

מרכז לחקר האסלאם ע"ש נחמיה לבציון  
The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies  
مركز ترميميا للتحقيق الإسلامي



האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
جامعة العبرية في اورشليم - القدس

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# The Islamisation of Egypt and North Africa

Michael Brett

First Annual Levtzion Lecture

**The Islamisation of Egypt and North Africa**

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**Michael Brett**

**The School of Oriental and African Studies  
The University of London**

**The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies**

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## Abstract

The subject of Islamization is clearly a major issue in the history of the Middle East, to which Nehemia Levtzion devoted much attention. In this lecture, attention is drawn to its development in two adjacent areas, Egypt and North Africa, in which the process differed with the society. In Christian Egypt, the Church survived, but intermarriage and a continuous trickle of conversion on the part of the Copts contributed to a higher rate of reproduction on the part of the Muslim element in the population, which eventually transformed it into a majority. In North Africa, the transformation began with the identification of the pagan Berbers as a nation which had submitted to Islam, and their recruitment into the Arab armies. Immigration into the cities created an urban Muslim population, but the framework for the incorporation of the rural population was created by the revolutionary appeal of Islam to the tribes, which resulted in the unification of North Africa in the Almohad empire.

## תקציר

סוגית ההתאסלמות היא נושא מרכזי בהיסטוריה של המזרח התיכון, והיתה אחד מתחומי המחקר הבולטים של נחמיה לבציון. בהרצאה שלפניך, נבחנת סוגיה זו בשני אזורים סמוכים -- במצרים ובצפון אפריקה -- בהם התרחשו תהליכי התאסלמות שונים. במצרים הנוצרית, הכנסייה הצליחה לשרוד, אולם נישואי תערובת ותהליך המרה אטי אך מתמשך מצד הקופטים תרמו לשיעור ריבוי גבוה יותר בקרב המרכיב המוסלמי של החברה. לבסוף הפך מרכיב זה לרוב. בצפון אפריקה, תהליך ההמרה החל עם הגדרתם של הברברים הפגאנים כאומה אשר קיבלה על עצמה את האסלאם, ועם התגייסותם לצבאות ערב. ההגירה אל הערים הובילה להיווצרותה של שכבה עירונית מוסלמית. האוכלוסיה הכפרית, לעומת זאת, התאסלמה בעקבות כח המשיכה המהפכני של האסלאם עבור השבטים, שהוביל לבסוף לאיחודה של צפון אפריקה תחת האימפריה האלמוחדית.

**Michael Brett** is Emeritus Reader in the History of North Africa at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. His PhD thesis, London 1970, discussed the historiography of the invasion of North Africa by the Banū Hilāl. His books include *The Rise of the Fatimids. The World of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the Tenth Century CE*, Brill, Leiden, 2001; *Ibn Khaldun and the Medieval Maghrib*, Variorum Series, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999; and with Elizabeth Fentress, *The Berbers*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996.

## **The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies**

The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies was established late in 2004 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Center strives to encourage and initiate research regarding Islamic religion and civilization, from the advent of Islam in the seventh century C.E. until today, in the Arab world, elsewhere in the Middle East, in Asia and Africa and also in the West. In order to fulfill this goal, the Center organizes research groups, conferences, seminars, and lectures, supports individual and group research, distributes scholarships, and encourages dialog between scholars of Islamic studies and related fields. Islam is understood not just in the narrow sense as a religion, but also as a culture and civilization, and thus the Center will deal with such subjects as religious thought and practice, material and intellectual culture, politics, society and economics. To this end, the Center supports inter-disciplinary research with scholars in religious studies, history, the social sciences, law and other fields. Innovative research projects within established disciplines will also be encouraged and supported. The Center will direct some of its activities towards the general public, in order to bring about greater understanding of Islamic religion and civilization. The publications of the Center will seek to reach a wide audience of scholars as well as the interested public.

Since its founding in the 1920s, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has had a proud tradition of Islamic, Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, today continued mainly in the Institute of Asian and African Studies in the Faculty of Humanities, but with cooperation with colleagues also in the Faculties of Social Sciences and Law. Scholars from the Hebrew University in these fields have a world-wide reputation for their research and publications. Hundreds of students, including many dozens of graduate students, are enrolled in various programs dealing with these subjects.

Much of the impetus for the establishment of the Center comes from the desire of colleagues and friends to perpetuate the memory and continue the work of Professor Nehemia Levtzion, who passed away in August 2003. Professor Levtzion was a member of the Institute of Asian and African Studies and a noted scholar of the history of Islam in Africa and the social history of Islamic religion and culture. He was also well-known for his public activities in the sphere of academic administration and related matters, both within the Hebrew University and on a national level.

**The Annual Nehemia Levtzion Lectures**, of which is the inaugural one, bring distinguished international scholars to the Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies to deliver a talk on a subject related to one of the many fields in which Prof. Nehemia Levtzion was active: African history, Islam in Africa, conversion to Islam, Sufism, reform movements in Islam and the teaching of Islamic religion, civilization and history, or other aspects of Islamic studies. The Levtzion Lectures are held in cooperation with leading academic institutions in Israel.

## I

I am pleased as well as honoured to be invited to give this first lecture in memory of our colleague Nehemia Levtzion, although I have a confession to make. My acquaintance with him goes back to the time when I first entered the School of Oriental and African Studies as a research student in 1966, and my engagement with his work to the time of my appointment as Lecturer in the History of North Africa in 1970. In 1972-3 I contributed to the seminar which he arranged at the School on the subject of conversion to Islam, out of which came the volume *Conversion to Islam* that appeared in 1979.<sup>1</sup> My own contribution, however, on the conversion of Egypt and North Africa, was not published, partly because I had worked the material into a chapter for *The Cambridge History of Africa*,<sup>2</sup> but partly because I was dissatisfied with the conclusion: many questions remained to be answered. Some twenty-five years later I first accepted, but finally declined a second invitation to contribute to the *History of Islam in Africa* which Nehemia edited in conjunction with Randall Pouwels,<sup>3</sup> in view of my other commitments. Today, over thirty years later, in this Memorial Lecture, I hope to remedy both of these omissions with the help of that familiar pair, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, community and society: how the one grew into the other and the other gave rise to the one.

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<sup>1</sup> N. Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam*, New York and London, Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1979.

<sup>2</sup> M. Brett, 'The Arab conquest and the rise of Islam in North Africa', *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. 2, *From c.500 BC to AD 1050*, ed. J.D. Fage, Cambridge, CUP, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> N. Levtzion and R.L. Pouwels, eds., *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens, Ohio University Press; Oxford, James Currey; Cape Town, David Philip, 2000.

## II

Islam, Bernard Lewis used to tell his students, is a great deal more than a religion; it is a way of life and a civilisation. To convey this comprehensive meaning, Marshall Hodgson coined the word Islamdom as a match for Christendom, a world named for its faith.<sup>4</sup> The term has not caught on, though it has the merit of shifting the emphasis from the religion to the civilisation. Merit from the historian's point of view, because it transforms Islam from a thing in itself into the series of beliefs and activities of Muslims across the centuries, on the principle that the history of the subject *is* the subject. From that point of view, as Geertz observed when looking at Islam at either end of the Islamic world in Java and Morocco,<sup>5</sup> the salient feature is plurality: religions, ways of life and civilisations that all go under the same name. This is not to suggest that they have nothing in common apart from the name, as the French were wont to do in North Africa, and as Muslims themselves may sometimes feel: students of mine have been known to denounce the forms of Islam studied by Geertz as paganism. It is simply to acknowledge the many ways in which different peoples at different times have subscribed to the religion quite literally in good faith, and the equally many ways in which they have differed and disagreed. The *qāḍī* of Īwālātan in the Sahara who entertained Ibn Battūta in the presence of a female friend; the merchant of Īwālātan who entertained him in the presence of his wife; both replied to their guest's expressions of shock that such was the custom, part of the

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<sup>4</sup> M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols., Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> C. Geertz, *Islam Observed. Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1968.

way of life of this particular Muslim community.<sup>6</sup> The problem is to explain how that community had come into being as part of a wider Islamic society, to whose development it contributed.

Historians may not believe in the miraculous origins of Islam or of any other faith; but the evolution of its civilisation out of what John Wansbrough called the sectarian milieu of Late Antiquity<sup>7</sup> is nevertheless a remarkable phenomenon. The sectarian milieu was an aspect of the society of the Near East at the time of the Prophet; but within two or three hundred years of the Hijra, the society in question had been transformed into that of Islam by the energy of the faithful who established their community at Medina in 622CE. If we think of the Arab conquests as an astronomical Big Bang, the origin of an expanding universe, the trinitarian belief in God, Prophet and Book has acted rather as a Black Hole, a centre of gravity that has attracted other ways of life and thought into a galaxy that is by now far wider than the original Arab empire, and much more varied than its already complex society. The attraction is all the greater for its enactment on the ground: every year the faithful are drawn back, physically in space and mentally in time, to the point of origin of the belief at Mecca. It was in this way that Ibn Battūta came to trace the outreach of his faith across the surface of the globe, as he moved in from the west and out to the north, the east and the south over a period of some thirty years in the first half of the fourteenth century CE.<sup>8</sup> The account of his travels bears witness to the conversion of rulers in Central

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<sup>6</sup> *The Travels of Ibn Battūta, A.D. 1325-1354*, Vol. IV, ed. and trans. H.A.R. Gibb and C.F. Beckingham, London, The Hakluyt Society, 1994, pp. 951-2.

<sup>7</sup> J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu. Content and composition of Islamic salvation history*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> See above, note 6; the first three volumes were published in 1958, 1962 and 1971 respectively. Cf. R.E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battūta, a Muslim traveller of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century*, London and Sydney, Croom Helm, 1986.

Asia; of government in India; and of population in East Africa, as the pagan Mongol Khans of the Golden Horde professed the faith; as the Sultans of Delhi conquered much of the sub-continent; and as the growth of trade in the Indian Ocean led to the formation of the Swahili, the Muslim people of the East African coast.

Conversion, in the sense of a changeover from one system to another, is a suitably impersonal term for the growth of the original community of the faithful into the society of the lands it had conquered, and for the subsequent establishment of Islamic societies beyond the boundaries of the original empire. As a statement of fact, it reduces the element of personal choice in the matter of faith to one among many such factors in the process. In referring to Ibn Battūta and his witness to the expansion of Islam, I have used conversion for political, administrative and demographic change, but not at all in the sense it may have in Islam as well as Christianity, of embracing a new religion out of personal conviction. If we ourselves go back in space and time from the periphery of the Islamic world in the first half of the fourteenth century CE to the period of its formation in the lands conquered by the Arabs between the seventh and the tenth century CE, the meaning is just as factual. When the Arab empire finally vanished in 945 CE, conversion was evidently widespread. Rulers were Muslim; government and administration had been Islamised; and those who professed the faith were well on their way to becoming the great majority of the population. To describe this conversion of an original minority into a majority, and the previous majority into a minority, Bulliet reduced the process to a statistical curve, ingeniously derived from a sample of ancestral names to be found in the biographical dictionaries that multiplied from the tenth century onwards.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> R.W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period. An Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1979.

The paper on the subject which he delivered to the seminar at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1972-3 was a major contribution to the subsequent volume, *Conversion to Islam*.<sup>10</sup> But the length of the curve differed from country to country, representing a slower rate of conversion in Egypt than for example in Iran. The sample may have been limited, and hence inadequate. The various graphs, however, provide a working hypothesis that prompts the question: what were the mechanisms at work in each country to explain the formation of an Islamic society out of the initial community of believers?

### III

There is certainly a common denominator. Whatever the point at which we examine Bulliet's S-shaped curve of conversion as it rises upward from the minimum to the maximum percentage of the population in question, that population was divided between members and non-members of the Muslim community. By the same token, the division was determined by the criteria of admission and exclusion that prevailed at that particular time. At the time of the Arab conquests and the formation of the Arab empire, the criteria of membership were both racial and religious: the Arabs as distinct from non-Arabs; believers as distinct from unbelievers. The equivalence of Arabs with believers in the original community of the *mu'minūn* or faithful was unsustainable; from the very beginning it may have been more of an ideal than the reality. But the selectivity imposed by this racial and religious elitism upon the entry of non-Arabs into the community governed the ways in which the various peoples of the empire were eventually converted to the religion, the

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<sup>10</sup> Idem, 'Conversion to Islam and the emergence of a Muslim society in Iran', in N. Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam*, pp. 30-51.

society, and the civilisation of Islam. Whereas in Egypt, the land of the Copts, the unbelievers were predominantly Christian, in North Africa the Berbers were considered to be largely pagan. While Christians, once conquered, were obliged to remain Christian in exchange for the payment of a poll-tax, pagans were not only required to submit to the Arabs, but to profess their faith. Therein lie the roots of two very different histories.

The equivalence of Arabs with believers, non-Arabs with non-believers, broke down within a hundred years. Initial recruitment of non-Arabs into the armies of the faithful as *mawālī muslimūn*, clients who had made their submission to Arab members of the community, created a class of non-Arab subordinates to the Arab *mu'minūn*. Such recruitment was demographically explosive; in the townships where the armies were centred, at Fustāṭ in Egypt, for example, the community proceeded to grow by natural reproduction to the point at which it had outgrown the army that the state was prepared to support. Early in the eighth century CE in Egypt, the names of the Arab warriors entitled to pay were listed in a *dīwān*, a register; the final step was taken early in the ninth, when these Arabs were removed from the payroll altogether. What then remained was a nomadic population of Arab tribesmen in the desert, and a civilian population of subjects rather than rulers in the cities, in particular Fustāṭ. For these believers, the term Muslim had become the standard appellation in place of Mu'min, which survived in its original sense chiefly in the title of the Caliph, Amīr al-Mu'minīn or Commander of the Faithful.

Five hundred years later, Ibn Khaldūn took a gloomy view of this development, observing that the Arabs of the third race, who had followed the Prophet, had been swallowed up in the mass of the people they had conquered, leaving the bedouin who had remained in the desert

to develop into a fourth race of uncivilised nomads.<sup>11</sup> That was not how it appeared at the time to the thriving Egyptian community of Muslims in various walks of life, governed by Muslim rulers and living under the law of Islam. The establishment of their community was celebrated in the ninth century by the jurist Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, who wrote an account of the conquest of Egypt and North Africa,<sup>12</sup> and in the tenth by al-Kindī, whose *Governors and Judges of Egypt* related the subsequent history of the country under the names of those appointed to the principal offices of state, the *wālī* or governor on behalf of the Caliph and the *qāḍī* or judge on behalf of the law.<sup>13</sup> The dyarchy of these two officers defined the community just as its faith was defined by the law as defined by the scholars over the past two or three hundred years. In similar fashion the two Christian communities were defined by their churches, of which the Coptic Patriarchate was the more important. *The History of the Coptic Patriarchs of Alexandria*, compiled in the second half of the eleventh century CE, matched the work of al-Kindī as a narrative of the reigns of successive Patriarchs that told the other side of the story, a history of adversity and decline.<sup>14</sup> What we see from these works is the conversion of a Christian into an Islamic society, as the Muslim community grew

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, 7 vols., Būlāq, 1284AH/1867, VI, 2-6. Cf. De Slane, trans. vols. VI and VII, *Histoire des Berbères et les dynasties musulmanes de l’Afrique septentrionale*, 4 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. P. Casanova, Paris, Paul Geuthner, 1925, reprint 1999, Vol. I, pp. 1-12; A. Cheddadi, *Ibn Khaldūn. Peuples et nations du monde*, 2 vols., Paris, Sindbad, 1986, vol. 2, pp. 419-27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Kitāb futūḥ Miṣr wa’l-Maghrib wa akhbārihā*, ed. C.C. Torrey, *The History of the Conquest of Egypt, North Africa and Spain*, New Haven, 1922.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Kindī, *Kitāb al-wūlāt wa kitāb al-qūḍāt*, ed. Rhuvon Guest, *Governors and Judges of Egypt*, Leiden and London, 1912.

<sup>14</sup> (Severus ibn al-Muqaffa‘), *Ta’rīkh batārikat al-kanīsa al-Miṣriyya*, ed. and trans, B.T.A. Evetts, Y. ‘Abd al-Masīḥ, O.H.E. Burmester, A.S. Atiya and A. Khater, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria/the Egyptian Church*, 3 vols., Paris, 1901, Cairo, 1943-59, 1968-70.

into the great majority of the population while its counterpart turned from a nation into the community of a minority. Such an outcome had been effectively accomplished by the time of the compilation of *The History of the Patriarchs*, and was complete by the end of the Mamluk period.

The problem is that the evidence is lacking for the way in which this transformation was accomplished. The judgment of Ibn Khaldūn, that a nation which falls under the rule of another will quickly perish,<sup>15</sup> is a generalisation that not only begs the question, but is qualified in the case of Egypt by the survival of Christianity down to the present day: a point to be borne in mind. For the early centuries the conversion of Christians into Muslims was conspicuous by its absence, as D.C. Dennett observed when arguing against the familiar thesis that there was a rush to convert to avoid the poll-tax.<sup>16</sup> Down to the end of the Umayyad period in 750, the association between the profession of faith and admission into the community of the faithful as a client of the Arabs restricted recruitment in Egypt to a few high officials in the administration. But the same was true in reverse: to be a member of the Church was to be the member of a society whose ties were not easily broken even after conditions of entry into Islam were relaxed in the ‘Abbasid period. No great conversion of Christians into Muslims is attested except at the beginning of the eleventh and the fourteenth century CE, when it resulted from two extraordinary bouts of persecution. The ties themselves persisted despite the decline in numbers down to the nineteenth century, when the community began to increase in the context of the overall growth in population. This demographic upsurge, which means that the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal, 3 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., New York, Bollingen Foundation, 1967; London and Henley, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, I, 300-1.

<sup>16</sup> D.C. Dennett, *Conversion and the Poll-tax in Early Islam*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1950.

Christian community of Egypt today is now more numerous than it was when it formed the total population of the country, is a second point to be borne in mind when considering the explanation for the Islamisation of Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

This emphasis on the resistance of Egyptian Christians to conversion is the reverse of Richard Bulliet's insistence on the need for an incentive to do so in the form of some expected reward. For literate members of the Christian community there was a strong disincentive in the form of their employment, either in the Church or in the financial administration of the state. Both the Coptic Jacobite and the much smaller Orthodox Melkite Church lived off the considerable endowments of which we have a glimpse in the twelfth-century *Churches and Monasteries of Egypt* ascribed to Abū Ṣāliḥ.<sup>18</sup> Despite the proliferation of Muslim functionaries, Coptic Christians retained their old and lucrative position in government as the experts of the fiscal regime. Despite their corresponding expertise in irrigation, however, the illiterate Coptic peasants lost their monopoly of agriculture, the economic basis of government, and with it a comparable incentive to stay with the Church. That loss, however, was not occasioned by the loss of members to Islam, but in the first place by their resistance to oppression by the Muslim state. Down to the beginning of the eighth century, not only did they retain their monopoly, but in the words of Harold Macmillan, they had never had it so good. Provincial Coptic governors had connived to keep the tax burden low by failing to enter peasants who had moved from their native

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<sup>17</sup> For this and the following argument, with all references, see M. Brett, 'Population and conversion to Islam in the medieval period', in U. Vermeulen and J. Van Steenberghe, eds., *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras, IV*, Leuven: Peeters, 2005, pp. 1-32.

<sup>18</sup> (Abū Ṣāliḥ), *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt, attributed to Abū Ṣāliḥ*, ed. and trans. B.T.A. Evetts, Oxford, 1895.

village on the tax list of the village where they had settled, so that the taxes of those who were on the list were shared among a greater number of cultivators. When this practice was stopped, migrants were sent back to their villages, and the tax burden was increased, the consequence was a hundred years of sporadic Coptic peasant revolt that ended only in 832.<sup>19</sup>

Writing in the fifteenth century, al-Maqrīzī was right to say that after 832 the Muslims were in control of the villages, but not that they were in a majority: the phrase *wa-ghalaba al-Muslimūn 'alā al-qurā* is ambiguous.<sup>20</sup> Similarly the evidence of tombstones from Aswan in the middle of the ninth century, necessarily those of an affluent minority in the far south of the country, is insufficient to substantiate the claim that this was the time when the Christian majority became the Christian minority:<sup>21</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal's description of Egypt a hundred years later is full of Coptic villages.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless the evidence for the destruction of churches in Middle Egypt in the period of the revolts, which was accompanied by a change in the dedication of churches from otherwise unknown Egyptian saints to Saint George and other familiar figures, seems proof of a widespread uprooting of the Coptic peasant population from its ancient attachment to the localities marked by the shrines of the

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<sup>19</sup> For a fuller discussion, cf. Brett, 'The Arab conquest and the rise of Islam in North Africa', above, note 2, and *ibid.*, 'The way of the peasant', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XLVII (1984), 44-56.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-mawā'iz wa'l-i'tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa'l-āthār (Al-Khiṭaṭ)*, ed. G. Wiet, 4 vols. only, Cairo, 1911, vol. I, 335 = edn. Bulaq, 1:80. Cf. I.M. Lapidus, 'The conversion of Egypt to Islam', *Israel Oriental Studies*, II (1972), 248-62, and Y. Friedmann, 'A note on the conversion of Egypt to Islam', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, III (1981-2), 238-40.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J.M. Bloom, 'The Mosque of the Qarāfa in Cairo', *Muqarnas*, IV (1986), 7-20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-ard*, ed. J. Kramers, 2 vols., Leiden 1938-9, I, 155-56, 161; trans. J.H. Kramers and G. Wiet, *Configuration de la terre*, 2 vols., Beirut and Paris, 1964, I, 153-54, 159.

spirits of each place.<sup>23</sup> Equally significant is the fact that the final Coptic revolt was part of a much wider Arab insurgency in a period of civil war, and that thirty years after its suppression, the country witnessed a series of peasant risings in support of ‘Alid pretenders to the Caliphate. Al-Maqrīzī was thus in a way correct when he went on to say that after their defeat, the Copts turned to the oppression of the Muslim majority as tax-collectors. His remark, which reflected the dislike of the Copts in his own day and age as a privileged minority, bears witness to the marginalisation of the Christian community that we may think set in from the second half of the eighth century onwards as the Christian population began to shrink.

The reason for that shrinkage cannot be the loss of life entailed by the suppression of the Coptic revolts. Al-Maqrīzī offered his own explanation when he said that the Muslims took Christian wives for Muslim offspring, which may well be true.<sup>24</sup> Underlying the revolts, however, was a very long-term factor of the kind beloved of Braudel, namely the perpetual shortage of people to cultivate the available land. It was the need for peasants that induced them to migrate; that drove the state to send them back to where they had come from; and finally to offer tax concessions to those would bring waste land back into cultivation – an admission of failure that connived at the practice it strove to eradicate. Egypt, in other words, was underpopulated, both with regard to the land available for cultivation and with regard to the state which the land was required to support. The population was certainly small; the best estimates suggest that it fluctuated between two and six million, with an

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. Décobert, ‘Sur l’arabisation et l’islamisation de l’Égypte médiévale’, in C. Décobert, ed., *Itinéraires d’Égypte. Mélanges offerts au Père Maurice Martin, SJ*, Cairo, 1992, pp. 273-300: pp. 278-80.

<sup>24</sup> See above, note 20.

average of four, down once again to the nineteenth century and the beginning of its spectacular growth in the twentieth.<sup>25</sup> It may well be that the peasant element in that population had a persistent tendency to fall, and required a constant trickle of immigration from the desert to maintain itself.

The consequences of such a demography for the conversion of Egypt to Islam are fundamental to the explanation. Within an essentially static population, let alone one with a tendency to fall, the growth of one element must necessarily be at the expense of another. Within a growing population, on the other hand, the two elements may increase together, as we see in the case of the Coptic community today. If we think, as we must, of the Muslim community as a dynamic element within the static population of medieval Egypt, the Christian community was bound to decrease to the point of equilibrium that seems to have been reached by the time of the Ottoman conquest. No wave of conversion would be required, merely a higher versus a lower rate of reproduction that over the centuries would bring about the repopulation of the Nile valley by Muslims: in other words the conversion of Egypt to Islam. One might argue about the reasons for such dynamism, including the marriage of Christian women to Muslim men that would reduce the fertility of the Coptic community, as well as a constant trickle of individual conversions; it would certainly go back to the original formation of the Muslim community at Fustāṭ in the seventh century. What it does is to offer some foundation for Ibn Khaldūn's assertion that a nation that comes under the rule of another will perish, even when qualified by the survival of that nation as the community of a minority.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. C. Issawi, 'The area and population of the Arab empire', in A. Udovitch, ed., *The Islamic Middle East, 700-1800. Studies in social and economic history*, Princeton, 1981, pp. 375-96.

## IV

When we turn to the lands west of Egypt, the picture is different although the elements are the same. Barqa in Cyrenaica and then Tripoli were taken and garrisoned in the middle of the seventh century; the conquest of Byzantine Africa with its capital at Carthage, however, took over thirty years before it was completed in 705. By 710 the Arabs had reached Tangier, and by 715 were in possession of Visigothic Spain. A Latin-speaking Christian population had survived, at least in the cities, all the way to Tangier, although the main concentration was in Tunisia. To the Arabs they were the Afāriq, in other words the Africans, and fell into the same category as the Copts, a protected nation defined by its religion as subject to the poll-tax. Like the Copts, they survived as a community under bishops appointed by Rome at least until the end of the eleventh century, and thereafter to the middle of the twelfth century. By then they seem to have been a small urban population together with an agricultural population in the oases of southern Tunisia, swamped by the combination of immigrant Arabs with the native Berber population.<sup>26</sup> It is that combination, rather than the undoubted tenacity of the Afāriq, a minority of the population from the outset, that gives the history of North Africa, and its conversion to Islam, its peculiar interest.

Whereas the Copts, the Qibt in Arabic, were simply ‘the Egyptians’, called after the Greek name for the country, the Berbers, the Barbar in Arabic, were an Arab invention.<sup>27</sup> By that I mean that the

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<sup>26</sup> The survival of the Christian population of North Africa to the west of Egypt is very poorly documented; for a summary, cf. Ch.-A. Julien, *Histoire de l’Afrique du Nord: Tunisie – Algérie – Maroc*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 2 vols., Paris, Payot, 1951-2, I, *Des origines à la conquête arabe (647 ap. J.C.)*, ed. Ch. Courtois, pp. 277-9.

<sup>27</sup> For the following argument, with appropriate references, see M. Brett and E. Fentress, *The Berbers*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, esp. ch. 3, ‘The unification of North Africa by Islam’; also Brett, ‘The Arab conquest and the rise of Islam in North Africa’, above, note 2.

whole range of tribal peoples, from the Nile valley to the Atlantic, regarded as *barbari* or barbarians by the civilised Latins and Greeks, were classified by the Arabs under that name as a nation along with the rest, a race of mankind in line of descent from Noah. It is of course true that these peoples belonged to a language family that has been classified by modern scholarship as a branch of Afro-Asiatic under the name of Berber, the Europeanised form of the Arabised Latin. It is equally true that in the Classical period a modified Semitic alphabet had been employed for the various languages of the group in inscriptions right across the Berber world as far as the Canary Islands. But in the absence of a literature in these languages, it is impossible to say how far there was a sense of Berber as distinct from individual tribal identities to persuade the Arabs of the existence of a Berber race. Its character was obscured by a mysterious distinction between *Butr* and *Barānis* that later became a division between *Zanāta* and *Ṣanhāja*, and by uncertainty over its membership: in the middle of the eighth century the people of the Fezzan, who can only have been the Berber *Garamantes* of Antiquity, were classified as *Ḥabash* or ‘Ethiopians’ by the jurist *Mālik ibn Anas*.<sup>28</sup> His opinion that as ‘Ethiopians’ they should be attacked if they refused to submit is nevertheless typical of the approach to the subject in the literature, and a key to its understanding. From the second half of the eighth century at the latest, as Robert Brunschvig clearly shows in his seminal article, ‘*Ibn ‘Abd al-H’akam et la conquête de l’Afrique du Nord*’, the Arabs were concerned with the legality of the wars they had fought and the conquests they had made.<sup>29</sup> By the time of *Mālik* the

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. R. Brunschvig, ‘Un texte arabe du IXe siècle intéressant le Fezzan’, in idem, *Etudes sur l’Islam classique et l’Afrique du Nord*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1986, no. XII.

<sup>29</sup> R. Brunschvig, ‘*Ibn ‘Abd al-H’akam et la conquête de l’Afrique du Nord par les Arabes*’, *ibid.*, no. XI.

Barbar were firmly in place as a nation that had already been fought and obliged to submit, but not on the same terms as the Christian Copts. Apart from a Christian minority, they had been identified as pagans without a religion of their own. As a result their submission was not only to the Arabs but to the God of the Arabs: their *islām* had involved their Islam, their conversion to the new faith.

The classification of the Berbers as a nation is thus explained by the need of the conquerors to fit their innumerable tribes into a simple Biblical scheme of humanity that assigned to each nation its proper place under God and the Arabs. Their conversion was required to establish them in that place as the subjects of the Arab empire. As told in the Arabic sources, therefore, the history of their conquest is a history of that conversion: the Berbers, we are told, apostatised twelve times before their Islam was made good. On the face of it, this is an exception to the rule that is such a commonplace of modern histories of Islam, that the Arabs never imposed their religion by force; and certainly it contrasts with their treatment of the Copts. Tidied up in this way in a literature that is more than a hundred years later in date, however, the reality is likely to have been more complicated. The price paid for their submission by the Berbers of Libya was a tribute in slaves that the sources explain as a punishment for rebellion after their original subjection. From those slaves came recruits to the army, *mawālī muslimūn* so servile that a governor of Ifrīqiya in 720 had his Berber guardsmen tattooed with his own name.<sup>30</sup> But other *mawālī*, such as perhaps Ṭāriq, who gave his name to Gibraltar, appear to have been Berber chieftains whose submission provided the Arabs with the forces required to conquer

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<sup>30</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ*, above, note 12. Revised ed. and trans. A. Gateau, *Conquête de l’Afrique du Nord et de l’Espagne*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Algiers, 1948, pp. 114-15.

Spain.<sup>31</sup> And since the Arabs as they moved westwards to the Straits stayed within the frontier of Roman Africa, the Berbers of the bulk of Morocco and south-western Algeria remained unconquered, embraced in principle but not in practice by Islam.

The framework was nevertheless in place for the evolution of a Muslim society in North Africa, even though a revolution was required before it could proceed.<sup>32</sup> The revolution was proof of the Arabs' success even as it set out to overthrow their dominion. It was preached for the right that their religion represented against the wrong that was done in its name. The wrong was the inequality of Arabs and non-Arabs within the community of the faithful that was typified by the tattooing of the Berber guardsmen by the governor Yazīd ibn Abī Muslim, for which they killed him. Twenty years later, in 739, such resentment came to a head when Damascus revived its original demand for tribute from the Berbers in the form of young girls and the skins of unborn lambs. The right was the equality of all believers that was preached by the Kharijites from their base in Iraq, and pointed by their belief that sinners such as the Umayyads were thought to be were apostates worthy of death. The Kharijites should not be regarded as a heretical minority in opposition to an orthodox majority: in the middle of the eighth century they were in competition for the right to represent the entire community.<sup>33</sup> When Ya'qūb ibn Sallām came to write his account of the beginning of Islam and the rules of religion in the ninth century, he quoted traditions of the Prophet and his Companions that must have circulated in the middle of

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Brett, 'Arab conquest and rise of Islam', above, note 2, pp. 511-12.; Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers*, above, note 17, pp. 85-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 517-21; *Berbers*, pp. 87-8.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. E. Savage, *A Gateway to Hell, a Gateway to Paradise*, Princeton, The Darwin Press, 1997.

the eighth, to the effect that the Berbers had been chosen for the purity of their faith to restore the religion of Muhammad to the Holy Places desecrated by the hypocrisy of the Arabs.<sup>34</sup> But the risings that ensued across North Africa failed to install a Berber Caliph. The overthrow of the Umayyads was left to the ‘Abbasids, while North Africa was divided between the Arabs in Ifrīqiya and Kharijites in the northern Sahara and western Algeria. By the time that Ibn Sallām was writing, the Ibādī Kharijites whose history he celebrated possessed their own Imam in their own capital at Tāhart in western Algeria, whose authority was recognised as far away as the Fezzan. They had nevertheless become a sect with its own version of Islamic law, whose members were destined to form a minority community within the Islamic society of North Africa.

## V

The constitution of that society proceeded in the eighth and ninth centuries through a combination of immigration, colonisation and repopulation.<sup>35</sup> Repopulation occurred in Ifrīqiya as in Egypt, as a result of the growth of the Muslim community in the cities and the Tunisian countryside by immigration from the East; by the importation of slaves; and by immigration from the tribal Berber countryside. Colonisation was an extension of the process further to the west, beyond the reach of the ‘Abbasid emirate at Qayrawān, the capital of Ifrīqiya, where a rash of

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<sup>34</sup> *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, ed. W. Schwarz and Shaykh Sālim ibn Ya‘qūb, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986, pp. 121-5.

<sup>35</sup> Cf., in addition to Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers*, M. Brett, ‘The Islamisation of Morocco, from the Arabs to the Almoravids’, in idem, *Ibn Khaldūn and the Medieval Maghrib*, Variorum Series, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999, no. I.

little cities sprang up along the routes to Tangier and across to Spain. Beginning with Tāhart, Sijilmāsa, Fes and Tlemcen in the wake of the great Kharijite revolt, they were founded or ruled for the most part by refugees from the East and their descendants, but flourished on trade, both long-distance and local. That was the key to their growth. Right across North Africa, immigration, colonisation and repopulation were evidently political in origin, the result of the Arab conquests and the evolution of the Arab empire. But at the same time they were the vectors of the commercial revolution that laid the foundation of what Lombard called the Golden Age of Islam.<sup>36</sup> As the movement of armies from end to end of the empire was succeeded by the movement of people, the flow of tribute turned into the flow of trade, nowhere more so than in North Africa on the route between Egypt and Spain, and at the head of routes across the Sahara that for the first time were exploited for commercial purposes. The resultant prosperity underlay the formation of an Islamic society in the region that was strikingly different from its Classical Roman and Christian Byzantine predecessors.

The Roman empire had divided North Africa geographically by the *limes*, a fortified line from Sale on the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the Gulf of Syrtis in Libya that marked the frontier between urban civilisation and tribal barbarism. The distinction was maintained by the Arabs, who incorporated the old Roman territories into their empire. It was nevertheless abolished by Islam, the religion, the society and the civilisation which embraced the whole territory, first conceptually, then economically, and finally politically. Conceptual unity was established with the definition of the Berbers as a Muslim nation. Economic unity followed from the development of the long-distance trade routes that not

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<sup>36</sup> M. Lombard, *The Golden Age of Islam*, Amsterdam, Oxford and New York, Elsevier, 1975.

only ran from east to west to the north of the old Roman frontier but southwards across the line of the *limes* to southern Morocco, the Sahara and the Bilād al-Sūdān, the Land of the Blacks. Political unity came about from the conversion of the Berbers to the faith: the Kharijites who controlled the northern Sahara from Sijilmāsa in south-eastern Morocco to Zawīla in the Fezzan in the ninth century were succeeded in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries by the makers of three great revolutions, the Fatimid, the Almoravid and the Almohad, that finally overthrew the political division of North Africa to create a state system that has lasted, *mutatis mutandis*, to the present day.

Given the difference in the context of each revolution over a period of three hundred years and a distance of a thousand miles, the story of those revolutions is not simple. There are nevertheless two common denominators: the first the nature of Berber tribalism, the second the struggle within Islam for the right to rule the community and define its faith. They are summed up in John Wansbrough's verdict on the Fatimid revolution: 'That the propaganda in this particular case should have been *Ismā'īlī* is historically, but not phenomenologically, relevant'.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the preaching of the Fatimid revolution belonged to the history of Islam, a product of the running battle for political power and religious authority that had raged from the death of the Prophet. The response it elicited, on the other hand, and the revolution it accomplished, was the product of the structural militancy of Berber tribal society, self-governing according to rules that permitted the combination of self-styled masterless men into an army obedient to a dictator. The proof of Wansbrough's conclusion is to be found in the subsequent revolutions of the Almoravids and Almohads. The propaganda or preaching in each case was quite

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<sup>37</sup> J. Wansbrough, 'On recomposing the Islamic history of North Africa', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1969), 161-70, p.168.

different, though historically related; indeed, it pursued a Hegelian path through the history of Islam from Fatimid thesis to Almoravid antithesis to Almohad synthesis. But the response of its auditors, from Kabylia in Algeria to the Western Sahara and the High Atlas in Morocco, was in each case the same: the formation of an army for the conquest of an empire. It was a phenomenon that was surely in the mind of Ibn Khaldūn, the supreme eulogist of the Berbers, when he stated that no religious preaching could rouse a people to conquest without a sense of solidarity in those to whom it was addressed; but conversely, no sense of solidarity with kith and kin could be mobilised for conquest without religious inspiration.<sup>38</sup>

## VI

Woven together, these three strands of circumstance, dialectic and tribal society produced a continuous story that began in the north-east, in the territory of the old Roman empire that the Arabs had annexed, and ended in the south-west, in the lands beyond the *limes* and the limits of the Arab conquest. A hundred and fifty years after the Kharijite revolt, the Fatimid revolution was yet another Berber rebellion against the Arabs in Ifrīqiya, the old Roman province of Africa that the ‘Abbasids had recovered for their empire.<sup>39</sup> Though recognised as Muslim, the Kutāma tribesmen of the mountains of Kabylia in eastern Algeria were kept in place by military expeditions that levied the *zakāt* or alms-tax as a form of tribute. Roused by the expectation of the Mahdī, the saviour from the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, I, 319-27.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. M. Brett, *The Rise of the Fatimids. The World of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the Fourth Century of the Hijra, Tenth Century CE*, Leiden, Brill, 2001, pp.81-99, *et passim*.

line of the Prophet who would arise with the sword to restore the justice of heaven to earth, their clans united to overthrow their oppressors, and as a warrior community of the faithful brought the Fatimids to power at the beginning of the tenth century. Sixty years later they carried the dynasty to Egypt in pursuit of its ambition to restore the Caliphate to the line of ‘Alī, and to assert the authority of the infallible Imam over the Law of God. Ifrīqiya was entrusted to other Berber warriors, whose Zirid dynasty took charge of the state that the Kutāma had won. Ironically, the historical destiny of these new champions of the Fatimid cause was not to win the rest of North Africa for the Fatimid empire, but to participate in the counter-revolution mounted by its opponents.

The opponents of the Fatimids were on the one hand the jurists of the Sunnī schools of law, who refused their claim to the Imamate, and on the other the ‘Abbasids, who rejected their claim to the Caliphate. In Ifrīqiya the jurists prevailed, and in the middle of the eleventh century the Zirid sultan yielded to their pressure, and changed his allegiance from Cairo to Baghdad. Their action, however, was not confined to Ifrīqiya, but reached across to the very different world of the Maghrib al-Aqṣā, the far west. Here was a land largely beyond the pale of the Roman empire, unconquered by the Arabs, that had never known a central state. Divided by mountains between the Sahara and the Atlantic plains, it had been entered by Muslims from the north and east in search of the silver of the Anti-Atlas and the gold of the Bilād al-Sūdān. As immigrants who created a whole network of burgs or little cities, they established a multiplicity of frontiers with a tribal Berber population to which they presented Islam as a religion, a society and a civilisation. The civilisation was that of the golden age of prosperity generated by long-distance trade; the religion was that of the law that regulated the society. Outside the jurisdiction of the Islamic state and its legal apparatus, observance of the

law was all the more important for the maintenance of these scattered Muslim communities and the conduct of their affairs, including their dealings with the peoples they encountered. In the oases of Sijilmāsa, the original inhabitants were conquered and subjected; elsewhere, Berbers who wished to enter and trade in the market were obliged to profess Islam. It was certainly in the interest of trade to accommodate the peoples who controlled the passage of the mountains and the desert. But on the Atlantic plains the frontier was a line of battle. The *ribāṭ* of Sale on the site of the Qaṣba of Rabat was garrisoned by volunteers on guard against the infidel to the south.<sup>40</sup>

The Barghawāṭa, the infidels in question, were neither pagans nor Christians but imitation Muslims, the followers of a Berber prophet with a Berber Qur'an who banded together in the ninth century to make war upon their neighbours in the name of God. Not only do they exemplify the prestige of Islam throughout North Africa as the religion of the new civilisation. In demonstrating the power of its example to transform a tribal, stateless society into a militant community under a charismatic chief, they supply the proof of Wansbrough's dictum that such behaviour was the particular response of a particular kind of society to the messianic, millenarian message of the faith contained in the first verses of the thirty-sixth Surah of the Qur'an: 'Yā Sīn. By the Book that prescribes and ordains, You are one of those sent on a straight road, A revelation of the Mighty, the Merciful, To warn a people whose fathers were not warned, So that they are heedless and unaware.' The verses are apt, for out of the culture of the *ribāṭ* that developed beyond the High Atlas as a fortress for ascetics in spiritual war upon infidelity, came the mission of 'Abd Allāh ibn Yā Sīn to the Berbers of the western Sahara. 'Abd Allāh

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<sup>40</sup> For the whole of this passage and what follows, cf. Brett, 'Islamisation of Morocco', above, note 34.

was himself a Saharan, and by his name a new convert to the faith. In the middle of the eleventh century he went out of zeal, perhaps by invitation, but with the blessing of Abū ‘Imrān al-Fāsī, jurist of the Zirid capital of Qayrawān and vigorous opponent of the Fatimids. The unity he imposed upon the tribesmen converted them into the Almoravids, al-Murābiṭūn, the Men of the Ribāṭ or brotherhood in the holy war. Welded into a formidable fighting force under his ferocious discipline, they went on to conquer not only the western Sahara but the whole of Morocco and Muslim Spain from the imperial capital they established at Marrakesh. Surpassing the Barghawāta, in the name of Islam, the Almoravids not only created a state where none had been before. From beyond the Roman frontier they overthrew the long-standing division between the lands of civilisation to the north and east and the lands of barbarism to the south and west to realise the old Kharijite dream of a Berber empire.<sup>41</sup>

It was an empire predicated upon the strict observance of the law on the authority of the jurists of the Mālikī school of Sunnism, the form of Islam that stood in strong opposition to the claim of the Fatimids to the authority of the Imam. But the question of a single authority as opposed to a diffused consensus remained deeply troubling, necessitating a theological rather than a legal solution. The theology of the Almoravids was a straightforward belief in the literal rather than the metaphorical meaning of expressions such as the hand of God. But in the course of their career of conquest in the second half of the eleventh century, the theologians of the Sunnī revival at Baghdad developed the metaphysical concept of the Qur’an as the one and only source of illumination. In the works of al-Ghazālī, not only did this meet the challenge of the Fatimid Imamate on its own ground; it relegated the traditional science of jurisprudence to a subsidiary branch of knowledge. The inspiration was

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., and Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers*, pp. 99-105.

to hand for the return of the Berber scholar Ibn Tūmart to his homeland in the High and Anti-Atlas as the Mahdī sent by God to conquer the world for His truth. Exploiting the discontent of the tribesmen with the rule of the Almoravids, he united them in yet another militant community, al-Muwaḥḥidūn or Unitarians, the Almohads. Under his Caliph ‘Abd al-Mu’min in the middle of the twelfth century, they not only took over the Almoravid empire, but extended it as far east as Tripoli. In the name of Islam, North Africa had been united by the energies of the very people the Romans had excluded, not from their point of departure at Carthage in the far north-east but from its diametrical opposite at Marrakesh in the far south-west.<sup>42</sup>

## VII

With the formation of the Almohad empire, the conversion of North Africa to Islam: the religion, the society and the civilisation, was complete. Provoked by the preaching of the prophets of righteousness, and predicated on the promise of Divine reward, the three successive revolutions had created an Islamic polity and an Islamic society whose religion was almost entirely Muslim. Christianity had died out, finally extinguished by Almohad intolerance. As for paganism, traditional beliefs in magic, sorcery and spirits had passed into Islamic custom and Islamic legend irrespective of the puritanical doctrines for which the revolutionaries had fought.<sup>43</sup> In the course of their conflict, Islam had been naturalised as the common faith, and the original definition of the Berbers as a Muslim nation had become reality. The French in the

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<sup>42</sup> Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers*, pp.105-19.

<sup>43</sup> Cf., e.g., F. Legey, *The Folklore of Morocco*, trans. L. Hotz, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1935.

colonial period were mistaken in concluding from popular practice that the belief of the great majority of the population was superficial. ‘But this I am sure of’, said the English author Morgan in the early eighteenth century, ‘that there is not one natural African, on this Side the Niger, who if asked, of what Religion he is, will not, with Indignation in his Countenance, on account of so dubious and affronting a Question, immediately reply, “I am, God be praised, a Mussulman”’.<sup>44</sup>

From the twelfth century onwards, Judaism alone persisted alongside Islam in North Africa as the religion of small communities of farmers, artisans and merchants; as indeed it did in Egypt. I will not attempt to explain its survival, except to draw from the Geniza archive the conclusion that the refusal of conversion to Islam was a condition of an active participation in the affairs of the society and the civilisation. In that respect the Jews resembled the Copts, another religious community whose role in government was related to its faith, but differed from the Ibādī Kharijites, the only body of Muslims in North Africa to have remained in permanent opposition to their fellows. Expelled from Ifrīqiya by the ‘Abbasids and by the Fatimids from Tāhart; their hold upon trans-Saharan trade finally broken by their expulsion from Zawīla in the twelfth century; they survived in isolation as refugees in the Saharan oases of the Mzab and the cliffs of the Jabal Nafūsa in Tripolitania. They survived through the school of jurisprudence that was developed by their scholars alongside those of Sunnī Islam in the eighth and ninth centuries; but while this bound their community together, it distinguished them from the great majority, by whom they were ostracised. Not until the

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<sup>44</sup> J. Morgan, *A Complete History of Algiers*, London, 1731, reprint, New York, Negro Universities Press, 1970, p.71.

Ottoman period did the Mzabis begin to play a part in the life of Algiers.<sup>45</sup>

As far as Islam in Egypt and North Africa is concerned, the ‘Ibādīs were the exception that proves the rule. In contrast to the communities of non-Muslims who survived and in some measure flourished under the rule of Islam, the communities of the conquerors disappeared. By the middle of the thirteenth century, the Almohads had been overthrown, and together with the Kutāma, the Friends of the Imam, and the Almoravids, the Men of the Ribāṭ, these Unitarians had followed the Arabs, the Mu’minūn or Faithful, into history. Where are they now? asked Ibn Khaldūn of the Arabs of the Third Race, the builders of the Arab empire; they have vanished into the mass of their subjects, leaving a Fourth Race to emerge in the deserts they had abandoned for their career of conquest.<sup>46</sup> So too with the imperial Berbers of North Africa. Having lost the empires they had won, the ethnic communities that had formed in the name of God in response to the call to do His work had shrunk back into the society their successive conquests had created. If a symbol of their passing and the nature of their achievement be required, it is the passage of Ibn Yā Sīn’s *murābiṭ*, a classical militant whose mission was to revolutionise the world, into the dialectal *marabout*, a saintly figure whose role was to bless and keep the social order from Morocco to Libya, and from the sea to the Sahara.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For their bibliography, see Savage, *A Gateway to Hell, a Gateway to Paradise*, above, note 33, pp. 184-9, ‘Works of Tadeus Lewicki’; these include his article ‘al-Ibādiyya’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.; cf. also R. Brunschvig, *La Berbérie orientale sous les Hafside*, 2 vols., Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1940, 1947, I, 329-33.

<sup>46</sup> See above, note 11.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Brett and Fentress, *The Berbers*, pp. 142-9.

Now if you have begun to think, that like the ballad of Frankie and Johnnie ‘this story ain’t got no moral, this story ain’t got no end’, well, there is indeed no moral, but there is an end. The elimination of the ‘Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad in 1258, followed by that of the Almohad Caliphate at Marrakesh in 1269, terminated the six-hundred-year-old dispute over power and authority that governed the formation of Islam. A hundred years later, at the end of the fourteenth century in North Africa and Egypt, Ibn Khaldūn could look back judiciously over its long history, and reckon up the balance according to the laws of economics, social formation and government rather than those of theology. If there was a moral, it was political rather than religious. And with the conversion of Egypt and North Africa effectively complete, Ibn Battūta could set out in confidence from Tangier in the first half of the fourteenth century for a tour of the periphery of the Muslim world, to record the further progress of Islam far beyond the frontiers of the Arab empire. His last port of call was West Africa, whose conversion to Islam was the lifelong study of Nehemia. I am happy to leave its story to his work.

