

## **Religion, community and loyalty on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, 865 CE**

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The difficulty of reconstructing a pre-modern anthropology of religion is well known. Most of us live in an industrialized and ‘post-secular’ society, and this means that we must navigate through a thicket of misunderstanding and misconception, which separates current psychologies, conceptualizations and practices of religion from those that we wish to grasp. The impact of the revisionist work of Asad and several others is still being felt. Having seen our way through this thicket, we typically then find that the hunting is heavy going. On the one hand, ‘religion’ appears most everywhere, deeply ingrained within the residues of experience and thought that we all our sources; on the other hand, precisely because the centrality of religion was taken for granted and, in theoretical terms, usually non-separable from other aspects of society, only seldom do we find the big game we need to answer big questions.

If we wish to understand the relationship between religion and empire, we need to understand how the imperialists understood religion. In my paper I will contextualize and make some provisional sense of a piece of religio-political propaganda, which survives in a work of 10<sup>th</sup>-century historiography, hiding in plain sight, as we shall see, but mummified by language and history. This propaganda offers us a glimpse at a construction of caliphate, belief and community—and, so, ‘religion’—that was produced at a moment of both political and imperial crisis: the intra-Abbasid civil war of the mid-860s. In a historiographical landscape that tends to be as flat as Iraq itself, the propaganda stands out like a tall tell: we have a precise date, a well-placed author who stands at the heart of the imperial project (Sa‘īd b. Ḥumayd), and a good sense of audience. Most important, we have a long and rich text that fossilizes in exemplary rhetoric what, to both contemporaneous and subsequent readers, must have sounded like a desperate, reactionary—even radical—model of religion and empire.