

Early Islam: An Alternative Scenario of its Emergence

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Introduction

If intellectual curiosity, a fascination with the orient, or the growing need for experts of the Middle East prompts the decision of high school graduates to apply for the study course *Islamic Studies*, they will be taught roughly the same outline of a narrative about the origin of this religion as generations of students before them: a man later known as the Prophet Muḥammad was born in Mecca around 570 CE, received his first revelation at about the age of forty, founded the religion of Islam and started a new empire, which just one generation after his death had become the dominant power of the whole region due to the relentless war-like efforts of his political and religious successors, the caliphs. Islamologists have of course done a lot of “fine-tuning,” occasionally modifying the traditional picture, albeit only to a limited extent. The core outline, however, has only been questioned by very few mavericks of the academic community. Summarily, such scholars are labeled *revisionists*, although their findings and conclusions might differ greatly. The first generation of them appeared in the 1970s – people like Günter Lüling (see 1974; 2003), John Wansbrough (see 1978), and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (see 1977), but their opinions and research results have mostly been left out of standard works¹ concerning Islamic Studies. At best, in some specialized articles they are mentioned as outsiders. But up to now they can hardly be found in introductory books, scholarly overviews, or encyclopedia articles.

Ever since, a number of monographs and, even more important, anthologies have been published which at least partially belong to this category (“partially” because not all authors

reject the traditional report completely). Chronologically the first series to be mentioned are the anthologies edited by Ibn Warraq (1998; 2000; 2002), in which he assembled both classic articles, many of which he translated himself, and modern contributions. The second series was originally published in German. Both the series and the academic society editing them are named Inârah. One of the founding members of the society was Christoph Luxenberg (pseud.), whose book *Die syro-aramäische Lesung des Koran* (2000; 2007) aroused worldwide interest and led to both apologetic and polemical reactions. So far, seven anthologies have appeared in German, of which two have been translated into English, and an eighth is forthcoming (Ohlig and Puin 2005; 2009; Ohlig 2007; 2013; Gross and Ohlig 2008; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2014).

Several renowned scholars have written about Luxenberg's findings, including in three large anthologies (Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx 2009; Reynolds 2008; 2011). Although Inârah anthologies are often mentioned, **the only Luxenberg** is dealt with in detail, in part, perhaps because many of the anthologies articles are not in English. The fact remains that the entirely new scenario for the emergence of early Islam that has been sketched by this group of researchers is hardly considered. This chapter aims at rectifying this neglect, by summarizing at least some of the main contributions of Inârah authors and presenting the outline of an alternative history of early Islam.²

The Traditional Report and Hard Evidence

The subheading of this section contains the words "hard evidence," an expression to be taken literally. What is meant are tangible objects like coins, inscriptions, and other artefacts, not literary texts written centuries after the purported events. Their importance for sound historical research can best be explained by having a closer look at Volker Popp's work (2009a).

Popp's point of departure is the approach of the famous German historian of Rome, Theodor Mommsen. Mommsen was aware that not everything Roman historiographers wrote could be taken at face value. Every student of Latin knows that Livy's books are full of myths and fairy tales. So in order to find out "what really happened," he started to collect Roman coins, or at least their plaster casts. His collection then enabled him to draw up a list of names and dates which could be assumed to be historical, as coins are undoubtedly contemporary *prima facie* pieces of evidence. As objects of everyday use, the information found on them was accessible to everybody, a fictitious ruler on a coin is therefore unthinkable. Moreover, they are *not conservative* as has sometimes been claimed: from the days of antiquity to modern times one of the first things a new ruler or regime does is to strike new coins, with new symbols and new slogans. If, therefore, Mommsen found that a Roman historian wrote about a certain consul of a certain year, and the coins of that year display other names, he could be certain that in this case the historian had either made a mistake or intentionally falsified history. His list of titles, names, and dates on coins thus provided the framework for his *Roman History* (Mommsen 1854–1856), especially regarding the sequence of consuls and later emperors. A similar method is standard in Medieval Studies: There are many knights or small towns for whom we do not possess written documents, but if their names appear on coins with a date, then they can be assumed to be historical. Thus coins allow for the drawing of a historical map, which provides the outline history of a region.

Popp applied this time-tested method to early Islam and came to astonishing results: Most coins which are considered "Islamic" have a date in the form of a number, a mint name, and a "name," which can, however, also be interpreted as a title or a motto. The coins give us dependable information about where which ruler exerted power. Moreover, we can state that

where there is no minting activity, there is no orderly government. The explanation often adduced, e.g., for the late attestation of coins from Mecca, that early Islamic rulers had “no time to have coins struck” cannot be accepted; as from the days of early antiquity no new ruler could claim to be “in power” without coins displaying symbols of the regime change.

The oldest coins mentioning the form MHMD/T are from the Persis and can be dated to the late 680 CE. The first mint activities considered Islamic, however, started a few decades earlier, around the year 641, interestingly the same year as the death of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641). Islamic tradition ascribes considerable kerygmatic importance to this undoubtedly important historical figure: the Prophet is said to have written letters to him, alleged autographs of which are still discussed on the internet³ and shown in museums. Another striking coincidence is this Byzantine Emperor’s devastating victory against the Sassanian Empire. On the brink of utter destruction and to the surprise of his contemporaries, he and his Arab vassals managed to win the decisive battle against the Sassanians in the year 622, the year which marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Syriac sources talk about the “year of the Arabs (*tayyāye*),” because his Arab vassals gained considerable autonomy after this battle. The Islamic calendar begins with the alleged emigration (*hijra*) of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina, also in 622.

The Robert Kerr, however, has given a different etymological explanation of the term *hijra* (2014b). According to him the term does not designate the “emigration” or “flight,” but is derived from the well-attested root *h-j-r*, in the Syriac *mhaggrāye* (Hagarenes, i.e., Arabs). The “*hijrī*” year would therefore be nothing else but the Arabic equivalent of the Syriac “year of the Hagarenes / Arabs.” Only later was it re-interpreted as the year of the *emigration*. Moreover, it

seems quite awkward to start a new calendar with the commemoration of a flight, considering the many victories afterwards.

Contrary to what is commonly believed, and partially due to translations like in Hoyland's often-mentioned book (1997), early Christian contemporary sources never talk about *Muslims* and rarely about Arabs, but usually about Hagarenes, Saracens, and Ishmaelites. To translate these terms as "Muslims" is not appropriate. Uwe F. Schmidt enumerated the first attestations of the terms *islām* and *muslim* in European languages (forthcoming), and the earliest attestation for the term *muslim* can be found in the *Book of Ceremonies* of the Emperor Porphyrogennetos (r. 945–959): *exousiastès tòn mousoulēmitôn*, more than three centuries after the first "Muslims" allegedly came into contact with the West. The first attestation of "Islam" is even later.

Another argument adduced by Popp to demonstrate that the Islamic calendar is a later invention is the oldest inscription left by a caliph. It is the inscription in the baths of Hammat Gader, dated 42/662–663. Apart from the fact that it is written in Greek and not in Arabic, the date is given according to three alternative methods: the dating *kat' arabas* – "according to the Arabs," often equated with the *hijrī* year,⁴ the dating according to the city history, and finally the dating according to the Byzantine calendar (the so-called *indiction*).

What made Popp question the overall veracity of traditional Islamic historiography, however, is not only what *can* be found on coins, but also what *cannot* be found. The oldest coin struck in Mecca stems from the 'Abbāsids and is from the year (of the Arabs) 202. The question whether Islam emerged in Mecca and Medina will be treated in more detail below. Other examples are the descendants of Mu'āwiya, his son Yazīd and grandson Mu'āwiya II, for whom there is no coinage at all.

Thus, unlike many traditional Islamologists, who adhere to the outline of Islamic history as described by non-contemporary works by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Ibn Hishām (d. 834), Ibn Iṣḥāq (d. 768), al-Wāqidī (d. 822), Ibn Saʿd (d. 845), al-Bukhārī (d. 870), Muslim (d. 875), etc., Popp was even more suspicious of Islamic historiographers than Mommsen had been of Livy. If a place name appears on a coin, it can be assumed to be the name of a mint, e.g., Shiraz, Darabjird, Marw/Merv, and if a number appears, it can be a date. So these are two coordinates which allow a location on a timeline and a map. Names on coins might be either the names of governors, princes etc., or alternatively not names, but titles or mottos. Whenever Popp looked up these names mentioned by al-Ṭabarī and did not find them, he believed the coins to be *prima facie* evidence rather than a historian who had lived centuries after the purported events. In many cases, names did appear in al-Ṭabarī, but not on coins. These figures Popp believed to be literary inventions. Additional skepticism was prompted by the fact that the sources of the traditional Islamic literature often display very divergent views of historical events, descriptions etc. (Gilliot 2008; 2012; Kalisch 2009; 2014; Puin 2008; 2014; Plato forthcoming).

So the question arises: why al-Ṭabarī would invent people or whole historical sequences? The answer is that the ideology of *his own era* required corroboration by a sequence of rulers which resembled a sequence that the readers were familiar with, as part of their collective memory. So the saga of Muʿāwiya and his offspring is similar to the structure of biblical narratives of the Book of Kings (Wellhausen 1902: iv), where the father and founder of a dynasty, who was judged an unjust ruler, was succeeded first by a tyrannic son and then by a weakling as a grandson, which concluded the downfall of his family. This is not history, but a *topos* the aim of which was to demonstrate the intervention of God in history.

What ideological reinterpretation means, can be demonstrated with a modern example. In the Soviet Union (and nowadays in Russia) several encyclopedias have appeared which contain articles about figures of Russian history, such as Stalin, Lenin, and Trotsky. The description of Stalin and Trotsky and the way their activities are judged differs enormously in articles in different editions even of the same encyclopedia. In one edition, from the 1950s, “Trotsky” did not even appear as an entry, but “trotskism” did. A similar attitude can be observed everywhere and at all times. Today, a history of the British Empire would be written with a very critical and politically correct mindset (“what have we done to them!”), whereas a hundred years ago it would have praised the conquests (“carry the white man’s burden!”). A good historian must be aware that historiography might tell you more about the *era when it was written* than about the *era it purports to describe*.

When al-Ṭabarī invented or erased figures, it was to make history fit into the picture of his concept of a caliphate. Irregularities, however, had been discovered a long time before Popp. When George Carpenter Miles wrote his numismatic history of Rayy (1938), he sometimes found up to four different coins struck in the same year by different groups that tried to occupy or rule this city. Miles followed this up in the literature and found that in most cases only one or two of these rulers appear in the literary sources. Another example is the numismatist John Walker from the British Museum concluded that many inscriptions on the coins differ from the content of the traditional report (1941). A third example is Josef van Ess. In his prestigious history of religious thought of early Islam he admits that there are hardly any early witnesses and, for the first century after the *hijra*, no more than a few inscriptions. Furthermore, he considered all (later) Islamic texts as “under suspicion of projection” (1991: viii). Consequently, he abstained from presenting the first century at all.

Correlating the coin inscriptions with the literary tradition one often comes to the conclusion that the content of the inscription cannot be reconciled with the literary text. So there are two ways of dealing with such numismatic evidence: One can “read the literary text into the coin inscription,” filling in every gap with “knowledge” stemming from the historians, conjecturing, reinterpreting, and sometimes intentionally ignoring disturbing facts. Or one can break free from preconceptions and start from scratch.

According to the traditional report the Islamic conquest affected a territory which equaled that of the Roman Empire, stretching within a century from Spain and the shores of the Atlantic to Central Asia. Whether this conquest really took place the way it was described is another question of import. The conquest of Spain has aroused the interest of another Inârah member, Johannes Thomas.

Most purported events of the conquest, as in the east, were described by historians only centuries after they allegedly happened. Furthermore, the reports differ considerably in geographical and other details. Already Albrecht Noth found out that the earliest report about the conquest in Arabic, the *Futūḥ Misr* of Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, uses topoi from eastern descriptions of the conquest (*al-fataḥ*). As we have seen, many of these topoi ultimately go back to models stemming from the Old Testament. The sources written in Latin are usually dated around the 8th century. Thomas showed that the view expressed in a recent Spanish publication that this text is the report of a “new convert to Islam” or that at least that it had been influenced by a Muslim dignitary, is untenable due to the material content of the text. Moreover, it is conspicuous that these texts assume the location of Mecca to be in Mesopotamia. Furthermore, central aspects of the biography of the Prophet were obviously not known to the authors. The Mozarabic Chronicle mainly follows the model of late Latin historiographers, especially Isidor of Seville on the one

hand, and apocalyptic and eschatological patterns, as for example can be found in Isaiah, on the other. Details about the religious environment or about the per capita tax for non-Muslims (*jizya*) cannot be found in these texts. The term “Christiani” appears rather as an ethno-political category than as a religious one, comparable to “Muslims” in the Bosnian war or “Catholics” in Northern Ireland. The term exclusively designates inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula, not adherents of the religion in general. In later chronicles from Asturias no new religion is mentioned, instead they talk about a “Mohammedan rite.”

The often publicized opinion that the year 711 marked a radical change in the composition of the population of Spain, that the majority now belonged to Berber and Arab tribes which introduced their egalitarian tribal culture, is rather due to romantic notions than to facts. Neither place names, nor ethnological research or material evidence support this view (Thomas 2008). Furthermore, Thomas demonstrated that the alleged tribal conflicts of the 8th century, which appear in narrations, go back to literary topoi (Marj Rāhiṭ) rather than to historical events (2010).

As in the east, there is no archeological trace of any of the battles found in the description of the conquest. The decay of cities in Spain in the 5th and 6th centuries is paralleled by a similar development all around the Mediterranean and goes back to the fall of the Roman Empire rather than to an Islamic invasion. On the other hand, the architecture in 8th century Spain that some archeologists label “Islamic” is not significantly different from the remains of the Visigothic era (Thomas forthcoming). That the religion of the newcomers cannot have been *Islam as we know it today* is visible e.g. in the architecture of the famous Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba. Like a number of former mosques in Toledo it does not face towards Mecca. Moreover, in heterodox

writings like the work of Ibn Masarra for example, Iranian, Gnostic, Christian, Judeo-Christian and Jewish influence can be found (Thomas 2008; 2009).

What cannot be denied is that there was an influx of Berbers who brought their Ibādī, Ṣufrī, and Khārijī ideas with them, which display similarities to Latin Donatism and whose presence in North Africa is attested even after the Arab conquest. So what did take place was not an “Islamic Conquest,” but rather a gradual demographic and political change, which led to the spreading of a new doctrine, which was still in the process of its emergence as a new religion.

The research of Raymond Dequin (2012) concentrates on the era of the ‘Abbāsids. His findings show that they were in fact a branch of the Umayyads. The new rulers intentionally modified their genealogy in order to separate from the rest of the family; instead they created family links to the alleged Prophet. To give such a fictitious family genealogy⁵ more theological weight, the concepts of *muḥammad* (“the praised one”) as well as that of *‘alī* (“the elevated one”) were historicized. According to Dequin, both terms were originally gnostic concepts denoting redemptory figures, originally going back to Christological notions.

Moreover, Dequin has found evidence that it was not until after the ‘Abbāsids had taken over power that the pilgrimage to Mecca was established. It should be added that the relevant passages in the Qur’ān allegedly describing the *ḥajj* are far from clear⁶ and allow completely different interpretations to that of the description of a pilgrimage. Moreover, the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 685–705) was reproached for having diverted the pilgrimage from Mecca to Jerusalem (Goldziher 1971: 44–45). It should be remembered that he was the man who had substituted Arabic for Greek and Persian in the financial bureaus and that he had issued an Islamic gold coinage, replacing the Byzantine *denarius* with its image of the Emperor by a Muslim *dinar* with Qur’ānic quotations (Gibb 1960–2007: 77). It seems rather unlikely that a

ruler whose obvious aim it was to spread the language and the message of the Qur'ān should so blatantly try to weaken the new religion Islam. Considering the missing material evidence from Mecca and the questionable appearance of the place name “Mecca” in the Qur'ān (see below), it seems more likely that he did not “divert” the *ḥajj* pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but rather that it had originally been a pilgrimage to this town, and that only later was it ostensibly “re-directed” to its fictitious original location. According to Dequin, the model for this new holy site was the Buddhist Nowbahār (*nava vihāra*) in Balkh (Afghanistan), whose description by later Arabic authors strongly reminds the unbiased reader of the Ka'ba (see below).

Another observation made by Dequin concerns the biography of the Prophet. The main source of information for all later descriptions of the life of Muḥammad is the *Sīrat Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Iṣḥāq. The origins of the book are shrouded in mystery, the Arabic text mostly used today is the much changed, both abridged and extended edition of Ibn Hishām. The nearly two centuries that separate the purported events described from the oldest version of the book disqualify it as a primary historical source. But even if the book should contain *salvation history* rather than *history*, the question still remains whether the figures described and the details of the biography might not have a historical kernel.

One model for the depiction of the Prophet assumed by Dequin is Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī (700–755), the man who, according to the traditional report, toppled the Umayyad dynasty and paved the way for the 'Abbāsids. About his origin numerous and vastly different versions can be found. The stories told about him display considerable parallels to details narrated in the *sīra*: Having been a successful military leader in a number of conflicts including a Khorasanian rebellion and power struggles within the Umayyad dynasty, he might have inspired the description of Muḥammad's raids. Moreover, he is said to have led a secret society in

Khorasan, which might have been the model for the *Anṣār* of the Prophet. His daughter was called Fāṭima, whose descendants claimed religious and political legitimation due to their descent, possibly the model for the Prophet's daughter of the same name (Dequin 2012).

The biography of the Prophet triggered the emergence of all later works of traditional Islamic historiography. Dequin assumes that the composition of the *sīra* as well as the well-known genealogies of Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī, known as *Jamharat an-Nasab*, had been commissioned by the ruling elite. These works were not published in many copies, but served as an internal court document on which other historical works could be based. This provided an outline that could be fleshed out with details and at the same time guaranteed the avoidance of too many internal contradictions.

Dequin opines that the establishment of an “Abbāsīd worldview” and its organized proliferation goes back to the Barmakids, who up to the era of Hārūn al-Rashīd promoted the composition of standard works of all fields and disciplines, frequently based on translations, but mostly anxious to give the impression that the new publication was an Arabic original.

The Enigmatic Qur'ān

Transmission History

Several Inārah authors have spent years investigating some of the oldest manuscripts and especially the variants and different readings (*qirā'āt*) to be found in them (G.R. Puin 2008; E. Puin 2008; 2009; 2010; 2012; 2014; Fedeli 2009; 2012; Small 2008; Gallez and Lamsiah 2014). The Qur'ān is said to have been transmitted orally and committed to writing only at the time of the caliph 'Uthmān. The variants, however, tell a different story. In many, but not in all cases, they represent phonetically very different readings, which go back to the same consonant

skeleton without diacritic dots, the so-called *rasm*. As Gerd-R. Puin pointed out, if the Islamic notion of *tawātur* (widespread oral transmission) is correct, then the early reciters of the Qurʾān must have memorized phonetically very different variants (e.g., *yayʿas* vs. *yatabayyan*), which a generation later was first written down and miraculously led to the same *rasm*. The most logical explanation is that the primary medium of transmission was not the memory of reciters, rather *written texts* or *manuscripts* (without diacritical dots), which later were interpreted in different ways.⁷

That the dogma of the oral transmission of the Qurʾān has been doubted before. Mingana mentions the problem of the Arabic name *Yaḥyā*, which appears in the Qurʾān (e.g., Q 3:39, 6:85; 19:9, 19:12, 21:90), which corresponds to the Greek name John / Johannes, the Syriac form of which is *Yuḥannā* (1927: 177). The two forms are phonetically very different, but a comparison of the written forms brings us to the solution: *yahyā* (يحيى) and *yuḥannā* (يحنى) have exactly the same *rasm*, the only difference lies in the diacritical points. It was a case of *mis-reading*, not of *mis-hearing*, which led to the different forms of the name.

One or Several Authors?

For Western scholars the question of authorship of the Qurʾān is perhaps the most sensitive issue regarding early Islam. Many modern scholars are anxious to find a formula that sounds scientific and at the same time does not irate Muslim believers. Angelika Neuwirth for example considers the Qurʾān to be something like the minutes of a dialogue between the early Islamic community (“*Gemeinde*”) and the proclaimer (“*Verkünder*”) (2010).⁸ This looks more like mental gymnastics than good scholarship: Every verse of the Qurʾān was either written or at least given its final shape by a *human being*, not by some intangible “*dialogue*.” And the

question is legitimate whether those who gave this final shape to Qur'ānic verses were *one* or *many* (i.e., more than one), irrespective of the question whether they followed divine inspiration or their own creativity. Moreover, for a Western scholar the general approach *should always be* to assume a *human author*, not divine intervention.

The impression one gets after an unbiased look at the different parts of the Qur'ān is not that it is the work of *one* author. The short surahs of the final *juz'* of the Qur'ān, the so-called *juz' ammā*, and the juridical parts of Medinan surahs display a drastically different style.

Another problem becomes clear when the Qur'ān is not read in *Arabic letters*, but in *transliteration* (see Zirker 2013). In many cases a large number of relatively short verses, which cover not more than a third of the page's width, are followed by one verse of up to six (!) lines, a good example being Q 74:31. The only conclusion is that such a verse is a later addition.

Moreover, there are many surahs (according to some calculations up to 29), which do not contain the divine name *Allāh*, but *rabb* instead. A third designation for God is *rahmān*. In biblical studies it is common to refer to the *Yahwist* and *Elohistic* texts of the Pentateuch, a distinction based on the use of the respective Hebrew term for God. So it might not be too far-fetched to postulate a set of *Rabbist*, *Rahmanist* and *Allahist* texts in the Qur'ān.

Considering all these facts the question remains what is the common stylistic element of the Qur'ān. Even Neuwirth herself did not present anything except for two features: the Qur'ānic loose rhyme (*saj'*) and a number of typical Qur'ānic expressions like *wa-allāhu ya'lamu wa-antum lā ta'lamūn*^a "God knows and you do not know" at the end of a verse. As these expressions mostly appear without any connection to the rest of the text, they might have been added later to mark a specific text as Qur'ānic.

How the question of authorship might be treated can be exemplified by asking: did the author(s) of the Qur'ān know Hebrew? (Gross. 2014a) To answer it, we can look at an expression to be found in Q 112:1, which also appears in the inscription on the inside of the Dome of the Rock: *qul huwa allāhu aḥad*, “Say: He is God, the One!” It is conspicuous that the normal Arabic word required here would not be *aḥad*, but *wāḥid* or *waḥda-hu*, a form that can be found on early Islamic coins: *lā ilāha illā allāh waḥda-hu*. The possibility that Syriac is the donor language can be excluded, as the form of the word in that language is unspecific: *ḥad*. If, however, we consider the corresponding Hebrew text, Deut. 6:4, we find a parallel: *šma ' yisra 'ēl YHWH elohēnū YHWH eḥad*, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” Even Neuwirth sees this biblical verse as connected to the choice of words in this surah (2010: 200). So it seems plausible to assume that the author of this verse did in fact have at least some knowledge of Hebrew.

The next form we will analyze is the name Isaac, in Arabic *Ishāq* (with a *sīn*), which corresponds to the Hebrew *Yiṣḥāq* (with an emphatic *ṣ*). The Hebrew form means “he laughs” and is explained in Gen. 18:10–12: God announces a son to the centenarian Abraham, which the latter refuses to believe, instead “he laughs”: *wa-y-yiṣḥāq*. In another verse it is his wife who laughs (*tiṣḥāq*). In the Syriac Bible the form is *Īshāq*, as in Arabic with a non-emphatic “s,” and the etymology of the name is obscured, as “he laughed” is *gḥek* in Syriac. So we can be certain that this Arabic name form does not stem from the Hebrew Bible, but from a Syriac source. That the Hebrew text was not known and the etymology not understood by the author of the respective Qur'ānic verse (Q 11:71) becomes clear when we read it: “And his wife, standing by, laughed (*fa-daḥikat*) when We gave her good tidings (of the birth) of Isaac (*Ishāq*).” Although the root of the Arabic verb *daḥika* is the etymological equivalent of the root underlying Hebrew *yiṣḥaq*, this

connection was not seen by the author of this verse. We can be certain that he did not know this text in Hebrew and probably did not understand the language at all. So the probability is very high that these two Qur'ānic verses (Q 112:1; 11:71) presuppose at least two different authors!

The Theology of Early Islam

Karl-Heinz Ohlig, the initiator of Inârah, argues that the theology in the Qur'ān and its view of Jesus – not as the *son of God*, but only as a messenger (*rasūl*), a servant of God (*'abd allāh*), and a praised one (*muḥammad*) – is much older than the concept of Trinity. This concept goes back to the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. So the Qur'ān can be interpreted as defending the old view against the modern Western/Hellenistic interpretation of Jesus as son of God. According to the Nicaean Creed, Jesus is of the *same substance* (“homo-ousios”) as opposed to *a like substance* (“homoī-ousios”) as God, who was thus first seen as a binitarian (and only with later Councils as a trinitarian) deity (Ohlig 2013b). These tenets were already strictly rejected by the ancient Syrian theologians such as Aphrahat (Bruns 1991), as well as later by the Qur'ān. Together with Luxenberg, but for different reasons, Ohlig opines that *muḥammad* – “the praised one” – is originally only an epithet of Jesus. If understood in this way, the sentence from the *shahāda* “*muḥammad rasūl Allāh*” does not mean “and Muḥammad is the Messenger of God,” but “praised be the Messenger of God.” That such a meaning is in accordance with Arabic grammar can be seen when we take the well-known phrase from Christian liturgy (Mt 23:39): *mubārakun al-`ātī bi-smi-al-rabb* (“*benedictus qui venit in nomine domine*,” Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord”). *Mubārak* (“the blessed one”) and *muḥammad* (“the praised one”) can be considered synonyms, but also the second part of the sentence, “he that cometh in

the name of the Lord” is next to synonymous to “he is the Messenger of God,” which would make the second part of the *shahāda* a quotation from the Bible.

Moreover, a short perusal of the coin images examined by Volker Popp (2009a) shows that early Islamic coins are full of Christian symbols, among others, the cross. For Ohlig, the split between Christianity and Islam, i.e., the moment in history when they were felt to be two antagonizing religions, was as late as the year 800 or even later. Therefore we have “Christian” symbols on the oldest coins, but it was not the post-Nicean Trinitarian Christianity we know, but a kind of Christianity which had a concept of Jesus much like that of Islam.

The “Territory of Emergence” of Islam

Mecca and its Attestation in the Qur’ān

It is generally assumed that the place where Islam originated is Mecca, the holy city of Islam. As we have seen, the material evidence for this location is very scanty, the oldest coin stemming from the year 202 AH. Archeological investigation of sites in Mecca was either forbidden or, in modern days, is made impossible due to the building activities of the Saudi government (Destruction n.d). But even in the Qur’ān, there is but one attestation of the alleged name *Makka* and one of an alleged variant: *Bakka*. A number of hypotheses have attempted to account for this (Gross and Ibn Warraq 2014). The most likely explanation for the form *bakka* was put forth by A. Regnier (1939; 2013).

Q 3:96 reads: “*inna ’awwal bayt wuḍī’a li-al-nāsi la-alladhī bi-bakka mubārak wa-hudan li-al-’ālamīn*, “The first House (of worship) appointed for men was that at Bakka, full of blessing and of guidance for all kinds of beings.” Regnier found a parallel in the Book of Psalms (84:6–7): ‘*ōbirê bi-’emeq ha-bbākā’ mā yān yišîû-hû gam-birākôt ya ’iṭeh môreh...*, “Passing through

the valley of Baca they make it a spring; The early rain also covers it with blessings. ...”. The Hebrew expression *bi-‘emeq ha-bbākā* etymologically corresponds to the Aramaic expression in the Pšittā: *bə-‘umqā də-ḥaktā*. In the relevant verses in both the Qur’ān and the Psalms we are dealing with a “blessed” place of worship, not a town: “full of blessing” and “covers it with blessings,” respectively. The corresponding Hebrew and Arabic forms are both from the same root: *b-r-k*. (Qur’ān / Arabic: *mubārak*; Bible / Hebrew: *birākōt*). The Qur’ānic passage is probably a reminiscence of the psalm, by the way the only biblical book mentioned in the Qur’ān by name: *zabūr*.

The form *makka* is only attested in one verse: *wa-huwa alladhī kaffa aydiya-hum ‘an-kum wa-aydiya-kum ‘an-hum bi-baṭn makka min ba‘d ‘an ‘azfara-kum ‘alay-him wa-kāna Allah bi-mā ta ‘malūna baṣīr*. “And it is He Who has restrained their hands from you and your hands from them in the *midst of Makka*, after that He gave you the victory over them. And Allah sees well all that ye do” (Q 48:24; Pickthall 1930). From the context it is not clear what exactly this verse alludes to. The expression *bi-baṭn* does not make it very probable that a town is meant, let alone a holy place. The other Qur’ānic expression often taken as alluding to Mecca, or more specifically the Ka‘ba, is *masjid al-ḥarām*, “the forbidden place of worship,” which is equally unspecific.

To sum up, if we did not know about Mecca from the traditional literature and modern Islam, and instead only possessed the Qur’ān, we would never think of this city as the holy place where the religion of the Islam originated. Robert Kerr provides a lengthy explanation of how Mecca became the holy city of Islam and which traditions helped flesh out the narrative (2014c). Now if it was not Mecca, the question remains where the “territory of emergence” (Gobillot 2008) of Islam *can* be found. The most likely candidate is the region where the first Islamic coins

were minted: the area around Marw (Southern Turkestan on the Silk Road), the city the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik was probably named after: Marw-ān.

Buddhist Elements

The very thought of a historical connection between the emergence of Islam, a *strictly monotheistic* religion, and Buddhism, a religion *without the concept of a personal god* from a place as far away as *India*, seems to be absurd. From a theological or rather philosophical perspective a bigger contrast seems hardly possible. But if we consider the possibility that the territory of emergence of Islam were Arabic speaking pre-Nicaean enclaves on the Silk Road, where all contemporary religions and belief systems came into contact, then links between these two religions become much more plausible (Gross 2008; 2009). However, the differences are so fundamental, that, should there have been an influence of Buddhism on early Islam, then we should not expect this influence to be visible in the *beliefs* and the *ethics* of Islam, but rather in *superficial elements* or *formalities*.

However, when trying to find influences between two religions, we must bear in mind an important caveat: not everything that *looks* similar is linked or even *means* the same. So if we want to find out whether a shared feature goes back to parallel development or borrowing, at least one of the following criteria must be met: (1) The parallels coincide in at least one detail, which does not appear in similar cases; (2) the parallel in Islam contradicts what is normal in this religion; and (3) the parallel is only a parallel between Islam and Buddhism and cannot be found in other religions of the area.

For example, the pilgrimage (*hajj*) is not explicitly described in the Qur’ān, important terms connected to it do not appear or they appear with a different meaning, e.g. *tawāf*, *sa’y*,

‘*umra*.⁹ With all these aforementioned reservations, the following parallels between Buddhism and Islam can be found:

(1) In Q 2:197 we find the expression *al-ḥajj’ashhur ma’lūmāt*, “the pilgrimage (or ‘feast’ (the original meaning of the Hebrew equivalent *ḥāg*) [takes place] during the well-known months.” It is conspicuous that the plural of “month” is used here, which presupposes a minimum of *three months*. As the *ḥajj* takes place only during *one month*, probably something else is meant. The time when most Buddhist young men become monks is the rainy season, which in Buddhism is marked by two big ceremonies. It lasts exactly three months. (2) The so-called *sa’y* (running from Ṣafā to Marwa during the pilgrimage) is an activity totally unknown in normal Islamic life. It has, however, a parallel in Buddhist “walking meditation,” if the pace is slowed. Ṣafā (Aramaic: Rock) might designate Jerusalem (the Dome of the Rock) and Marw-ā (the city on the Silk Road). The run then would symbolize ‘Abd al-Malik’s travel from Marw to Jerusalem.

(3) The clothes to be worn during the pilgrimage have a conspicuous characteristic for men: the right shoulder is uncovered. This is unparalleled in normal Islamic clothing, but exactly resembles Buddhist monks’ robes. For women, the veil, gloves etc. are not only *not obligatory*, as in normal life in many Islamic countries, but *forbidden*. (4) The pilgrims’ clothes are white, and according to one ḥadīth may not be colored with *wars*, a substance which dyes them “between red and yellow,” exactly the range of colors of Buddhist monks of different denominations. White clothes are typical for Buddhist lay followers.

(5) At the beginning of both the pilgrimage and an ordination as a monk the head is shaved and the body perfumed. (6) Both a Buddhist temple and the Ka’ba are circumambulated, a practice normally unknown in Islam. The direction in Buddhism is clockwise, except during

funerals (as in Islam). (7) The description of the Ka‘ba resembles the one of the Nowbahār in Afghanistan, e.g., both buildings are veiled. (8) Some Islamic concepts are not explicitly treated in the Qur’ān, one of them being the *niyya*, “intention.” A similar concept is very important in Buddhism. It is known as *cetanā* (Sanskrit/ Pali: “intention,” a presupposition for the karmic impact of a deed). Another key Buddhist term to be considered in this context is *sammā-sati* and *sati-patthāna* (“mindfulness”).

(9) There are several parallels in the life of Buddha and Muḥammad: Before Buddha’s mother conceived she saw a white elephant in a dream, whereas the Prophet was born in “the year of the elephant” (a story later connected to a military campaign of Abraha from Yemen). (10) According to one tradition, Muḥammad was born, received his first revelation and died on the same day. One of the most important holidays in Buddhism is *Vesākha* (also called “Buddha day”), the day the Buddha allegedly was born, entered the state of houselessness, attained enlightenment and passed away (“parinirvāna”). (11) There is at least one parallel text in the Qur’ān and the Buddhist canon: Q 109 very much resembles the 8th speech of the first part (*Sīlakkhandhavaggapāḷi*) of the so-called Long Discourses (*Dīghanikāya*) of the Pali Canon.

If these features and elements should really go back to Buddhist influence, the question arises why they were introduced. Here a parallel case from Christianity can help: Christmas is originally the holiday of the ancient Roman *sol invictus*, a competing cult of late antiquity. The emperor Constantine had coins struck with the Christogram Chi Rho on one side and the symbol of *sol invictus* on the other. The re-interpretation of the old holiday as the birthday of Christ facilitated conversions from the competitor cult. As newcomers they found something in the new religion that they knew already.

Similarly it is imaginable that these (superficially) Buddhist elements were secondarily introduced into Islam. The fact that during the earliest era of Islam there must have been links between the Arabic speaking world and India is also demonstrated by the oldest dictionary of Arabic, the *Kitāb al-ʿayn*, authored by Khalīl b. Aḥmad. The sequence of letters is not the one current in Arabic or any other Semitic language, but of the sacred language of India: Sanskrit (Plato forthcoming).

Epilogue: Critical Research and the Islamic World

I am aware that both believing Muslims and traditional scholars of Islamic Studies must find the present article irritating. Still I believe that the alternative view of early Islam just sketched is more or less what would emerge from research, if Islam were not one of the major world religions with millions of often bellicose adherents. If we did not possess anything about the history of early Islam but manuscripts and medieval text editions, hard *prima facie* evidence (inscriptions, coins, artefacts, and excavations), and what “the others said about Islam (or rather the *Hagarenes*),” and if the standard historical-critical methods, which a standard in other disciplines, were applied to the letter, then this is roughly the picture with which we would end up.

Of course, the inevitable question both for the scholar and the believing Muslim must arise: what would remain of the religion if the view just described should ever be accepted by mainstream Islam? Fred Donner has the following to say about Islam and Western research:

The implication for those of us who wish to engage in such historical research is that we should go full speed ahead and not trim our sails to placate irate believers. We should, to be sure, try to explain to believers (and to everyone else) exactly why our work is not in

any way a threat to their faith, perhaps along the lines suggested above, and make it clear to them that we do not dispute their right to believe as they wish; ideally, we should have believers as allies in our researches, not as adversaries (2011: 36).

I agree that we should not trim our sails, but I cannot help considering the rest of the quotation as the result of wishful thinking. Of course, one might opine that the “main tenets” of Islam, the assumption of an uncreated creator, of an immortal soul, of afterlife with the reward for good and punishment for bad deeds would not have to be dropped. But would not most believers of Islam claim that faith in the historicity of the Prophet, the Sunna and the Qur’ān as the *unalterable literal word of God* are also “main tenets” of Islam? These truth claims would have to be given up.

In order to see what it means for a religion to come to grips with modern science the example of the Catholic Church, the theory of evolution, and the big bang theory is instructive. It is true that these theories have been accepted by the Vatican, but it is also true that this was a painful process, and that along this path the Church has lost many of its members. In my opinion, good research and free thinking have a precious and costly prerequisite: *doubt*. Precious, because it leads to a constant process of questioning one’s basic assumptions, of never being content with what one has found out so far, and eventually to self-improvement. Moreover, to quote Sir Peter Ustinov, what unites people is not faith, but doubt. But it is also costly, as it leads one to question even one’s basic convictions – including faith. Still I think that the ultimate effects, even on a religion, can be positive: the Catholic Church today is a much more humane and likeable institution than it was during the Renaissance, and it can be hoped that enlightenment for Islam would have a similar effect.

If we observe public “debates” in Islamic countries, e.g. about the ethics of a new law, the marrying age of girls, etc., the usual procedure is that passages from the Qur’ān and its commentaries, the ḥadīth literature, and the *sīra* are adduced to make a point. This would change for the better if the holy book of Islam were no longer the *literal word of God*, but only – as in Christianity – an *inspired* book, and if the traditional literature were considered only books *to be understood within the historical context* in which they were written. Whoever wants every inhabitant of the Islamic world to have access to the achievements of a free, democratic and enlightened society has to start with the historical-critical investigation of the Qur’ān and traditional Islamic literature.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the prestigious handbook of Arabic philology edited by Helmut Gätje (1987).

² The question of the emergence of Classical Arabic, which the society has addressed, will not be discussed. See Markus Gross (2012).

³ It is *communis opinio* in the academic world that they are fakes (for pictures see Muhammad’s Letters n.d.).

⁴ It is described as “perhaps the earliest purely Greek inscription ... with a hijra date” (Islamic Awareness 2007).

⁵ It should also be mentioned that both the Gospel of Matthew and Ibn Ishāq’s biography of the Prophet begin with genealogies.

⁶ See the section on Buddhist elements below.

⁷ There are more reasons to doubt the primarily oral transmission (Gross 2013).

⁸ This notion, in slightly different wording, appears throughout several chapters of her book.

⁹ It might be objected that the verbal roots appear as *ḥajj al-bayt* and *i‘tamara*, but the context does not allow a clear text-inherent interpretation.

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