook say. It is also necessary to put to test the validity of their claims. Is there evidence corroborating their claims. We have to ask the question of truth, the question of validity, or the *questio juris*.

In order to deal with the book *Hagarism* in any of its two capacities – i.e. as a piece of reality or as a statement about reality – one has to understand it and make sense of it. Here I would like to introduce a principle, a guideline, which may be of some help. It is Donald Davidson's Principle of Charity that I have in mind.[5]

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4    See Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 298–341.

5    See Christopher Norris, *Resources of Realism. Prospects for 'Post-Analytic' Philosophy* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1997), 60.

According to this principle we just cannot understand what people say unless we count them necessarily right in most matters. It is a way of maximising the truth-contents of other people's utterances and thus secure a basis for comprehension (and in some cases mutual comprehension). This Principle of Charity should be followed as far as possible.

But when we deal with the book *Hagarism* (which is the example here) as "history-as-science", i.e. as a statement about reality, we have to reckon with the alternative possibility that some statements may come out false according to the best available criteria of reason, valid inference and evidential warrant. In this case we have to let another principle guide us, namely David Papineau's Principle of Humanity according to which others (like ourselves) are error-prone at least on occasion; that such errors come about most often for causally or otherwise accountable reasons; and hence that we can make a claim to have rightly inter-preted their beliefs even if (as sometimes happens in our own experience also) those beliefs turn out to be erroneous.[6]

In the following, I will mainly deal with the book *Hagarism* as "history-as-reality", i.e. as a thing in the world which is neither true nor false but a product of causation. Guided by the Principle of Charity, I will try to understand what Crone and Cook say about the emergence of the Islamic movement, or rather as they themselves construe it, the making of the Islamic world. As such the book *Hagarism* is an interpretation of the past among other interpretations of the past which all may be interpreted along the two relationships of language to reality. I will also try to say something about *Hagarism* as a statement about reality, i.e. as "history-as-science". Since this is a much more presumptuous task, I will confine myself to a few comments on the use of sources, which of course is an important element in the methodology applied in the book. Since the appearance of Robert Hoyland's book *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It*, we are in a better position today than ever before to evaluate the sources that Crone and Cook based their representation on.

The starting point of *Hagarism* is the unsatisfactory state of the Islamic sources dealing with the development of early Islam. I quote: "It is however well-known that these sources are not demonstrably early. There is no hard evidence for the existence of the Koran in any form before the last decade of the seventh century, and the tradition which places this rather opaque revelation in its histo-rical context is not attested before the middle of the eighth. The historicity of the Islamic tradition is thus to some degree problematic ..."[7] So what are the options if one really wants to know something about the early development of Islam? One

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6    See Papineau, *Reality and Representation*, 36–39, 98–102.

7    Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 3.

can present a sensibly edited version of the Islamic tradition as historical fact. But one can also argue that what purport to be accounts of events in the seventh century only make sense for the study of religious ideas in the eighth century. The Islamic sources may be interpreted to either effect, but they offer little that can be used in any decisive way to arbitrate between different approaches. Again I quote: "The only way out of the dilemma is thus to step outside the Islamic tradition altogether and start again".[8] And this is exactly what Crone and Cook do when they put aside the Muslim sources and muster an impressive amount of non-Muslim contemporary source material in order to conjure a novel interpretation of the origins of the Islamic movement.

In doing away with the whole bulk of Muslim sources as being to late and in focusing on contemporary non-Muslim sources, the book *Hagarism* stands at the end of a long line of source critical studies with regard to *ḥadīth* material. One could go as far back as Julius Wellhausen and Ignaz Goldziher in the late nineteenth century, but may it suffice to mention the latest phase in this sceptical tradition, i.e. roughly the span of 25 years leading up to *Hagarism*.[9] This phase starts with Joseph Schacht and his works on Islamic law and the critique of *isnāds*, especially the article "A revaluation of Islamic traditions"[10] and the book *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1950).[11] Schacht proposed two major theses: (1) that it was not until the ʾAbbāsid revolution in the mid-eighth century that *isnāds* going all the way back to the Prophet began to be widely used; (2) that, ironically, the more elaborate and formally correct an *isnād* appeared to be, the more likely it was to be spurious. Schacht concluded that no existing *ḥadīth* could be reliably ascribed to the Prophet, though some of them might ultimately be rooted in his teachings.

Subsequent *ḥadīth* scholars reacted to Schacht's radical theses in roughly three different ways. First, scholars of a more conservative persuasion argued that Schacht did not understand the nature of *ḥadīth* transmission in early Islam. These include Nabia Abbott,[12] Fuat Sezgin,[13] and Muhammad Azmi.[14] Second, there

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8   Ibid.

9   For a convenient summary see R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History. A Framework for Inquiry* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1991, 76–87.

10   Joseph Schacht, "A revaluation of Islamic traditions." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1949): 143–154.

11   Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).

12   See Nabia Abbott, *Studies in Arabic Papyri*, II: *Qur'anic Commentary and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

13   See Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, I (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967).

14   See Mohammad M. Azmi, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1968).

were scholars who tried to learn from Schacht while still basically taking the traditional Islamic material into serious consideration, such as Montgomery Watt in his *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953)[15] and in a much more sophisticated manner by Gautier Juynboll in his *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance, and Authorship of Early Hadith* (1983).[16] Third, some scholars simply accepted the results of Schacht's research and set out to explore the full implications of his thought. In this category we find, of course, the provocative studies by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook to which John Wansbrough's books paved the way.

In his *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretations* (1977),[17] John Wansbrough proposes two major theses: (1) that the *hadīth* material, and even the Qur'ān itself, came into existence as the result of sectarian controversy during a period of more than two centuries, and then fictitiously projected back onto an invented Arabian seventh-century setting; (2) that the figure of the Prophet, as well as Islamic doctrine in general, were moulded upon Rabbinic Jewish prototypes. In his study entitled *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (1978),[18] Wansbrough analyzed the mythical character of early Islamic historiography as a late manifestation of Old Testament *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history).

The book *Hagarism*, finally, stands at the end of the line of source criticism initiated by Wellhausen and Goldziher, reinforced by Schacht and provocatively radicalised by Wansbrough. With regard to the sources, Crone and Cook, on the one hand, show no charity at all (if I may refer back to the Principle of Charity previously mentioned) towards the Islamic sources which they discard as unreliable. On the other hand, they show all possible charity towards the sources from outside the Islamic tradition. This is a problem that I will presently return to.

Meanwhile, I will briefly rehears the major theses proposed by Crone and Cook (with the emphasis on the first one) and mention the major non-Muslim witnesses they make use of. A short summary can never do justice to the complicated picture the authors draw in a very erudite and exuberant style, but I will do my best to follow the Principle of Charity.

The book in itself is not very voluminous. It covers about 270 pages. But it is worth while noting that the actual argument is put forward in less than 150 pages. The rest of the book contains two appendices, a couple of indices, a bibliography,

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15   W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

16   G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

17   John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

18   John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

and, strikingly, an abundance of notes covering 85 pages. The three main theses of the book are presented in the three parts into which the book has been divided.

In the first part called "Whence Islam?" (pp. 3–38), Crone and Cook argue that what later became Islam began as a messianic and irredentist movement called "Hagarism" with subsequent close affinities to Samaritanism. They find that there is no reason to suppose that the adherents to this primitive movement called themselves "Muslims". The earliest datable occurrence of the term "Muslims" is in the Dome of the Rock of 691–692 and it is not otherwise attested outside the Islamic tradition until far into the eighth century. As for the name "Hagarism", it derives from a juxtaposition of the personal name Hagar and the Arabic term *muhājirūn*. This latter term is well attested in non-Muslim Greek and Syriac sources. In Greek the word 'magaritai' is found in numerous papyri the earliest datable one being from 643. In Syriac the corresponding word is 'mhaggre' or 'mhaggraye' also found in numerous sources, the earliest one – a letter from the East Syrian catholicos Isho'yahb III – possibly dating from before 640.

The term *muhājirūn* with its Greek and Syriac cognates imply two notions. The first one is genealogical: it refers to the descendants of Abraham by Hagar. The second one is an attained one: it refers to those who take part in a *hijra*, an exodus. While the first notion is rather lost in the later Islamic tradition, the second one is fully preserved. But the exodus, or *hijra*, referred to originally is not the one from Mecca to Medina. It is rather the emigration of the Ishmaelites from Arabia to the Promised Land. I quote: "The 'Mahgraye' may thus be seen as Hagarene participants in a hijra to the Promised Land, and in this pun lies the earliest identity of the faith which was in the fullness of time to become Islam".[19]

Further, this emigration of the Ishmaelites to the Promised Land had a Judaic messianic character and was lead by a prophet who was still alive during the conquest of Palestine. These assumptions find their support in the very earliest of the non-Muslim sources adduced by Crone and Cook, namely a Christian anti-Jewish tract in Greek entitled the *Doctrina Jacobi* ('Teachings of Jacob') and purportedly composed in Carthage in North Africa in July 634. The text is cast in the form of a dialogue between Jews set in Carthage. At one point in the argument reference is made to current events in Palestine in the form of a letter from a certain Palestinian Jew called Abraham. Here "[a] false prophet [who] has appear-ed among the Saracens" is mentioned, and the text goes on that this, I quote, "prophet has appeared coming with the Saracens, and is proclaiming the anointed one who is to come".[20] This messianic interpretation of the movement is

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19 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 9.

20 Ibid., 3.

strengthened by the independent evidence of a Jewish apocalypse of the mid-eighth century, the so called "Secrets of Rabbi Simon ben Yohay", which probably derives from an earlier apocalypse written soon after the events to which it refers.

Having arrived in the Promised Land the former alliance of Jews and Arabs in the wilderness broke down and the Judaic messianism was for some time replaced by a Christian messianism. More significant, though, was the inspiration drawn from Samaritanism. It seems that the Samaritans had more to offer the new movement than the Christians had. Among the Hagarene borrowings from the Samaritans, Crone and Cook mention the Samaritan scriptural position, i.e. to accept only the Pentateuch and to reject the prophets. This implied the deletion of the scriptural basis of the Davidic component of Judaic messianism, since neither the legitimacy of the Davidic monarchy nor the sanctity of Jerusalem are attested in the Pentateuch.

A further borrowing from the Samaritans is the notion of *islām* in the sense of submission to God. Though the verb *aslama* has cognates in Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac, it is only in a Samaritan text of the pre-Islamic period – not in Jewish or Christian literature – that we find exact parallels to the Islamic usage of *islām* and *aslama*. So it was in Palestine, in the environment of Samaritanism, that the adherents of the new movement started to call themselves Muslims in stead of Hagarenes. I quote a passage from *Hagarism* which simultaneuolsy illustrates the ebullient style of the book: "In early Hagarism the idea of 'exodus' had constituted the central duty of the faith, and at the same time provided its adherents with a name. It was as if the central category of the religion of Moses had been a reference to the Red Sea. But when redemption became scripture, the Hagarenes needed a category more Sinaitic in scope. Hence *islām* replaced *hijra* as the fundamental religious duty, and the 'Mahgraye' accordingly became Muslims".[21]

In addition to the Samaritan scriptural position and the notion of *islām* as submission to God, two Samaritan calques were to shape the Hagarene movement in a most significant way, according to Crone and Cook. The first of these is the Meccan sanctuary. In their rejection of the sanctity of Jerusalem, the Samaritans had adopted the older Israelite sanctuary of Shechem. When the Hagarenes in turn disengaged from the Jews, and in this case specifically Jerusalem, Shechem provided a simple and appropriate model for the creation of a sanctuary of their own. The similarities between Shechem and Mecca are striking. Both cities are closely associated with a nearby holy mountain, and in both cases the fundamental rite is a pilgrimage from the city to the mountain. In Mecca as well as in Shechem the sanctuary is an Abrahamic foundation. In both cases, finally, the urban sanctuary

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21    Ibid., 20.

is closely associated with the grave of the appropriate patriarch: Joseph (as opposed to Judah) in the case of Shechem, Ishmael (as opposed to Isaac) in Mecca.

The other Samaritan calque is the Islamic imamate. Here, too, there is a structural resemblance of the two institutions – the Aaronid high-priesthood and the Islamic imamate (especially in its Shi'ite variant). "In each case we have an office in which supreme political and religious authority are fused, and in each case the primary qualification for office is the combination of religious knowledge with a sacred genealogy. The analogy is obvious enough, and was perceived long ago: the Samaritans themselves in their Arabic writings adopted the imamate to translate their own high-priesthood".[22]

The above may suffice to give an impression of the first and most significant thesis of Crone and Cook, namely that what later became Islam began as a messianic and irredentist movement called "Hagarism" with subsequent close affinities to Samaritanism. In the second and third parts of their book, the authors propose other themes, which I will only hint at here. In the second part called "Whether Antiquity?" (pp. 41–70) a tripartite typology of Christian cultures in the Middle East is suggested: a Coptic/peasant culture, a Nestorian/aristocratic culture and, finally, Syrian/ascetic culture. The third part called "The collision" (pp. 73–151) envisages the further development of the Islamic movement in the melting-pot of the Middle East from Hagarene, barbarian conquest to Pharisaic cultural pluralism.

So far I have been dealing with the book *Hagarism* as a piece of reality, as "history-as-reality" to use Danto's phrase. My task has been to think in terms of causality in trying to sketch the background of the source-critical methodology applied in the book. From the beginnings of Western Islamicist critique of *isnāds* in Wellhausen and Goldziher we observed a radicalization in Schacht and in Wansbrough. *Hagarism* can be seen as an endeavour to explore the full implication of this line of thought. I have also tried to understand the major theses of the book and to relate them – however briefly. It has been my ambition at least to be guided by the Principle of Charity. As long as *Hagarism* is treated as "history-as-reality" there is no need to apply the other above-mentioned principle, i.e. the Principle of Humanity. As "history-as-reality" *Hagarism* is neither true nor false.

From now on I will switch perspective and treat the book as "history-as-science", i.e. as statements about reality. This implies, as already mentioned, another type of questions. I am no longer interested in genetic questions or questions of causality. I am no longer interested in explaining, understanding and describing. Instead, I want to raise questions of semantic values, of true and false, for

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22 Ibid., 26.

instance. While reality never can be true or false – it only is – statements about reality may be true or false. Of course, I am not going to go into detail here. That would be too great a task for this occasion. I will, therefore, confine myself to a few comments on the methodology of *Hagarism*, and especially the use of the sources.

I will again refer to the two Principles of Charity and Humanity. In relation to the two categories of source material distinguished by Crone and Cook them-selves, i.e. Muslim sources and non-Muslim sources, one could say that Crone and Cook show no charity at all in relation to the Islamic sources, since they are basi-cally wiped aside. In relation to the non-Muslim sources they, on the one hand, honour them with an extreme amount of charity. Everything these sources say is accepted at face value. On the other hand, one could twist the argument a little bit and say that, at the same time, they do not show enough charity, since they fail to recognise the polemical stereotypes found in the bulk of the sources adduced. Many of the texts are examples of stereotypical genres, such as "epistle", "apo-calyptic", "dialogue in the presence of a prince" etc. These genres have their own logic and are not always intended as statements about reality.

Another way to phrase this would be to say that Crone and Cook apply the Principle of Charity, for sure, when they deal with the non-Muslim texts. What they fail to do is to go a step further and apply the other principle, the Principle of Humanity, according to which others (like ourselves) are error-prone at least on occasion; that such errors come about most often for causally or otherwise ac-countable reasons; and hence that we can make a claim to have rightly interpreted their beliefs even if (as sometimes happens in our own experience also) those beliefs turn out to be erroneous. With regard to the Islamic sources Crone and Cook very readily accept that humans (especially Muslims it seems) are error-prone.

The dubious use of witnesses in *Hagarism* actually removes the very founda-tion of the main theses of the book, and perhaps renders the whole idea of a *Hagarism* the way it is presented in the book into a castle in Spain. Many of the first reviewers of the book pointed this out already in the seventies. John Wans-brough stated this quite eloquently: "My reservations [...] turn upon what I take to be the authors' methodological assumption, of which the principal must be that a vocabulary of motives can be freely extrapolated from a discrete collection of literary stereotypes composed by alien and mostly hostile observers, and there-upon employed to describe, even interpret, not merely the overt behaviour but also the intellectual and spiritual development of the helpless and innocent actors".[23]

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23    John Wansbrough, Review of *Hagarism*, by Crone and Cook, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978): 156.

At the very beginning of the present article, I promised to get back to Robert Hoyland's impressive inventory of non-Muslim witnesses to early Islam. This voluminous book covers 872 pages and is clearly to be regarded as a rewarding outcome of the great pains the authors of *Hagarism* initially took in identifying and bringing to light a variety of interesting sources contemporary with the rise of the Islamic movement. The full title of Hoyland's book is *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* and it appeared exactly twenty years after *Hagarism* in 1997.[24] I have the impression that Hoyland's book has not received the attention of scholars that it deserves.

After an initial part on the historical and literary background (pp. 11–49), there follows a Part II (pp. 53–519) which is the actual inventory of sources. This main part of the book is divided into Part IIA (pp. 53–254) listing sources with incidental references to Islam and Part IIB (pp. 257–519) listing texts with deliberate references to Islam. The various texts are located in their historical contexts and the most important passages are quoted in translation. The notes contain an abundance of references to secondary literature. Part III (pp. 523–598) contains a seventy-five pages long essay on "Writing the history of early Islam". Part IV (pp. 601–703) is a collection of six excurses on various topics.

For our purpose, the most interesting chapter is Chapter 14 "Using non-Muslim sources: An argumentative approach" (pp. 591–598). In this chapter (as well as elsewhere in the book), Hoyland proves to be a sound follower of the two Principles of Charity and Humanity (though he, of course, does not use these categories himself). He steers a steady course between the Scylla of accepting the non-Muslim sources uncritically *en masse* and the Charybdis of rejecting them categorically likewise *en masse*. Rather he advocates that one should be discerning in evaluating every piece of evidence in its own right.

Throughout the book Hoyland points out the parallels and similarities between the reports of Muslim and non-Muslim witnesses. It is seen as a strong argument in favour of the latter that they do frequently coincide with what is said by the former. "And this is perhaps the most valuable aspect of the non-Muslim sources: not so much that they give independent testimony – though they often do that too – but that they can sometimes tell us what the Muslims were saying long before this was written down by the Muslims themselves. If what the non-Muslim say the Muslims were saying in the seventh century agrees with what the Muslims wrote down in the ninth century, then it is likely that this is what the Muslims were saying from the beginning, or at least from the time of the relevant non-Muslim witness. And if they do not agree, then this should be investigated, for the

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24    Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1997).

very fact that there are so many instances of agreement means that discrepancies deserve our attention."[25]

When we examine a certain report in its own right, we have first to ask certain questions. Hoyland enumerates three such questions. First, what is the source of the observation? Naturally, "one must distinguish between different types of observation, for one would generally place more confidence in what someone said they saw or heard directly rather than in second and third-hand evidence".[26]

Second, what is the character of the observation? Here one has to distinguish, for instance, between simple observations, on the one hand, and totalising explanations and apologetic formulations, on the other hand. The latter category, i.e. the totalising explanations and apologetic formulations, is the one that critics most have in mind when they attack the worth of non-Muslim sources. But even with these, there is not ground for outright dismissal. In each case there is usually some anchor in reality, but one can only use such material for historical reconstruction with circumspection.

Third, what is the subject of the observation? One must make some distinction as to the content of the observation. "As one would expect, the non-Muslim sources are at their most reliable when describing externally observable phenomena."[27] – "Also as one would expect, non-Muslim sources are at their least helpful – or at least one has to be at one's most wary – when they are commenting on Muslim beliefs and intra-communal life. Between these two poles one must apply varying degrees of scepticism."[28]

I will give Robert Hoyland the last words. Here he summarises his position, which I fully agree with and which with its balanced common sense attitude promises well for future research in this area: "[...] non-Muslim sources cannot provide a complete and coherent account of the history of Early Islam, even less can it support an alternative version of its development. But [...] the testimony of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writers can be used alongside that of Muslim authors to furnish us with an enriched and expanded vision of the history of the Middle East in Early Islamic times, to offer us new perspectives on its character and to suggest to us new directions for its study."[29]

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25    Ibid., 592.

26    Ibid., 593.

27    Ibid., 595.

28    Ibid., 597.

29    Ibid., 598. The above article was originally presented as a paper at the 5th Conference of the Nordic Society for Middle Eastern Studies in Lund, Sweden, 25–28 October 2001.