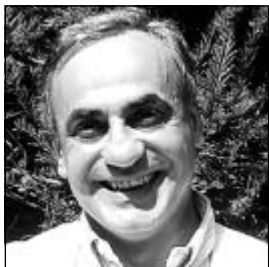


Aziz Al-Azmeh

## Transitions



Born in Damascus, 1947. Study of Philosophy, Sociology, and Oriental Studies in Beirut (License-ès-Lettres), Tübingen (M.A.), and Oxford (D. Phil.). Professor of Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, 1985–96; Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 1994–95 and 1996–98. Author of, in Arabic, *Historical Writing and Historical Knowledge* (1983), *The Politics and History of 'Heritage'* (1987), *Arabs and Barbarians: Medieval Arabic Ethnology and Ethnography* (1991), *Secularism* (1992), *Religion and the World in Contemporary Arab Life* (1996), and, in English, *Ibn Khaldūn in Modern Scholarship* (1981), *Ibn Khaldūn: An Essay in Reinterpretation* (1982), *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies* (1986), *Islams and Modernities* (1993), and *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Politics* (1997). – Address: 51 Blenheim Drive, GB-Oxford OX2 8DL.

I have now come to the end of my third year as a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg. I had contemplated an overall reflection on the city and the institution, no less than on the overall direction of my work during that period, but I thought the better of it, not least because some what I have concluded would not necessarily interest either city or institution. These have been important years: there will be many occasions to acknowledge the Wissenschaftskolleg in print and the three years have been transitional both in terms of topical and disciplinary direction, and in terms of career orientation. And they have been years rich in personal experience, as are all situations of transition, most particularly when transitions last for three years. And now, having already, on this my very last day here in Berlin, expressed my private affections and farewells to the many excellent friends I made here, I shall proceed straight away to reporting on matters of scholarship.

The academic year just concluded has been one of relative geographical immobility unusual for me in the past decade or so, and of an almost obsessive distraction in the direction of my work. I attended just three conferences, in Beirut, New Delhi, and Kairouan, and delivered lectures at the Tunisian University and *Ringvorlesungen* in Zurich and Berlin. I had

normally moved far more extensively, and now did very much come to enjoy and indeed to cherish long stretches of work entirely undisturbed and uninterrupted, and almost entirely without the interference of committee work, in Berlin and elsewhere which consumed much effort the previous year.

But the course of work I had set up for myself was almost entirely abandoned in favour of the pursuit of lines of research that I had not anticipated to quite the extent that these took. I had intended to write my book on the conceptual and socio-cultural conditions of all formally constituted knowledge in the Arab high middle ages, the period of ca. 900–1300. But before starting the composition of my text, I wished to pursue a small number of details that arose from my recently published book *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities*, most particularly on the categorisation of historical objects as ‘Islamic’ in the context of their Late Antique bearings and conditions of genesis, and with a view to a better understanding of periodisation.

The pursuit of these details took on a life of its own, and I saw myself plunged into the very exciting world of Late Antiquity: rhythms and structures of monetary history, of the troubled genesis of monotheism, and of the indissoluble wedding of God and Mammon which constituted the condition both of Eastern Romanity and of the Caliphate. There is a tremendous amount of iconographic, literary, and conceptual material that would vitiate presumptions, deeply enracinated in academic as well as demotic representations of history, of separate Eastern and Western historical itineraries, each a self-enclosed supra-historical substance, representations of particularly acute salience in Germany. Indeed, this romantic historicism was the object of the first part of the study I produced, the prototype of a book-length historical essay, and was the occasion for some systematic reflections on notions of culture and civilisation in the quest for more fitting modes of organising historical materials and conceiving historical objects in the *très longue durée*, one more resistant to infection by unconscious vulgar sociologies that circulate in the public domain.

Particularly riveting for me was looking systematically into the structures of ancient Semitic religions, most particularly in the last remaining reservation of Near Eastern polytheism that was Central Arabia in the seventh century. The manner in which the Koran utilised the entire structural repertoire of these religions in order to propound monotheism and incorporate the many deities into the one was the matter that led to the conclusion of this study, which sought to show how the millennium-long oecumenical trends of Late Antique monetary, religious, theological, and cultural history, reflected in large-scale inconclusive wars, were the foundations upon which Caliphal universalism, which brought this series of

wars to a conclusive end, was erected, thereby continuing, consummating and concluding the very long history of Late Antiquity.

My debt to the staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg, like that of all Fellows, is inestimable: their unfailing courtesy, helpfulness, and efficiency make the Kolleg what it is. They have made it possible to live and work comfortably and indeed to thrive in the enviable environment of a dormitory. I was particularly privileged this last year with wonderful neighbours who made the top floor of Villa Jaffé into a minuscule utopia, adding an aromatic, convivial, ever helpful, and decidedly unmonastic inflection to the notion of an ivory tower.