

A Survey and Assessment of German Approaches to *Sīrah*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to address the question why German critical and polemical sīrah-writings garnered little reaction at the time they were written in the 1970s, and only began to receive greater interest at the beginning of the twenty-first century. What has changed since the 1970s? In answering such question, a brief and selected overview of German contributions to the literature on the life of the Prophet is presented. This will be traced from the early German biographers, critics, and sceptics, and deniers and revisionists who have gained quite some ground in the backdrop of a new political culture evolving in the wake of growing Islamophobia and populism. The conclusions will set out some of the issues that may be important for further sīrah-studies both in the light of questions pertaining to the historiography of religion in general and sīrah-writing in particular.

Keywords

German scholarship, *sīrah*, the Prophet, source criticism, migration, Islamophobia.

Introduction

Historiography and the construction of narratives of the past are important discursive devices in establishing identity and solidarity and in providing a normative order for a given society. As such historiography has always been an influential source of authority, of change as well as continuity, and of self-assertion and canonisation. As the construction of the past is informed by complex processes of self-canonisation and their semantic displacements, it

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therefore adopts a self-referential normative function in the collective memory of people.

One profound example of such historiography is *sīrah*-writing, which seeks to reconstruct the life of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). This is a challenging task, on the one hand because of the exemplifying nature of the genre, endowed as it is by the idea of salvation history that perceives history as God's saving work among his chosen people. On the other hand, the challenge arises from an alleged perennially agonising problem of authenticity with regard to contemporary sources, in addition to their arguable paucity. The resultant scarcity of objective hermeneutical study of the *sīrah* and *ḥadīth* seems to represent a case in point and has been taken up by German-speaking scholars of Islam. Therefore, this paper is concerned with the analysis of processes of historiography rather than with their theological evaluation, right up to contemporary times.

The Need for *Sīrah*-Writing

It seems, that the need for *sīrah*-writing emerged at a time when learning and knowledge eventually came to be diversified, specialised, and professionalised—*akhbār* (reports), *ṭabaqāt* (biographical literature), *shi'r* (poetry), *maghāzī* (accounts of military engagements), and *ḥadīth* being the sources—just when Muslim historiography became a tool for organising knowledge and thus society.¹ However, organising knowledge is not an innocent process. Equipped with normative properties, it helps to achieve orientation and to construct a coherent identity and moral order for any community. Therefore, the representation of the past takes part in a discourse of power. Consequently, it is worthwhile to investigate the social location of the historical narrative and of the procedure of remembrance; and the selective way in which memory retains and distributes the emphases it places on events.

Sīrah eventually came to be the prime reference point for historicising the other as well as for self-historicising; when a canonised past emerged, complete with patterns for describing alterity, social, and religious distinction and also discrimination. *Sīrah*-writing as a major genre in Muslim historiography, one which constructs not only the past in its various meanings and uses, but also the multiplicity of norms for the communities involved, suggests that early Muslim society started writing full-fledged books on the Prophet some two hundred years after his death, as the first work in the genre was written by Ibn Hishām (d. 834 CE) as an edited version of an earlier but now lost work by Ibn

¹ A very useful introduction to different problems pertaining to Islamic history and the processes of its codification is Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Isḥāq (d. 761 CE). The very fact that *sīrah*—etymologically related to being on a journey—eventually became the generic term for a biography of Muḥammad, went along with the ultimate message of *khatm al-nubuwwah*, the Prophet having a paradigmatic role in human life and beyond, being the sublimation of the sublime, the perfect individual, a moral and aesthetic ideal, educator, military commander, statesman, etc.,² which had to be imitated—*imitatio muhammadi*—through a “Sunnatisation” of the lifeworld.³ Whether this in turn championed the idea of the self-identification of Muslims with the Prophet is open to question.⁴

Early German Biographers

Given the problematic nature of the source material and the various fissures already beginning to appear in the early Muslim community after Muḥammad’s lifetime, it is no wonder that the different voices appearing in *sīrah*-works often reflected party-politics or were cultural artifacts based on the elaborations of different and contesting traditionists. These surrogates were mixed residuals and remnants of path dependencies often derived from the archives of the self. The same holds true for those who studied the *sīrah*-

² Carl Ernst states, “Muhammad had struck the perfect balance between the different capacities that he held. He is set as the standard against which every field of Muslim culture is measured. Political theorists regard him as the ideal ruler. Legal scholars view him as the source of authentic law. Philosophers see him as a Platonic philosopher-king, whose wisdom derives from his contact with the Active Intellect. Sufis, in contrast, see the Prophet as the beloved of God, the merciful one who will intercede with God for all humanity, the inner mystical guide who is available to all.” Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 55–56. For an interesting contextualisation of different images of Prophets, see Faruk Terzic, “Parallels between the Historical Quest for Jesus and Modern Biographies of Muhammad,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 22 (2012): 22–49.

³ For example, see the *dalā’il* and *shamā’il* literature portraying Muḥammad as the unsurpassed model of beauty and spirituality, as canonised in the works of Abū Nu‘aym al-Isfahānī (d. 430/1038), al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066), and Qādī ‘Iyād (d. 544/1149).

⁴ The German Orientalist Rudi Paret (d. 1983) asserted, “In case of emergency, the Muslim might deny his faith, but he would never be willing to utter a word of slander against Muhammad or to renounce him, even though he were facing death in case of refusal to do so.” Rudi Paret, *Die legendäre Maghāzī-Literatur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930), 178, quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 263n4. And the Canadian scholar W. C. Smith (d. 2000) explained, “Muslims will allow attacks on Allah; there are atheists and atheistic publications, and rationalistic societies; but to disparage Muhammad will provoke from even the most ‘liberal’ sections of the community a fanaticism of blazing vehemence.” W. C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (London: V. Gollancz, 1946), 69–70, quoted in Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, 4. This literary tradition is based on reverence for the Companions of the Prophet. Consequently, their biographies (*ṭabaqāt* and *sīrahs*) were exempted from scrutiny.

writers, not from within the Islamic tradition (emic), but from outside of it (etic), such as the German scholars. In the nineteenth century, these scholars were themselves influenced by Biblical historical criticism (Leben Jesu Forschung).⁵

Thus, when the German orientalist Gustav Weil (1808–1889) applied the historical-critical method in his biography of Muḥammad in 1843⁶ based on Ibn Hishām's edition of Ibn Ishāq's text and when the Austrian scholar Aloys Sprenger (1813–1893) translated the important letters of 'Urwah b. al-Zubayr (635–712 CE) to Caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (646–705 CE) in 1861,⁷ they did not foresee a later growing critique and even mistrust regarding the validity of the three primary sources on the life of Prophet Muḥammad: the Qur'ān, *sunnah*, and *sīrah*, a critique, which would only begin to inform Western studies of Islam at the end of the nineteenth century.⁸

One of the first and foremost critics of the Prophetic tradition was the Hungarian orientalist Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) who dismissed the authenticity of the bulk of Islamic religious tradition on the grounds that the *ḥadīth*⁹ merely reflected the rampant party strife present after Prophet Muḥammad's death. They should therefore not, according to Goldziher, be considered a credible source for the reconstruction of his deeds and personality. Thus, save for the Qur'ān itself, the reliability of the entire early Islamic historical tradition (particularly the *sīrah*) was brought into question. For sure, Goldziher's expertise was based on the contemporary method championed by philologists and theologians: the critical research into sources—*Quellenkritik*. In contrast, both the Semitist Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) and the Oriental cultural policy scholar C. H. Becker (1876–1933) supported the applicability of the historical record, but each for different reasons.¹⁰ Much later, the German orientalist Rudolf Sellheim (1928–2013) stated that no other great founder of an Oriental religion enjoyed so many

⁵ See Terzic, "Parallels."

⁶ Gustav Weil, *Mohammed der Prophet: Sein Leben und seine Lehre; Aus handschriftlichen Quellen und dem Koran geschöpft und dargestellt* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1843).

⁷ Aloys Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad nach bisher grösstentheils unbenutzten Quellen* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1861); also Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, "Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts: the Hīġra in the Corpus of 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr," *Der Islam* 82, no. 2 (2005): 209–20.

⁸ Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996), 9. Also see the elaborated article by Harald Motzki, "Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey," *Arabica* 52, no. 2 (2005): 204–53.

⁹ This refers in particular to juridical and dogmatic *ḥadīths*. See Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammadanische Studien*, 2 vols. (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1889/1890).

¹⁰ See Theodor Nöldeke, *Das Leben Muhammeds* (Hannover: Carl Rüpfer, 1863); and C. H. Becker, *Islamstudien* (Leipzig: Quelle und Meyer, 1924).

biographical accounts as Muḥammad. A significant number of these reports seem, at their core and in their tendency, to plausibly correspond to the actual events or at least come close to them.¹¹ Thus, to find out to what extent the Islamic historical traditions available today preserve their original textual structure, German scholarship seems to have something to offer. Harald Motzki (1948–2019)—who recently edited volumes on Muslim traditions pertaining to legal, exegetical and *maghāzī ḥadīths* along with *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources*—strikingly describes the dilemma faced by potential biographers of the Prophet as follows:

On the one hand, it is not possible to write a historical biography of the Prophet without being accused of using the sources uncritically, while on the other hand, when using the sources critically, it is simply not possible to write such a biography.¹²

German voices favouring a source-critical approach to the historicity of Prophet Muḥammad grew ever louder as time went by, also ushering in unrestrained polemics. Scholars such as Christoph Luxenberg, the pseudonym of a scholar who studies the origins of the Qurʾān and early Islam, and Karl-Heinz Ohlig, Professor of Religious Studies and the History of Christianity at the University of Saarland (on both of these scholars see below), presented theories that no longer view the historical figure of the Prophet with mere skepticism. Since, as they argue, the beginnings of Islamic religion lay in a dark fog, the existing research on Muḥammad as a historical personality must also be flawed as it rests on what they consider unreliable historical and traditional sources. The question is, however, why these arguments were only taken seriously after a period of years? Furthermore, why did the doctoral thesis, written in the 1970s, of German Protestant theologian and Arabist Günter Lüling (1928–2014), in which he recognised selected Qurʾānic verses as Christian poetic verses,¹³ garner little reaction at the time they were written, and only began to receive greater interest at the beginning of the twenty-first

¹¹ “Über keinen der großen orientalischen Religionsstifter sind biographische Nachrichten in so reichem Maße auf uns gekommen wie über Muḥammad. Nicht wenige von ihnen dürften in ihrem Kern, in ihrer Tendenz tatsächlichem Geschehen entsprechen oder doch diesem nahe kommen.” Rudolf Sellheim, “Muhammads erstes Offenbarungserlebnis: Zum Problem mündlicher und schriftlicher Überlieferung im 1./7. und 2./8. Jahrhundert,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987): 3. On Sellheim see below.

¹² Harald Motzki, ed., *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), xiv.

¹³ Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qurʾan: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qurʾan* (Erlangen: Verlagsbuchhandlung H. Lüling, 1974). On Lüling see below.

century—at an academic as well as popular, journalistic level. What has changed since the 1970s? Does a work’s reception history depend on the social and historical circumstances of the time it was published?

This paper attempts to address these questions by presenting a brief and selected overview of German contributions to the literature on the life of the Prophet¹⁴ and its conclusion will set out some of the issues that may be important for further *sīrah* studies both in the light of questions pertaining to the historiography of religion in general and *sīrah*-writing in particular. We shall begin with contributions sympathetic to the Islamic tradition.

German Research on the Life of Muḥammad: Early Depictions of Muḥammad’s Life According to Traditional Sources

The moderate attitude of Nöldeke and Becker mentioned above remained dominant in European research until the 1970s.¹⁵ It is reflected in source-critical observations as pursued by the Danish Orientalist Frants Buhl (1850–1932).¹⁶ He thought it possible to write a “historically acceptable” story about Muḥammad’s life based on existing sources.

Buhl’s biography of the Prophet, *Das Leben Muhammads* (The life of Muḥammad) was published at the beginning of the twentieth century (1903). It drew little attention outside Scandinavia and gained almost no recognition in international circles of Islamic studies, as it was not originally written in one of the main European languages. Only with the publication of a German translation in 1930 did it secure academic recognition. As the Orientalist Hans Heinrich Schaeder (1896–1957) opined, this effect was justified because of Buhl’s “skill and prudence,” as well as the “caution of the critique, which refrains not only from an inflated skepticism but also from unreasonable assumptions.” Similarly, he appreciated the “sober formulation” of the results owing to the readability of his language.¹⁷ Hans Jansen (d. 2015), a contemporary Dutch expert on Islam even called Buhl “the most important Western scientist to write anything about the life of Muḥammad,” and noted that the majority of Western publications on Prophet Muḥammad in his time were based on Buhl’s work.¹⁸ Buhl’s biography of Muḥammad remained

¹⁴ Needless to say that only a modest glimpse into that wide area of expertise can be provided here.

¹⁵ Further discussed in the extensive biographies of Muḥammad by Montgomery Watt and Rudi Paret. See Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 10.

¹⁶ Frants Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammads*, trans. Hans Heinrich Schaeder. 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1955). Cf. Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 10.

¹⁷ H. H. Schaeder, foreword to Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammads*, iv (trans. JM).

¹⁸ Who in turn relied on Ibn Ishāq; see Hans Jansen, *Mohammed: Eine Biographie* (München: Beck, 2008), 21. On Jansen see below.

authoritative until the second half of the twentieth century.

Buhl was most certainly aware of the ostensible core problem of the traditional sources. While he considered the Qur'ān as the “most genuine and reliable source” for Muḥammad’s original sayings and life, he nevertheless questioned the authenticity of the written records of the *ḥadīths* due to their overwhelming number,¹⁹ asserting that “here one has been deceived to an extent found in few places in the literature of humanity.” He, therefore, made the following clarification at the very beginning of his preface: “At every turn I vividly feel the difficulties encountered by drawing his picture, and the imperfection of each attempt at using his speeches in the Qur'ān and the traditional sources about him as a means of transforming him into a character made of flesh and blood.”²⁰ Thus, Buhl considered his own approach as the only acceptable way to address the problem. This approach was based on the use of the Qur'ān as a primary source for historical reconstruction, using those traditional sources (esp., *ḥadīth*) that had faced the rigorous interrogation of *‘ilm al-rijāl*—with the exception of those traditions which he understood to have been invented or were apocryphal and those for which he wished to take no responsibility whatsoever.

Soon after the first German edition of Buhl’s biography of Muḥammad was published, the Swedish historian of religion Tor Andrae²¹ (1885–1947) came out with *Mohammed: Sein Leben und sein Glaube* (Muḥammad: His life and faith), the German edition of a work he had published two years earlier. The book can at best be understood as a complement to Buhl’s biography. Andrae takes the mediation of biographical details not to be of too much importance, due to the lack of a consistent indication of source authenticity augmented by his own critical review of them. On the other hand, he claimed to understand how to “psychologically penetrate and enlighten the development of the East and West.”²² One should not, however, overestimate the contributions of Buhl and Andrae to *sīrah* research. Though they enjoyed long-term importance, they nevertheless did not succeed in presenting a solution to the fundamental issue of source criticism. Rudolf Sellheim (1928–2013) tried to fill the gap between theology and history in 1967 by expounding that the narrative had to be distinguished in (at least) three layers in the *Sīrah* of Ibn Ishāq: (1) historical events; (2) legendary material; (3) factional or

¹⁹ Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammeds*, 367.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, iii (trans. JM).

²¹ Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: Sein Leben und sein Glaube* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932).

²² Schaefer, foreword to Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammeds*, v (trans. JM).

dogmatic perspectives.²³ Soon after the publication of this work, Sellheim became president of the International Society for Oriental Research, Istanbul, a post he held from 1968 to 2003.

In 1981 Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003), one of the most prominent German scholars of Islam who is also widely respected in “the oriental world,” published *Und Muhammad ist sein Prophet: Die Verehrung des Propheten in der islamischen Frömmigkeit* (And Muhammad is His messenger: The veneration of the Prophet in Islamic piety), which has since become a standard work on the subject.²⁴ From reading only the very first sentences of this book or taking a glance at the table of contents, it becomes clear that the work does not take a critical stance against the sources and traditions; rather, it seems that Schimmel intended to facilitate important insights into the religious world of Muslims as well as promote a better understanding of Islam. She often deplored the lack of acceptance of the Prophet of Islam in the “Western world” and observed that this approach was common not only among non-experts, but also among many Orientalists, who in their historical criticism tend to emphasise Muḥammad negative qualities. She regrets that “increasing secularisation evidently makes it impossible for many people to feel reverence for something that is sacred to others.”²⁵ With her book on Muḥammad, she hoped to convey an idea of the “importance of Islam” in the West. She regarded the traditional sources as authoritative material worthy for the biography, simply noting that it was entirely understandable that many legends about him had evolved over time. In this way, Schimmel argued, one could obtain from these traditional sources a much better idea about the charisma of the Messenger of God. Overall, the distinctive tenor of her work was often unburdened, though it did not distract the reader from the excitement and passion with which the learned author dealt with the subject.

The work of the Catholic priest and theologian Adel Theodor Khoury (b. 1930) takes a similarly appreciative approach,²⁶ as his contribution is characterised by a motivation for mutual understanding and dialogue between Christianity and Islam. He is just as interested as Schimmel in reflecting the opinions and feelings of the majority of Muslims rather than critically commenting on the issue of the sources. Given the increasing number of Muslim immigrants to Western countries, he also looks for similarities and

²³ Rudolf Sellheim, *Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte* (Leiden: Brill, 1967). Also see criticism by Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, xxxv, 18.

²⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Und Muhammad ist sein Prophet: Die Verehrung des Propheten in der islamischen Frömmigkeit* (München: Diederichs, 1981).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶ Adel Theodor Khoury, *Muhammad: Der Prophet und seine Botschaft* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2008).

areas of interface between the two religions. From the perspective of a sympathetic Christian, Khoury asks not only, “Who is Muḥammad for the Muslims?” but also, “Who is Muḥammad for the Christians?” in addition to examining the Jewish relationships with Muḥammad.

These researchers can be considered more or less neutral, though they are not necessarily unequivocally friendly to Islamic traditions. The next group is, however, more critical and skeptical towards these traditions.

Critics and Sceptics

For quite a while, Buhl and Andrae could claim to be reliable sources for a biography of Muḥammad, but now they are considered to be outdated due to their lack of dealing critically with the source material or their failure to take into account that cultural memory permeates past events selectively. In his monumental biography of Muḥammad, the Göttingen-based scholar of Islam Tilman Nagel (b. 1972) therefore presents an analysis of the current research, raising the question of how the “nightmarish durability” of Buhl’s biography of Muḥammad can be explained,²⁷ since after all there was no shortage of fresh knowledge. For Nagel, the blame for the ambiguity or rather uncertainty of how and whether it was at all possible to compose an “authentic” biography of Muḥammad lies in the scholarship itself. He recognises how disparate the more recent works on the life of the Prophet really are—especially how their methodology and presentation go in different directions, how varied the biographical representations actually are, i.e., “They range from an enthusiastic retelling of subsumed Muslim hagiographic tradition . . .²⁸ to the denial of Muḥammad’s historicity.”²⁹ For Nagel, the solution to composing a successful biography does not lie in a compromise between these two extremes, but rather in a “new beginning.” To achieve this beginning, Nagel proclaims, one must summarise the methodological problems responsible for this predicament in the first place. Accordingly, the text (*matn*) of a given *ḥadīth* must be read as a source from which one draws information while simultaneously analysing its chain of transmitters (*isnād*), as was the case with the methods of *ḥadīth* criticism that evolved only some decades after the

²⁷ Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende* (München: Oldenbourg, 2008).

²⁸ Ibid., 835. He draws examples from as varied sources as Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1985) and Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (London: Gollancz, 1991).

²⁹ For example, see Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd R. Puin, eds., *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Hans Schiler Verlag, 2005); see Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*, 835.

hijrah. Still Nagel also speaks of “dehistoricisation” and a “murder of history,” maintaining that, in addition to considering the *isnād*, one should look for the normative and timeless message of the *ḥadīth* statements rather than embedding the content in the historical context alone. He holds that the notes about the content of the *ḥadīths* found in the earlier *maghāzī* literature still needed to be reconstructed, while this was unnecessary for those found in the versions of *ḥadīths* deriving from it. Thus, he wants to nail down the “deferred” question of how to treat the life of Muḥammad. For him, one should not depend on the *ḥadīths* to learn about how the Prophet *really was*, but how he *must have been*.³⁰ A normative perspective alone would result in “reduction and one-sidedness,” he opined. Everything that did not correspond to the desired image of the Prophet was “interpreted away.” This is, as it were, a question of the scholarly historical narrative, which according to Nagel too often plainly conforms to the norms of the *sharī‘ah*, and consequently is itself influenced by a “Muslim critique.”³¹

For Nagel, it is a case of discovering the exact relationship between the Qur’ān and the *sunnah*, and of separating the two from each other as much as possible in order to eliminate doubts about the historicity of Muḥammad. This may be, according to Nagel, a deeply important set of hermeneutics, enabling one “to carefully and prudently register”³² the contents of the sources.

Nevertheless, as ambitious as his proposed “new beginning” might sound, Nagel’s deliberations met with severe critique, mainly because he postulated and applied his own methodology. In presenting a paper on the theme at a symposium in Frankfurt in 2009,³³ Basel’s Gregor Schoeler (b. 1944) gave a devastating treatment to Nagel’s work. He could do so because of his expertise in the field of the problematic nature of selective memory and forgetting in the formation of an oral tradition and the reconstructive textual narratives, hence the question of authenticity.³⁴ More precisely, according to Schoeler,

³⁰ Tilman Nagel, *Mohammed: Zwanzig Kapitel über den Propheten der Muslime* (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2010), 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³² Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*, 843.

³³ Gregor Schoeler, “Grundsätzliches zu Tilman Nagels Monographie *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*,” International Symposium: Geistiges Erbe des Islam, Frankfurt A.M., November 5–7, 2009 (unpublished).

³⁴ The transition from oral to written history was a revolutionary process, Schoeler opines, for it ventured into organising society around the written world, a world assumedly monopolised by political strongmen to establish their versions of truth. Thus, Schoeler programmatically quotes from Lutz Röhrich’s “Orale Traditionen als historische Quelle,” “Eye- and earwitness accounts have the tendency to impose certain traditional motives and expectations on the experienced, that is, to translate the real events in the sense of oral tradition and thus to distort them as well. . . . Our memory has much more to offer than we are able to remember at a time,

Nagel's sources are of questionable authority, since he does not use the original sources, but those of later compilations. He ranks Nagel's treatment of the early Abbasid-era traditionist al-Wāqidi³⁵ (747–823) as particularly problematic, arguing that this author of *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, of which we have a German translation by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) steeped in historical critical method,³⁶ should be considered untrustworthy—a point put forward by many classical Muslim scholars and also Shiblī Nu'mānī (d. 1914) in his *Sīrat al-Nabī*.³⁷ This verdict was overlooked by Nagel.³⁸ What one should consider problematic in the reception of al-Wāqidi was his habit of lumping together several different stories, reshaping and combining various traditions, and relying on the sources of a predecessor from Madīnah. Schoeler also tells how al-Wāqidi's narrative sequence differs in its progression as compared to versions of the same events by other narrators. Furthermore, he also points out that Nagel used only those versions of traditions that were consistent with his own theories and thus his wide-reaching hypotheses ought "to be considered inadequately supported." Schoeler's conclusion reads, "Regarding the results of Nagel's book, which are heavily (co-)determined by these hypotheses, the greatest skepticism is appropriate." Finally, he notes that Nagel's book creates a negative image of the Islamic prophet and exhibits an "extremely critical attitude toward Islam."

In 2000, the Erlangen-based scholar of Islamic studies Hartmut Bobzin,³⁹ published a book that, although dealing with the life of Muḥammad, can

but it is selective and changes the contents of recollection. Usually we only remember what is known to us and what we consider to be meaningful; the unknown we keep changing until it becomes familiar. Unintentionally and unnoticed the stories are restyled in accordance with the interests of those who recount the stories, their knowledge and predispositions, their antipathies and states of mind. In this way the stories become more and more similar to the narrators" (trans. JM). Lutz Röhrich, "Orale Traditionen als historische Quelle: Einige Gedanken zur deutschsprachigen mündlichen Volkserzählung," in *Vergangenheit in mündlicher Überlieferung*, ed. J. von Ungern-Sternberg and H. Reinau (Stuttgart: Vieweg, 1988), 90, quoted in Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 4.

³⁵ Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 137.

³⁶ Julius Wellhausen, *Muhammed in Medina: Das ist Wakidi's Kitab Almaghazi in Verkürzter Deutscher Wiedergabe* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1882).

³⁷ See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "A Venture in Critical Islamic Historiography and the Significance of Its Failure," *Numen* 41, no. 1 (1994): 26–50. On Shiblī's reception of al-Wāqidi, see *ibid.*, 32ff.

³⁸ Schoeler draws attention to the review on al-Wāqidi and what has been popularly referred to as "the affair of the slander" with regard to 'Ā'ishah. Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 134. For a more systematic treatment, see Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 29–30, who elaborates that al-Wāqidi wrote at a time when knowledge was diversifying and hence *sīrah* evolved as a genre.

³⁹ Hartmut Bobzin, *Muhammad* (München: Beck, 2002).

hardly be considered a biography of the Prophet as the work deals mostly with different perceptions about him. The study, therefore, supplies a helpful overview of different notions regarding the Prophet as well as raising the question of how reliable the source material for Muḥammad's biography really is. It also regards doubts on the meaningfulness of the sources as being well founded.⁴⁰

This second group of German scholars might seem to be academically sound yet critical to Islamic traditions, and therefore has been countered by Muslim authors like Mohammad Mustafa Azmi⁴¹ (d. 2017) who discovered, verified and evaluated *ḥadīth* collections antedating the six canonical collections, while Fuat Sezgin (d. 2018) argues that the *ḥadīth* collections are based on written sources from the seventh century.⁴² In the 1970s his wife, Ursula Sezgin, represented the thesis of an intrinsic Muslim loyalty to Islamic tradition (Überlieferungstreue),⁴³ arguing against the source-critical studies of Albrecht Noth (1937–1999)⁴⁴ who eventually became quite popular also in the anglo-phone world.

Deniers and Revisionists

In addition to the above-mentioned two groups of German biographers of Muḥammad, there are those who, although not having in the strictest sense written a biography of Muḥammad, were nevertheless unanimous in their conviction that the sources were weak. They have even questioned the historicity of Muḥammad, for whose existence they see no evidence. Many German scholars of Islam have criticised such extreme statements.

The Protestant theologian Günter Lüling (1928–2014) is a pioneer of that recent controversial movement within German Islamic studies, which seeks to put the authenticity of the Qur'ān, and thus the historical existence of Muḥammad, radically into question. In his work published in 1974,⁴⁵ Lüling defended his idea of an "Urtext" of the Qur'ān. He believes that the Qur'ān predates the time of Muḥammad and that it was originally a "pre-Islamo-

⁴⁰ Cf. foreword to *Muhammad*, by Hartmut Bobzin (München: Beck, 2002), 7.

⁴¹ Cf. Mohammad Mustafa Azmi, *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature: With a Critical Edition of Some Early Texts* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1978).

⁴² Cf. Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, vols. 1–9 (Leiden: Brill, 1967–1984), and Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, vols. 10–15 (Frankfurt: Institut für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften an der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 1992).

⁴³ Cf. Ursula Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf: Ein Beitrag zur Historiographie der Umayyadischen Zeit* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

⁴⁴ Cf. Albrecht Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition. A Source-Critical Study* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ Cf. Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'an*.

Christian, basic/original text” which Muḥammad and his followers merely revised. Lüling’s work was not given much attention within Islamic studies circles,⁴⁶ receiving especially little recognition in the early seventies, though more recently it became the basis for the research of Christoph Luxenberg and Karl-Heinz Ohlig.

Publishing under a pseudonym, Christoph Luxenberg takes up Lüling’s thesis but using a different methodology. According to his argument, the Qur’ān emanates from a Syro-Arabo-Aramaic language environment—or according to Luxenberg’s latest findings—the Qur’ān presumably has a Syriac base text. Thence come new readings and contents that would, according to Luxenberg, point to a Christian background, a thesis that denies Islam its own written language, hence largely its authenticity. According to Luxenberg, “Muḥammad” was not a name but merely a term that could be translated as “the praised one.”⁴⁷

Luxenberg’s findings are highly questionable and are described as a “fantastic blend of basic Semitic knowledge . . . amalgamated with long-winded fantasy,” while its methodology is characterised as “amateurish.” Despite all the criticism, Luxenberg enjoys an enduring following to whom the “shortcomings” of his theories and practices do not seem particularly disturbing.⁴⁸ The Catholic theologian Karl-Heinz Ohlig is identified as Luxenberg’s source of inspiration.

Due to what he perceives as the highly unsatisfactory status of the sources of early Islamic history, Ohlig is convinced that it is impossible to collect safe and reliable information on the life of Muḥammad. In other words, he puts the very existence of the Prophet into question.⁴⁹ He quotes Yehuda D. Nevo (1932–1992), a Jewish scholar of Middle Eastern archaeology, “Muhammad is

⁴⁶ Many years later, his book was published in India as *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003).

⁴⁷ Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* [The Syro-Aramaic reading of the Qur’ān: A contribution to the decoding of the Qur’ānic language] (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch Verlag, 2000).

⁴⁸ This was published in 2007 in a book on the Luxenberg-debate: Christoph Burgmer, ed., *Streit um den Koran: Die Luxenberg-Debatte; Standpunkte und Hintergründe* [Controversy about the Qur’ān: The Luxenberg debate; Points of view and background] (Berlin: Schiler, 2007).

⁴⁹ Cf. Ohlig’s citation in introduction to *Der frühe Islam: Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen* [Early Islam: A historical-critical reconstruction based on contemporary sources] (Berlin: Schiler, 2007), “Dass die Gestalt des arabischen Propheten historisch dunkel bleibt oder—härter formuliert—als historische Gestalt in Frage steht” (That the figure of the Arab Prophet remains historically in the dark or—to put it more strongly—is questioned as a historical figure); trans. JM.

not a historical figure, and his official biography is a product of the age in which it was written.”⁵⁰

In 2005, Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin published an anthology entitled *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam* (The dark beginnings: New research on the origin and early history of Islam) propounding that the history of the Islamic world was unknown in every respect. They brought forth arguments, backed by numismatic and inscriptive evidence, that they claimed were critical of the reliability of traditional sources.⁵¹ Ohlig’s contributions consistently dovetail with the general trend of critique in Islamic studies, which tends to look at things in his way, but seldom makes any actual deduction from the material ([keine] Folgerungen ziehe). Yet in other points, he “would gloss over problems of literary criticism.”⁵² For him, an inquiry into the early history of Islam could only lay a legitimate claim if it were based on genuine historical sources. Consequently, he undermines the validity of the literature from the eighth and ninth centuries of the Christian era. It would then follow that Islamic studies should try to critically confront its own patterns of interpretation.⁵³ Regarding German contributions to the study of the Prophet’s life, Ohlig opines that they consistently rely upon the same sources, and therefore their content always appears to bear the same badge. He comes to the conclusion that it is simply enough to read a single biography of Muḥammad, and furthermore maintains that the classical *sīrahs* are not appropriate sources for dealing with the question of the historical Muḥammad, since “no historically accurate life of Mohammad [could] be accounted for.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Cited from Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 11.

⁵¹ Such as Volker Popp, “Die frühe Islamgeschichte nach inschriftlichen und numismatischen Zeugnissen,” in *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin (Berlin: Schiler, 2005), 16–123.

⁵² Karl-Heinz Ohlig, introduction to *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung der frühen Geschichte des Islam*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin, accessed 25 February, 2011, <http://www.phil.uni-sb.de/projekte/imprimatur/2005/imp050503.html>.

⁵³ Ohlig says, “Er meint, dass die Anfänge des Islam nur dann verstanden werden können, wenn sie nicht von späteren Rückprojektionen, sondern auf der Basis der historischen Quellen und von den sich auf sie stützenden historischen und philologischen Fragestellungen her untersucht werden” (That the beginnings of Islam can only be understood if they are not subsequently analysed in the light of later projections, but on the basis of the historical sources and the historical and philological questions based on them); trans. JM. Ibid.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ohlig, review of *Mohammed: Eine Biographie*, by Hans Jansen, trans. von Marlene Müller-Haas, accessed December 12, 2017, <http://inarah.de/rezensionen/rezension-zu-hans-jansen-mohammed-eine-biographie/>.

It should also be noted that Ohlig's interests lay less in Islam than in detecting evidence for the evolution of a non-Trinitarian Christianity. This he seems to find in Islam, when he accepts Lüling's and Luxenberg's theses. For Ohlig, Luxenberg's "Syro-Aramaic interpretation" of the Qur'ān is a testimony that non-Trinitarian Christianity survived in the Arab world and that, through the course of history, Islam had evolved from the Christianity of the Syrian-Arab region. In other words, he takes Islam to be a Christian sect that first appeared as an independent religion in the eighth century of the Christian era.⁵⁵ Furthermore Ohlig, who holds that the Islamic Prophet never existed, maintains, like Luxenberg, that "Muḥammad" is not a proper name and instead means "the praised one," going further to regard it as merely a title assigned to Jesus.

Accordingly, Ohlig undertook the task of removing all of the references to Muḥammad contained in the Qur'ān, also giving a similar treatment to the extensive works of Arab-Islamic traditions, which for him were indeed acceptable, since he did not take them seriously into account as historical sources. Thus, Ohlig's treatment of the sources seems paradoxical to Nagel, according to whom Ohlig's work is inconsistent with previous research.⁵⁶

The idiosyncratic theses raised by Ohlig and his circle are rarely discussed in the Islamic world, but were taken up by Muhammad Sven Kalisch (b. 1966), a German convert to Islam and former professor of Islamic Theology in Münster.⁵⁷ According to him, the historicity of Muḥammad, which once would have taken for granted, has been shattered by the deliberations of revisionist views. This has, however, led him into trouble with Muslim congregations in Germany⁵⁸ for whom such views are understandably unacceptable. In light of the Muslim outcry about his position, Kalisch claimed that it was clear now that Muslims should never have raised the question of the historical Muḥammad but rather should have been satisfied with the pious concept of an ideal form. But such a critical understanding—which seriously consults the methodological approaches of archeology,

⁵⁵ Cf. Ohlig's interview, "Die Wurzeln des Glaubens: Ist Jesus der Prophet des Islams?" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 28, 2008, accessed December 17, 2017, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/die-wurzeln-des-glaubens-ist-jesus-der-prophet-des-islams-1694200-p2.html>.

⁵⁶ Nagel, *Mohammed: Leben und Legende*, 839.

⁵⁷ Muhammad Sven Kalisch, *Theologie ohne historischen Muḥammad: Anmerkungen zu den Herausforderungen der historisch-kritischen Methode für das islamische Denken* (2009), accessed December 17, 2017, <https://de.scribd.com/doc/169359499/Kalisch-Islamische-Theologie-Ohne-Historischen-Muhammad-German>.

⁵⁸ Kalisch renounced Islam in 2010 and now serves as Professor of Intellectual History in the Middle East in Post-Antiquity at the University of Münster.

numismatics as well as historical traditions beyond the Islamic setting—must not necessarily deter Muslims from their faith, he says. Even the questioning of the historicity of the Islamic Prophet, Kalisch postulates, should not hinder anyone from continuing the practice of Islam. For faith in a prophet named Muḥammad and a divine book (the Qurʾān) was indeed generated in order to “make the mystical philosophy understandable to the majority of the people.”⁵⁹ With these remarks, Kalisch demands an open and radically critical discussion on religion, maintaining that all Muslims should have access to this debate. He sees the current situation as one in which the “majority” is consumed with some Islamically legitimated myths while only an elite has access to the truth. He views such a monopoly on knowledge as highly unlawful and undemocratic as well as incompatible with the modern image of mankind, in which all people are asking for equal educational opportunities.⁶⁰ Contrary to most of the revisionists, who are lacking in a sober voice, Kalisch, free from any pugilism, demands factual arguments with scientific deliberations. It seems that the tensions arising from the normative needs of religious communities and the open striving for knowledge need to be made productive—how much poorer would the religions be without their heretics?

As the Dutch scholar P. S. van Koningsveld notes, Kalisch’s skeptical attitude is based, among other sources, on a reading of the late Dutch Arabist Hans Jansen.⁶¹ What Kalisch does not seem to be concerned with, is Jansen’s arguably Islamophobic attitude.⁶² Jansen is not primarily concerned with clarifying questions regarding the historical fact of Muḥammad’s person. He

⁵⁹ Kalisch usually brings forward comparisons with Christianity and adds that it should also be possible, even within Christian theology, to do without a historical Jesus. Cf. P. S. van Koningsveld, “Revisionism and Modern Islamic Theology,” *Hikma* 1 (October, 2010): 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶¹ Jansen, *Mohammed*. Jansen writes in his introduction, “Wer fromm ist und gern alle traditionellen Erzählungen über Mohammed glauben möchte, sollte dieses Buch daher besser aus der Hand legen. Aber auch, wer sehr kritisch ist und meint, daß alle Geschichten über Mohammed erlogen seien, kann seine Zeit besser nutzen, denn auf jeder Seite wird der Möglichkeit Rechnung getragen, daß ein Teil der überlieferten Geschichten auf wahren Ereignissen beruht” (Anyone who is religious and would like to believe all the traditional stories about Muḥammad had better put this book aside. But even those who are very critical and think that all the stories about Muḥammad are lies can make better use of their time, because every page [of this book] takes account of the possibility that some of the stories that have been handed down are based on true events); trans. JM. *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² Cf. Van Koningsveld, “Revisionism,” 16–17, where he quotes Jansen as stating that he converted to Catholicism because this Christian denomination showed a greater willingness to fight Islam. He also mentions a small book of Jansen entitled *Islam for Pigs, Apes, Donkeys and Other Animals* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Van Praag, 2008), referring of course to how the Qurʾān speaks about unbelievers. The book can be found at: <http://kleinverzet.blogspot.de/2008/03/islam-for-pigs-apes-mules-and-other.html>, accessed December 17, 2017.

is, rather, concerned with explaining the following: “If the stories which the early Muslims narrated about Muḥammad’s years in Makkah and Madīnah are more or less historically true, what picture of Muḥammad do they then draw for us?” At the same time, Jansen goes a step beyond the religious figure of the Prophet by also presenting source content that is contradictory to the pious image of the Prophet⁶³ and that arguably had been missing in earlier research on Muḥammad.⁶⁴ All in all, Jansen’s book follows the *sīrah* literature itself with the claim to ensure a dispassionate treatment of its content. However, it is clear that he doubts the historicity of Muḥammad, though not as obviously and passionately as Lüling, Ohlig and Luxenberg. Still, Jansen puts forth his views not by means of explicit formulas, but rather through ironic comments and connotations, thus reflecting the mood of Islamophobia sweeping over many Western countries.

Opinions on Jansen’s work will understandably vary widely. The great skeptics, such as Ohlig, celebrated Jansen for his readability and recommended his work as “a joy to the reader.” The more traditional representatives of Islamic studies, such as Berlin’s Peter Heine, however, criticised the sarcastic tone of the work. The gap between the different schools of thought becomes explicit when considering how the archaeologist Ohlig accused Heine of being guilty of not doing justice to Islam by using “fairytale methods.”⁶⁵ The majority, however, criticise Jansen’s “smug, polemic tone,”⁶⁶ though some reviewers consider this in a more positive light.⁶⁷

⁶³ See Jansen, *Mohammed*, 22–23, saying, “Ferner sind bei Ibn Ishāq Geschichten zu finden, die nach modernen Kriterien Mohammed in ein ungünstiges Licht stellen. Westliche Mohammed-Biographen haben solche Schilderungen oft weggelassen oder die erzählten Ereignisse beschönigt. . . . Eine Reihe dieser in modernen Augen eher negativen Aussagen kommt hier dennoch zur Sprache. Vorbehalten über den Inhalt dieser Erzählungen von Mohammed sollten dorthin adressiert werden, wohin sie gehören: an die islamische Tradition und nirgendwohin sonst” (Furthermore, Ibn Ishāq has several stories, which portray Muḥammad in an unfavourable light according to modern criteria. Western biographers of Muḥammad have often omitted such narrations or glossed over the narrated events. . . . Reservations about the content of these narratives of Muḥammad should be addressed to where they belong: the Islamic tradition and nowhere else); trans. JM.

⁶⁴ Cf. Ohlig, review of *Mohammed*.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Katajun Amipur, “Der Platz Mohammeds,” review of *Mohammed: Eine Biographie*, by Hans Jansen, *die Tageszeitung*, July 30, 2008, accessed January 08, 2018, <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/digitaz/artikel/?ressort=pb&dig=2008%2F08%2F02%2Fa0009&cHash=a81650e018>.

⁶⁷ Such as see Arno Widmann, “Hans Jansens über den Propheten: Aufklärung über Mohammed,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, March 12, 2017, accessed December 17, 2017, <http://www.fr-online.de/kultur/aufklaerung-ueber-mohammed/-/1472786/3317742/-/index.html>.

Apart from the polemical character of parts of Jansen's work, it is his approach to the issue of sources that is inconsistent. On the one hand, his method sheds some light on how problematic it can be to deal with the written records of Ibn Isḥāq, but on the other hand, it is this very source on which his book is firmly based. Moreover, the fact that Jansen has limited knowledge of his sources exposes his work to criticism. Therefore, Stefan Weidner, the former editor of *Fikrun wa Fann*, attributes a highly "unscientific reasoning" to Jansen and concludes that his biography is in fact an anti-biography.⁶⁸

This distinctive mood of right-wing populist tendencies that have been in the making for many years tallies with a booklet entitled *Good bye Mohammed: Wie der Islam wirklich entstand* (Good bye Mohammed: How Islam really came about)⁶⁹ and published under the pseudonym Norbert G. Pressburg. It represents another highlight in this debate and yet a further voice on the side of challenging Muḥammad's historicity. Its very title, which calls to mind the 2003 film *Good Bye, Lenin!*,⁷⁰ reveals the polemical nature of the author's semantics—following the motto that the Prophet of Islam has had his day—leaving no room to question the author's opinion as if it were self-evident. This treatise continues the revisionist discourse coloured by sarcasm and hostility towards Muslims. As demonstrated in the cover note, which declares that "Archaeology and the latest study of sources point to only *one* conclusion: the Prophet Muhammad is not a historical person," the author claims the undeniable truth of his stated hypothesis.⁷¹

On the whole, the booklet brings together the main theses of Lüling, Luxenberg, Ohlig, and their epigones, considering Islam having originally

⁶⁸ Stefan Weidner, "Eine Anti-Biographie des islamischen Religionsgründers: *Die Mohammed-Fiktion*," *Qantara.de*, May 23, 2008, accessed December 17, 2017, <https://de.qantara.de/node/7760>.

⁶⁹ Norbert G. Pressburg, *Good bye Mohammed: Wie der Islam wirklich entstand* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2009).

⁷⁰ The film caricatures events in Berlin around 1989/1990, when the hero's dyed-in-the-wool socialist mother falls into a coma, waking up only after the wall has fallen. As any shock could bring on a fatal heart attack, he tries to convince her that her beloved communism has not been overthrown but is in fact triumphing over capitalism. Thus, every detail of the old East is recreated inside the four walls of their tiny flat, and, as the text on the back of the DVD case explains, "What begins as a little white lie, soon turns into a major deception with hilarious consequences!"

⁷¹ The book was distributed by the Commissioner for Foreigners at the Thuringian Ministry of Social Affairs, Family and Health among local government administrative personnel as well as educators, stating that the book makes an important contribution to intercultural dialogue, as it is "didactically sensible" and approachable for "adolescents with an interest in history." As a result, the commissioner has been sent into temporary retirement.

been a Monophysite Christian sect thereby questioning Prophet Muḥammad's historicity. Consequently, it accepts their criticism of the Qur'ān and the authenticity of the *ḥadīths*, and adopts source material that is quite inadequate for reaching a thorough understanding of Muḥammad. Luxenberg's research results as such provide theories that represent a continuation of Lüling's theses and are celebrated as a "breakthrough" for Islamic studies because of the purported potential of Luxenberg's findings on the original language of the Qur'ān to bring about a much clearer understanding of the content of the holy scripture. One finds in Pressburg, who of course does not have any academic credentials, but is nevertheless popular among certain societal formations, yet another publicist of "the West" who denies "the East" the responsible use of its own history, and asserts his prerogative to tell, as well as his claim to possess, the "real" story. Pressburg also speaks of the "Western world's" discomfort with "Islam," which as a result of the supposed connection between religion and violence ventures into the search for the "true Islam." He sees the events of September 11 as the turning point, because since then Islamic studies in particular and the public in general have shown themselves to be, at the very least, more open to revisionist evaluations.⁷² He ends with the belligerent statement: "It is therefore time to turn to the facts." Overall, the polemic offers little that is new and should thus be taken as an overview of the latest developments of the revisionist German views on Islamic studies.

While this revisionism has become part of daily routine among the German public, at the same time, autobiographical representations by few Muslims claim to certify an ontological weakness within Islam and foresee its downfall, maintaining that corrupt elites in countries with Muslim majorities have been able to comfortably rely on Islam as a basis for their legitimacy.⁷³ The debate is heated: it uses religious language; it abuses revered symbols; and it is characterised by a generally negative image of Islam.

Conclusion

One could maintain that little attention has been given to revisionist

⁷² Pressburg, *Good bye Mohammed*, 10–11. Moreover, accurate references in the form of footnotes are extremely rare in Pressburg's work, while the consistently ironic tone claims scholarship, confusing the reader as to whether the book is intended only for academicians or for those who have little interest in eschewing prejudice and showing mutual respect.

⁷³ The latest is Hamed Abdel-Samad's *Mohamed: Eine Abrechnung* [Muhammad: A reckoning] (München: Droemer Verlag, 2015), wherein the Prophet is judged by today's measures, based on questionable source material of the past. See Stefan Weidner, "Hamed Abdel-Samads Buch 'Mohamed: Eine Abrechnung': From Critique of Islam to Post-Salafism," review of *Mohamed: Eine Abrechnung*, by Hamed Abdel-Samads Buch, *Qantara.de*, September 7, 2015, accessed December 17, 2017, <https://en.qantara.de/node/21423>.

approaches—such as Lüling’s—in the early stages of their development during the Cold War, but that since then they have attracted increasing interest. It may be plausible to suggest that new constructions for the portrayal of the cultural other are now being assumed, or are once again being assumed, now that the communist enemy has perished.⁷⁴

In the last several years, opposition to such constructions has grown louder. In particular, the representatives of major Islamic organisations along with parts of the German left and many experts on Islam have severely criticised this Islamophobic trend. Such an image of Islam and Muslims as the enemy has fed most recently on the horrors of 9/11, and the more frequent outbreaks of militant Islamism since then.

Due to increased immigration in the sixties and seventies, Muslims in Germany have become a social issue of growing significance and have gradually lost their prior marginal status. Meanwhile, Islam is the second largest religious community in Germany, after Christianity. Yet, politicians and media too often hold Islam in general and Muslims in particular to blame for perceived problems related to migration policy, and the integration debate flares up regularly, thus resulting in the fostering of a socially accepted Islamophobia in some quarters. The wide and positive reception of Thilo Sarrazin’s theses is telling.⁷⁵

One study called “The German State of Things”⁷⁶ as well as another commissioned by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation recently discovered that economic prosperity is directly related to applied democracy. The analysis holds that precarious political situations reinforce resentments against people

⁷⁴ Advocates of this thesis, among others, include famous scholars and authors as diverse as Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); and Samuel Phillips Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). See Thomas Naumann, “Feindbild Islam: Historische und theologische Gründe einer europäischen Angst,” in *Islamfeindlichkeit: Wenn die Grenzen der Kritik verschwimmen*, ed. Thorsten Gerald Schneiders (Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft, 2009).

⁷⁵ In his *Deutschland schafft sich ab: Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* [Germany abolishes itself] (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2010), Sarrazin, a member of the Socialist Party of Germany (SPD), predicted the collapse of the German state due to a combination of a drop in the birth rate, an increasing “lower class” and immigration, mainly from countries with significant Muslim populations. He regarded Muslim immigrants as incapable of cultural integration and as inferior by their genetic disposition, due to closed endogamy.

⁷⁶ See Wilhelm Heitmeyer, ed., *Deutsche Zustände 9* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010). The research group led by Wilhelm Heitmeyer regularly brings forth the latest research results (poll results and statistics) on Islam-criticism, Islam-hostility, or Islamophobia. According to a survey published in 2003, 46% of Germans considered Islam a backward religion and about 65% are of the opinion that Muslim culture does not match the Western world. For an analysis of this survey, see Eberhard Seidel, “Die schwierige Balance”, in *Deutsche Zustände 2*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 261–79.

of different provenance: the alleged “other.” In such a situation, the socially disadvantaged as well as large parts of the middle classes call for strong leadership. Metaphorically speaking, the economic situation covers the democratic deficits like a “narcissistic seal”—meaning, “the identification with the strength of the economy and the participation in prosperity compensate for the experienced subjugation.”⁷⁷ Immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants, have become the focal point for further resentments in this debate, and this also had severe repercussions on the 2017 German election, when the right-wing populist, xenophobic, and Eurosceptic “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD) became the third strongest party in Parliament, following the center-right Christian Democrats and the center-left Social Democrats.

The major part of Islam-critical and Islamophobic tendencies in the research on the life of Prophet Muḥammad can be explained in light of these developments. In fact, they are reflections of the increasing constructions of fear. When Luxenberg denies Islam its own written language and Ohlig defines Islam as a Christian sect (maintaining a rediscovery of Jesus, the Christian messiah and son of God, in the figure of the Islamic Prophet), they rob Islam of its agency and uniqueness, and they turn it into their own story. Revisionists such as Pressburg, to a certain extent, flaunt themselves as having recognised what they hold to be the untruth of Islamic history and as presenters of a new, true narrative, in order to bring light to the purported darkness of Islamic history. In so doing, they do service to a stereotypical Euro-centric worldview in which the historicity and agency of “the other” is to be judged and condemned. Thus, insignificant as they are as sources of historical account, they give us at least a valid picture of the political setting of parts of contemporary Europe. The pseudo-academic booklet published by AfD in 2016 is another testimony to an encompassing tradition of ostracism. In about 120 pages, it describes Islam as an ontological, unchangeable entity that seeks to undermine the “German Leitkultur” neglected by the established political parties.⁷⁸

Yet, not all the Orientalist arguments can be easily dismissed as they point to some hermeneutical aporia in Islamic scholarship itself. They call for a new critical investigation unconstrained by aprioristic or hostile presumptions. Hence, the critical and dispassionate search for knowledge

⁷⁷ Oliver Decker et al., *Die Mitte in der Krise: Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2010* [The mainstream in crisis: Right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany 2010] (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2011), 137–38. Also see Oliver Decker et al., *Ein Blick in die Mitte: Zur Entstehung rechtsextremer und demokratischer Einstellungen in Deutschland* (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2008).

⁷⁸ Michael Henkel, *Der Islam: Fakten und Argumente* (Erfurt: AfD, 2016).

based on rigorous unbiased and non-polemical contextual examinations of legal, exegetical, *maghāzī* as well as poetic sources of the first and early second century *hijrah* may help in achieving a more objective understanding of the historical reality of the life and faith of Prophet Muḥammad.⁷⁹ Tor Andrae's distinction between "functional prophethood," that is, the beginning of prophetic mission at a certain point in time, and "ontological prophethood," meaning that prophetic mission was ordained from the beginning of time,⁸⁰ might be as helpful in this endeavor towards historical coherence, as critically comparing between theology and history and their hermeneutical potential,⁸¹ or giving voice to variant readings and traditions hitherto neglected and disregarded for different reasons.⁸² As Marco Schöller from the University of Münster argues, secondary traditions on the Prophet do not *per se* represent an independent body of information but are themselves informed by the Qur'ānic text as they can become exegetical, and therefore tend to be retro-projected. Any historical information found in the *sīrahs* is, accordingly, a by-product of this biographical process.⁸³ Do we really have to surrender to an "indefinite tolerance of the source-material for radically different historical interpretations,"⁸⁴ which might have resulted from various social constructions of *sīrah*? To quote the historian and cultural scientist Jörn Rüsen, "By remembering, interpreting, and representing the past peoples understand their present-day life and develop a future perspective on themselves and their world. 'History' in this fundamental and anthropologically universal sense is a

⁷⁹ Whether the recently established centres of Islamic theology in German universities can be helpful in this regards, is yet to be seen. Cf. Jamal Malik, "Integration of Muslim Migrants and the Politics of Dialogue: The Case of Germany," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 33, no. 4 (2013): 495–506. Also see the contributions to the International Conference "Historicity and Islamicity: Perceptions of Early Islamic History in Contemporary Muslim Thought," at the Center for Islamic Studies, Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, December 12–14, 2019, https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/82093441/ContentPage_82093441.

⁸⁰ For example, see Adrien Leites, "Sīra and the Question of Tradition," in *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of Sources*, ed. Harald Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 49–66.

⁸¹ For a sketch on epistemological tenors and the "hermeneutical problem between a historical and a normative research on Muhammad," see Amir Dziri, *Sira: Einführung in die Prophetenbiografie* [Sira: Introduction to the biography of the Prophet] (Freiburg im Breisgau: Kalam Verlag, 2014), 15–38.

⁸² An example is the unearthing of traditions that differ from what became mainstream. Cf. Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 1:34–35; see Marco Schöller, "Sīra and Tafīr: Muḥammad al-Kalbī on the Jews of Medina," in *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of Sources*, ed. Harald Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 18–44; and also Gregor Schoeler, "Mūsā b. 'Uqbas Maghāzī," in *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of Sources*, ed. Harald Motzki (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 67–97.

⁸³ Marco Schöller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998).

⁸⁴ See Michael Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma: A Source-Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 155–56.

culture's interpretive recollection of the past serving as a means to orient the group in the present."⁸⁵

Accordingly, a historical narrative, constructed on the basis of historiographical writings such as *sīrah*, never merely represents facts of the past, but always reflects the context of its creation: Historicisation is always informed by the past, enmeshed in the questions and interests of the present and intended to serve the future. The evolution of the *sīrah* genre itself points to that direction. Since the organisation of knowledge is attached to contemporary societal discourses, such a history can hardly be entirely objective or neutral. Therefore, it seems proper to interrogate the ingenious processes of the construction and establishment of *master narratives* of a dominant normative history as against divergent "sect histories" or in relation to the historical constructs of other traditions. Similarly, the role of memory and of the *narration of history* as a conscious and non-innocent process needs to be re-valued. This is particularly true given when historians themselves get involved in a multi-layered process of making sense of synchronous and diachronic issues in which the narrative inevitably becomes rhetorical and the representation of the past gets involved in a discourse of power. And if the historical narrative becomes feeble, another term, equally important for religious legitimacy, has to be interrogated: *tradition*. Instead of regarding tradition as a firm and authoritative part of religious and cultural identity, scholars of religious studies tend to emphasise the cultural and discursive limitations of what is actually negotiated as tradition. In their view, the prophetic cycle is the case in point: appointment, proclamation, resistance and expulsion, combat and victory may have, over time, become *topoi* and important ingredients for a re-construction of Muḥammad's message. They argue that it is not a historical record of things that happened which matters, but rather the construal of the past, which can be ascertained in historical sources that must be investigated. A hermeneutic caution would, therefore, be well in place.

Thus, the current German research on the life of Muḥammad is less concerned with the person of the Prophet himself but rather with the question of the sources. Taking into account the historical contingencies revealed in different narratives, it mainly asks, "What can we know?"⁸⁶ rather than "What do we know?," thus reflecting on the complex processes of translation, of forgetting and of the reproduction of memory. Along several dimensions in

⁸⁵ Jörn Rüsen, "Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparative Historiography," *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (1996): 8.

⁸⁶ Schöller handles this question in his *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie*.

the more recent German research on the *sīrah*, the “critical spirit seems to have been even further spurred by the political disputes.”⁸⁷



⁸⁷ Weidner, “Eine Anti-Biographie des islamischen Religionsgründers.”