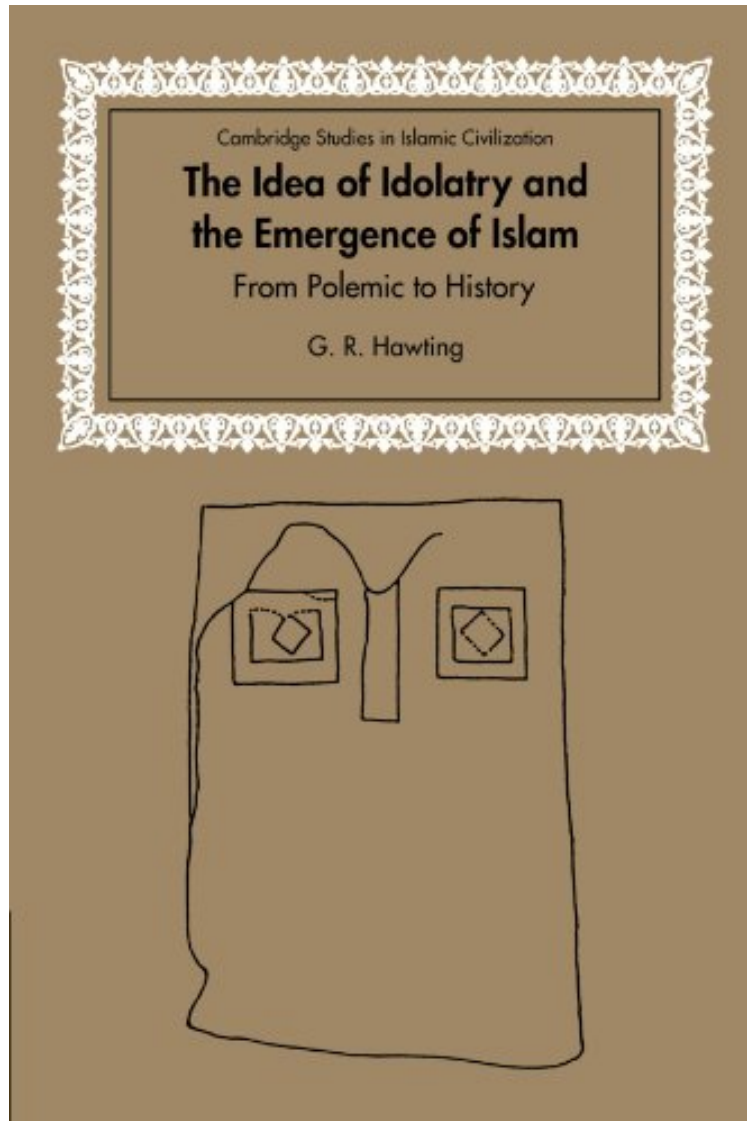


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The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization)

G. R. Hawting

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G. R. Hawting : The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. unclear terms and ramifications By sword of religion 24 February, 2014a Review of the Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam The idea of religion, specifically the notion of monotheism vs polytheism, is an ever-continuing debate; nowhere is this greater observed than in Islam. Islam, the religion founded in sixth century Arabia, a time and place known for its "idolatry", as part and parcel of its message, seeks to dispel any polytheistic inclinations, whether figurative or literal. In other words, its message is that of strict and uncompromising monotheism. In his book *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Hawting, within the framework of Muslim tradition, attempts to argue that the literal depiction of the idle-worshipping Arabs is historically incorrect, that it was imposed on the culture of that place and time through later development of answers to contemporary questions. Such developments, he argues, were a response, not directly to polytheism, but, rather, to a failure to maintain a "full and proper monotheism" (Hawting 62). The thrust of Hawting's argument rests on two suppositions: (1) that the terms whose understanding denotes a literal polytheistic setting could, in fact, be understood to denote an existence of improper monotheism, and that (2) the Muslim tradition, through which the names and places of the idles, along with how and where they were worshiped, was a later development. What Hawting fails to realize, in my opinion, is that polytheism is a concept hard to define, a thing which Hawting does not attempt to do. Thus, Hawting presents a narrow meaning of polytheism without taking into consideration its actual meaning, both as the cultures of the time, in general, and the Muslim tradition, in particular, saw it. As Hawting notes in both his introduction and preface, the aim of this book is to question "the commonly accepted view that the opponents attacked in the Koran as idolaters and polytheists (and frequently designated there by a variety of words and phrases connected with the Arabic word *shirk*) were idolaters and polytheists in a literal sense" (Hawting 2). His viewpoint is that the Koran is most concerned with "other monotheists whose monotheism it saw as inadequate and attacked polemically as the equivalent of idolatry" (Hawting xiv). Subsequently, he proposes that the Koran "has been seen to contain attacks on pre-Islamic Arab idolatry and polytheism because the tradition tells us that it does" (Hawting 20). The first chapter of his argument deals with the evidence obtained from the time of Jahiliyya. In it, he postulates that monotheism, although corrupted, was still prevalent in Arabia: Muhammad and Quraysh knew of, and came into contact with, Jews and Christians; many of the venerated stones were originally from Mecca, a reminder of the sanctity of the place; the word and concept of a supreme God still existed (Allah as a contraction of al-Ilah [lit. The God]). As a result, mainly due to the monotheistic tenor of the traditions, Hawting presents that "the material in Muslim tradition that presents the religion of the Arabs of the jhiliyya as a monotheism which had been significantly, but not completely, eroded by idolatry and paganism is largely explicable as an outcome of the historicistior of the idea that Islam was identical with the religion of Abraham. It also frequently reflects ideas about the meaning of koranic verses and about the background of the Koran in general. These considerations make it unlikely, in my opinion, that the material refers to a real historical situation" (Hawting 40). In my opinion, however, Hawting does not take into account that, although most of these traditions were compiled a couple of centuries afterwards, there is no compelling reason to discount their authenticity. The Arabs, in recording their past, were content to present it as it was, with some explication and possible elaboration, no doubt, but, intact nonetheless, including the less favorable parts. The focus of such tradition is not to denounce or to present a viewpoint, favorable or otherwise, about Arabian religion. Thus, the accounts of Arabian religion are interspersed with accounts of the life and customs of the time, simply presenting what was, rather than attempting to explain it. Hawting, however, might be correct in assuming that the views of the Arab redactors favored monotheism over polytheism enough to give the collected traditions a flavor of that belief. However, his assumption is founded upon the basis of his interpretation of polytheism. Nowhere does he claim, either in his book, or in any of the cited traditions, that the Arabs presented Arabia as being either monotheistic or either polytheistic. In fact, the traditions seem to point to a mixture of the two concepts, known today as henotheism. Throughout his book, Hawting, to my mind, presents an idealized form of polytheism: mainly, the worship of many gods, each being seen as the only one to whom worship is due, each only acknowledged by his patron tribe. From this assumption, he concludes that, because Arabian religion was partly monotheistic (especially through its connection to Abraham), it cannot be purely polytheistic. He is unable, however, to see a middle ground, that as history progressed, pure polytheism, and, conversely, pure monotheism became less and less common. In the region of Canaan, for example, the Israelites, who are also known for their monotheism, constantly worshiped other gods along EL/YHWH. Similarly, Hinduism stresses that all creation is from one source; the idles are only representations and incarnations of that one omnipresent being. The pantheon of Greek gods, though many in number, also seems to suggest that Zeus, the sky god, is the greatest among them. It is this legacya legacy which combines both forms of religion-that today's scholars would call henotheism; this is what is documented in Arabian religion. Furthermore, polytheism, stemming from the holistic concepts of unification between the natural and the divine, does not attempt to seclude worship to only one being among many others; it recognizes a pantheona hierarchy of sortswhich allows for many ways of worship directed, ultimately, to one being through an assembly of lesser, and more accessible, deities. Thus, what is literally seen as polytheism, the acknowledgment of many gods, each equal to the other, does not, to my mind, seem to exist. Henotheism, the belief in many gods with one higher supreme being, is what is conveyed through the collected tradition, rather than a literal polytheism. The next pieces of evidence for his theory are taken from the Koran. In

referencing its verses, Hawting notes that "the Koran does not use vocabulary that explicitly and literally carries an accusation of polytheism or idolatry" (Hawting 50). To prove this, Hawting presents the word *mushrikeen*, derived from *shirk*, explained by him as "associationism" (Hawting 49). According to him, this concept denotes, not the worship of idles and other gods, but rather, the setting up of other gods, while still believing in a higher supreme being, which, to my mind, sounds closer to henotheism rather than to monotheism. As previously noted, the Koran, although it does not fully elucidate the pagan beliefs of pre-Islamic Arabia, references these beliefs. In 37:36, Hawting notes that the *mushrikeen* are made to say "shall we, then, give up our deities at the bidding of a mad poet", denoting that there were, in fact, other gods whom the polytheists worshiped beside the God. Similarly, "they would have to strive to find a way unto Him who is enthroned on His Almightyness" (17:42) expresses that, had there been other gods, they would have caused chaos in the heavens, further illustrating the prevalence of other deities alongside the God. On an aside, Hawting notes that only the effectiveness and ability of the gods and idles are denied; neither monotheistic tradition, in general, nor the Koran, in particular, denies the (physical) existence of such idles and gods (K 25:3; PSs 115:4-8). Hawting astutely notes that "The difference of opinion between Muhammad and his Arab contemporaries did not relate to the identity of the god who had to be worshipped, but rather to the position of this god among other objects of veneration" (Hawting 22); with this, I whole-heartedly agree. That, from my perspective, is the essential point of tawheed (unity in monotheism) expressed in Islam; that is the monotheism is what is presented here, in objection to polytheistic behavior. Many of the Muslim passages, particularly those of the Koran, negate the concept of intercession. The idles cannot intercede for their worshippers (K 6:94, 10:18, 30:13, 39:49, etc.), nor can the angels (K 21:26-28, 43:15-19, 53:26). This, coupled with the acknowledgment by the polytheists of the theme of the last judgment, is seen by Hawting as evidence for already-prevalent shared monotheistic beliefs, further supporting his claim that Arabia was not literally polytheistic. This, however, could be argued against, in that, in presenting the idea of a last judgment, the Koran didactically, by putting the words into the mouths of its opponents, seeks to teach a lesson and to tell the listener what will befall the idolaters; it, in no way, affirms that the pagans acknowledged the concept of an afterlife (most prominently negated by the expression *ibn/ibnat al-dhar* [lit. son/daughter (occurrence/fortune) of time]). Later, the author makes a connection between the term *shirk* and its application to people who are seen as polytheistic, but who were "fully monotheistic and, frequently, as Muslims" (Hawting 68). Such examples, for the sake of argument, include the Kharijites against Ali, the modern Wahhabi movement against specific forms of Islam, and, interreligious, Protestants against Catholic icon worship. In attempting to point out that the term *shirk* referred to monotheistic practices, Hawting fails to recognize that, because Islam's main concern is uncompromising monotheism, it does not distinguish between *shirk* in the literal or metaphorical sense. The term *shirk* is applied, not just to idles, but also to those who would "take human beings for our lords beside God" (K 3:64) and, also, to the type of man who "makes his own desires his deity" (K 25:43). In referencing the tradition outside of the Koran, Hawting notes that the detail is less important than the broader picture, and that Any concrete information they contain about idols and sanctuaries in Arabia is presented in stories and reports which are typical of monotheist critiques of idolatry more generally and presented in a stylised way, (Hawting 111). This observation, which could be true to a certain extent (in that, through redaction, more than one source of information was used, giving local and conflicting accounts), it does not support his thesis that literal polytheism was non-existent. Near the end, Hawting seeks to prove that the 9 names mentioned in the Koran (I.E., the five of the people of Noah [71:23], the star called Serious [50:23], and the 3 "daughters of God" [53:19-20]) were later elaborated on and developed through exegeses and tradition. For example, Hawting views the incident of the Satanic verses (recorded in Al-Tabari) as "speculative elaboration" (Hawting 131), used either (1) to explain the concept of abrogation (K 2:106, 22:52), (2) to refute the concept of intercessors (the original passage compares the intercession of the 3 "goddesses" with that of the angels: their intercession will avail nothing), or (3) as proof that the revelation cannot be supplanted, that God safeguards it from error (K 15:9). He also questions how far these traditions indicate "real knowledge about cults involving the three" (Hawting 131). Ironically, in seeking to prove the validity of his claims, Hawting attempts to debunk the tradition of the Satanic verses, from which he obtains his evidence. Although Hawting presents arguments which are founded on a narrow interpretation of a concept (E.G., literal polytheism), he does attempt to validate his claims with sources, both from the Koran and from the tradition. In my opinion, however, he does not seek to express the importance of such an endeavor, nor its implications for future Muslim texts and study. Apparently, in attempting to discount certain views about the tradition, and certain traditions in particular, he assumes that the entire tradition will be disproved and considered as forged or falsified. In his conclusion, for instance, he notes that "since the Koran insinuated that the *mushrikn* were polytheists and idolaters, it may have been deduced that the opponents thus attacked were in fact real polytheists and idolaters [leading to] explanations of individual verses and passages in ways reflecting that idea" (Hawting 151). Throughout the book, Hawting does not define "real polytheism (I.E., whether or not it is distinct from henotheism), nor does he present the ramifications of such a concept, nor the impacts of such a viewpoint. It must be said, in contrast to the above critiques, that Hawting's attempts are not purely negative, in that they do not seek to debunk Islam, or its emergence, as a whole. As he states, "the message of this book] is not intended to be negative. On the contrary, it is hoped that it furthers what have been presented above as more historically

persuasive approaches to the emergence of Islam as a religion. If, in the course of that, we find that we have to question some of what has hitherto been widely accepted as historical fact, and to allow room for more uncertainties and obscurities, then that is a necessary price to pay" (Hawting 19). For this, he must be commended. His arguments would have better been explained if he had illustrated the ramifications of his ideas and if, in the beginning of his work, he had defined his idea of a polytheistic society. In short, although his thesis is not centered around a defined concept, and even though some of his arguments, while being extremely dense, are convoluted, in that they seek to establish a theorized premise by assuming that the said premise is valid, the spirit, though not necessarily the content, of his work, and the scholarly effort embodied there in, must be acknowledged and commended.

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. the destruction of the mainstream Qur'an-scholars' idols
 By David Reid Ross
 John Wansbrough in a series of essays published over 1977-8 had called shenanigans upon Western scholars' acceptance of Muslim scholars' assumptions concerning the foundational texts of Islam. Gerald Hawting, over the 1990s, mused over Wansbrough's hypotheses, and wrote this book to back some of them up. Despite a few missteps this book succeeds. Hawting accepts - for the sake of argument - the revisionists' critique of Islamic origins, and treats the suras as sermons of rhetoric. From that, he grapples with the Qur'an and early hadiths' critiques of "idolatry", to see how they might make sense in the first- / seventh-century Near East. This is by necessity "fragmentary, speculative and impressionistic" (p. 13); like the overviews of proto-Islamic graffiti in Nevo, Koren, and Hoyland. Although I will say this exercise has proven less speculative than he has feared; the footnotes are top-notch. If the Qur'an is rhetoric and if Ibn Hisham's Sira isn't a guide to its occasions-of-revelation, then the Qur'an's reader can no longer assume that its "idolatrous" foil represents actual idolaters. The mushrikun, then, will be more like the foes of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Abd al-Malik (pp. 81-2): they are whatever the sura in question is *really* going against. In the case of Q. 4:170-3, for instance, these will be mere Christians. Hawting's 1999 book is dated in parts - especially when citing the revisionist material available over the 1990s. It cites Crone's "Meccan Trade", which is dangerous, given Crone herself later admitting that book's problems. It also cites Nevo's research in the Negev on the "pagan" sites there, which have never been taken seriously. Also Hawting's prose isn't good. He uses the cliché "tip of the iceberg" p.14. He complains about precision being "not easy" p.16 and authenticity of a poem being "not easily ascertainable" p. 72 which I find to be prolix and also question-begging (is the lack of ease an objective fact?). I was *punished* for English like this in HIST 101, and it makes following the argument more of a chore than it should be. I also detect some repetition, which I suspect are artefacts of the book's compilation: some chapters had earlier lives as lectures and papers delivered elsewhere, like chapter 4 which is in truth a standalone study of Ibn al-Kalbi's kitab al-sanam. The book has been a success. Since its publication no ethical scholars may prattle about "the pagans of Mecca"; if they do, they reveal themselves as apologists and/or ignorant. [This was, I think, a gift to me by one unrelated to publication; but it was certainly purchased via . Back then it wasn't \$51. As of now, buy it used.]

10 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Generally Tendentious
 By Tron Honto
 Though a relatively short work, Hawting's work is an interesting attempt to tease out what can be considered historical among the Muslim tradition concerning religion in the pre-Islamic period. Nonetheless, this work is one that is fraught with problems. Most of this revolves around the treatment of the term "mushrikoun" throughout the Qur'an insofar as Hawting undertakes a great deal of equivocation of the term. Insofar as the bulk of his books locates the impetus behind the chronicling of pre-Islamic Arabian cults with an unlikely narrow interpretation of 'mushrikoun' which he credits Muslim scholarship with imposing on the Quran--wrongly in I believe being that 'mushrikoun' was a term widely applied to anyone other than a Muslim both in the Koran and early Muslim works contrary to Hawting's claim--his scenario remains tendentious, unconvincing and speculative. Despite this deep flaw, the treatment of the material is fascinating and engaging as a whole--redeeming much of the book's flaws.

Why and under what circumstances did the religion of Islam emerge in a remote part of Arabia at the beginning of the seventh century? Traditional scholarship maintains that Islam developed in opposition to the idolatrous and polytheistic religion of the Arabs of Mecca and the surrounding regions. In this study of pre-Islamic Arabian religion, G. R. Hawting adopts a comparative religious perspective to suggest an alternative view. By examining the various bodies of evidence which survive from this period, the Koran and the vast resources of the Islamic tradition, the author argues that in fact Islam arose out of conflict with other monotheists whose beliefs and practices were judged to fall short of true monotheism and were, in consequence, attacked polemically as idolatry. The author is adept at unravelling the complexities of the source material, and students and scholars will find his argument both engaging and persuasive.

"Hawting has accomplished his task with deep learning and with sharp, detailed arguments. All students of Arabia and

early Islam will do well to read this book." Meas Bulletin "The book is original and challenging and should be read by all scholars interested in the Quran, Islamic origins, and how religions imagine their origins." Religious Studies