

## Book Reviews

### In Search of Muhammad: A Review Essay

*Clinton Bennett, In Search of Muhammad, London and New York, Cassell, October 1998, x + 276pp, appendices, indexes, ISBN pb 0-304-70401-6 (16.99 pounds sterling) / hb 0-304-33700-5 (45 strg)*

Christian scholars have long been fascinated and challenged by the figure of Muhammad, the founder of a faith which has represented Christianity's greatest competitor for almost 1400 years. Today, while around thirty-three percent of the world's population identifies itself as broadly Christian, eighteen percent of people in the world adhere to Islam as their faith.<sup>1</sup> Statistics such as these beg many questions, but they are useful at the macro level for various purposes, such as providing an indication of the number of people living today for whom Muhammad is a significant role model and faith guide. Thus if almost one person in five living today considers Muhammad as the founder of his/her faith, it is clearly a valid and necessary exercise for scholars to try and paint a reliable profile of Muhammad in terms of both his historical and theological identity. It is this which Clinton Bennett has set out to do in his recent book *In Search of Muhammad*.

The first challenge faced by an author in writing on Muhammad is that of achieving an original perspective on this much-studied figure. Muslim scholars and writers have produced a plethora of works on the life and legacy of Muhammad,<sup>2</sup> invariably based on the traditional Muslim sources: the Qur'an, the prophetic Traditions (Hadith), the biographical accounts of Muhammad's life (*sira*) as well as a range of other exegetical and narrative sources. Similarly, Muhammad's life has attracted considerable attention from non-Muslim writers, though they have often produced alternative viewpoints to those proposed by Muslim writers by raising important questions about the reliability of the traditional Muslim source materials.<sup>3</sup>

Bennett engages with this challenge by distinguishing between what he terms "insider" (i.e. Muslim) and "outsider" (i.e. non-Muslim) approaches to Muhammad and Islam in previous scholarship. In seeking his own original perspective, he determines at the outset to avoid producing what he sees as a characteristic outsider study, being a non-Muslim himself. He does this by setting a very specific goal in his declared motto (following Wilfred Cantwell Smith): "the aim of an outside scholar writing about Islam is to elicit Muslim approval" (p. 7). Thus Bennett determines to draw on wide-ranging materials in his study, but decides before embarking on that study that the result should be pleasing to a Muslim audience.

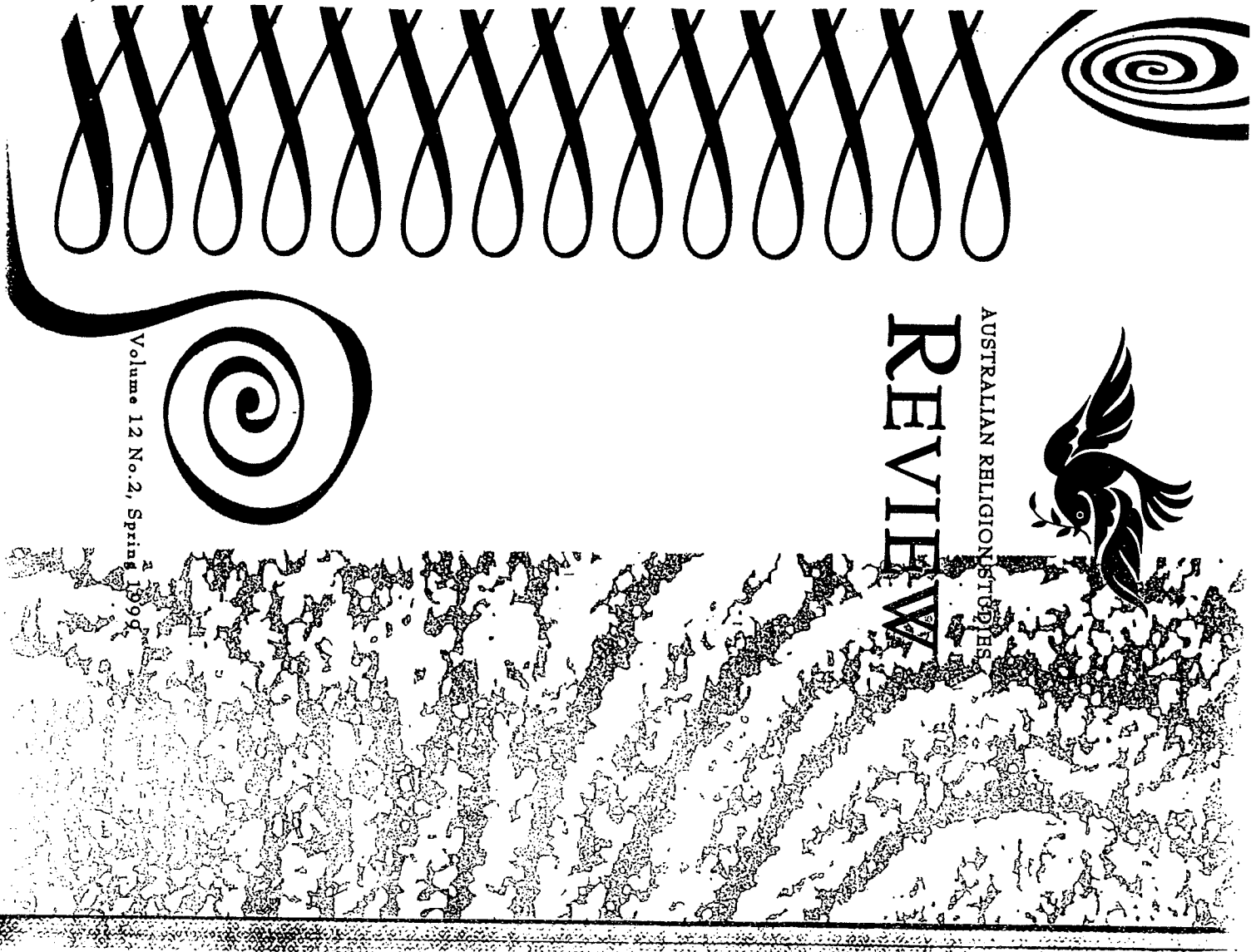
It should be noted that Bennett is aiming to produce a work which will access



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a wide-ranging readership, including a scholarly audience. In this latter context, Bennett's methodology must be questioned. It would be equally questionable if his aim was to elicit Muslim disapproval, for the same reasons. The aim of scholarship should be to seek after historical fact and truth, and the resulting pleasure or displeasure of "insider" communities should not be the primary goal.

Moreover, Bennett's self-declared motto poses a clear risk relating to the nature of the eventual output. Though he may - and does - survey wide-ranging materials, including non-Muslim historical-critical studies, his motto really predetermines that the outcome of his study cannot affirm any materials which are at variance in a significant way with the traditional Muslim sources for the life of Muhammad. In other words, his motto determines in advance that his output will resemble previous Muslim studies - though this time produced by a non-Muslim.

Furthermore, one must ask which Muslims Bennett is seeking to please? Certainly a study which undermines the orthodox view of Muhammad would incur the displeasure of Muslim traditionalists or Islamist radicals. However some Muslim modernists, neo-modernists or nominal Muslims might receive such a study as a stimulating challenge. Bennett's very motto tends to stereotype Muslims and their responses in an unhelpful way. Moreover, it suggests that he is most concerned with seeking the approval of a sub-set of Muslims; namely, those groups given to loud protests whenever their religious dogmas are subjected to challenge.

In chapters one and two, Bennett surveys the traditional Muslim sources for the life of Muhammad. These include Islamic sacred scripture and biographies of Muhammad's life. Bennett asks questions about the reliability of these materials, and in doing so reports on the scholarship of a number of non-Muslim academics, including Wansbrough,<sup>4</sup> Crone<sup>5</sup> and Cook who have been posing searching challenges to these traditional Muslim materials during the last two decades. Bennett refers to these scholars as the group taking a "pessimistic approach" (p. 37), though a far more accurate (and common) description would be to refer to them as the revisionist school of historians on early Islamic history. The revisionist scholars have attracted vehement and emotional reactions from Muslims to their research, including death threats, according to Bennett (p. 21).

Given this hostile Muslim reaction to the revisionist scholars, it is refreshing and deserving of commendation that a scholar with Bennett's motto is ready to address in an unemotional way the revisionist school theories. However, one can't help suspecting that Bennett's motto predetermines to some degree his rejection of these revisionist theories because of the displeasure that they have incurred in Muslim circles. He presents a range of reasons for his rejection of the revisionist approach. For example, in discussing inconsistencies in the *sira* and Hadith records - a favourite subject of the revisionists - Bennett acknowledges that this does pose problems. But he resolves this issue with a common Muslim counter-argument that it is details of the events only, rather than the events described in the accounts, which are open to challenge (p40-41). Furthermore, regarding falsification of Hadith accounts, also a

common charge of the revisionists, Bennett points to the speculative nature of revisionist school claims (p. 59).<sup>6</sup> He concludes, in concert with standard Muslim scholarship, that clearly some Hadith accounts were forgeries, but says there is no reason to believe that all were, stating "much of the [Hadith] material is authentic and historically reliable" (p. 63). In fact, revisionist scholars might generally agree with this, but would add that it is impossible to distinguish the authentic from the unauthentic accounts, a powerful observation which Bennett does not address.

Bennett's rejection of the revisionist research does not extend to a call for a boycott; on the contrary, Bennett recommends that revisionist scholarship should be studied in order to get an alternative viewpoint to the traditional Muslim accounts of early Islamic history. His attention to alternative approaches is not all-encompassing, however. For example, he makes no reference to the ancient Yemeni manuscripts of the Qur'an discovered in 1972 in Sana which are posing new challenges, somewhat supportive of revisionist theories, regarding the traditional Muslim view of the Qur'anic text and thus of the normative claims regarding Muhammad.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Bennett's statement that "The Qur'an is the Qur'an and will remain so eternally..." (p. 44) suggests that he is either unaware of the Yemeni manuscript find, or that the speculative nature of initial comment on these manuscripts is considered by him as being unworthy of attention.

In chapters 3 and 4, Bennett turns his attention to a step by step examination of the leading biographies of Muhammad produced by non-Muslim writers from the 7<sup>th</sup> century until today. He begins by observing that "... the context in which people write influences both their agenda and their attitude" (p. 69). This is indeed a pertinent observation, and one which applies as much to him as to earlier writers. His own approach clearly reflects prevailing trends in his own postmodernist pluralist society where minority voices are clearly amplified, often by members of majority groups. Thus Bennett reports that the Muslim Caliph Walid (705-715) destroyed churches and forced Christians to use Arabic in place of Greek (p. 71). His own comment on this is "Positively, this meant that Christians were subsequently able to play a fuller part in the intellectual life of the 'Abbasid Khalifate'" (p. 71). Here his motto flies at full mast, and he sounds like a Muslim apologist, straining to put a positive spin on an event which really deserves criticism. He has perhaps found the voice of the "insider", but many "insiders" themselves would be uncomfortable providing such knee-jerk support to what was clearly the oppressive actions of a conquering power. Bennett presents a useful survey of early Christian writers on Islam, though there is rarely any doubt where his sympathies lie when the Christian writer in focus engages in negative comment on Muhammad. Interestingly, he presents a more positive view of the Crusades than can be found in Muslim scholarship, and agrees with Watt that the deleterious impact of the Crusades has been over-estimated (p. 85-86). In moving on to more recent non-Muslim biographies of Muhammad, Bennett comments that "... the birth of serious non-Muslim scholarship of Islam begins with the Renaissance..." (p. 93). He seems to measure the seriousness of scholarship

according to the degree of priority accorded to Islamic sources. This appeals in one sense, in that scholarship should certainly be regarded with suspicion if it automatically dismisses Islamic source materials as being unreliable. By the same token, an uncritical acceptance of Islamic sources as authoritative seems to beg many questions as well, as discussed by the revisionist scholars.

In chapters five and six Bennett turns his attention to Muslim perspectives on the life of Muhammad. He undertakes a useful and well-researched survey of the concept of leadership within Sunni and Shi'ite Islam, and also deals with Sufi doctrines relating to leadership and the role of Muhammad within mystical thought. This is supplemented by a brief examination of writings on this theme by Islamic theologians, philosophers and political scientists. Bennett then puts on his anthropological hat and reports on a fascinating series of conversations about Muhammad which he had with diverse types of Muslims: urban and rural mosque authorities, a Sufi, and a liberal Muslim. The perceptions of these Muslims are certainly germane to the author's overall goal, yet the sudden change in style from scholarly discussion to popular newspaper anecdote is somewhat intrusive, and his method of reporting these conversations could have benefited from more skilful blending with the remainder of his book.

In his conclusion, the author assembles ingredients for what he terms "a Postmodern Theology of Religions". Here Bennett is trying to reconcile his own Christian faith with the faith of Islam in developing a view of Muhammad which will be acceptable to both Christians and Muslims. He begins with a lengthy discussion of the Rushdie affair, which again is germane to the discussion of perceptions of Muhammad, and which is perhaps more positive towards the *Saranic Verses* than many Muslims would be comfortable with. Then, turning his attention to the traditional choice offered by scholars and missionaries between Christ and Muhammad, Bennett asks "Is there any possibility that we are faced not with a choice between rivals but with complementary exemplars, both rooted in divine self-disclosure?" (p. 229). This is consistent with a comment made early in his book that "... we know much less about Jesus than we do about Muhammad" (p. 2). Bennett adds "... I do not know how the Qur'an was communicated by God through Muhammad, but I can accept that it was..." (p. 236).

These conclusions by Bennett seem on the surface to represent a compromise, the kind of compromise which is consistent with a multi-faith pluralist ideology prevalent in postmodern western society. However, one must question just how much of a compromise it really is. Islamic doctrine itself teaches that Christ and Muhammad are "complementary exemplars, both rooted in divine self-disclosure". Islamic doctrine would agree that "... we know much less about Jesus than we do about Muhammad" - though this statement only holds if we accept the authenticity of the traditional Islamic source materials, which have been so seriously challenged by revisionist scholarship. Moreover, many Muslims would themselves make the same statement as Bennett that "... I do not know how the Qur'an was communicated by

God through Muhammad, but I can accept that it was..."

In essence, Bennett's conclusions are consistent with Islamic doctrine, but inconsistent with orthodox Christian doctrine. The one big area of doctrine where Bennett articulates a belief which would not "elicit Muslim approval", to repeat his motto, relates to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Bennett comments "What remains problematical for me is Muslim denial of Christ's crucifixion. This event is central to my faith. I have not addressed this issue in detail..." (p. 238). One must assume that this has not been addressed in substance as it is virtually impossible to reconcile with Bennett's stated motto.

Overall, this work poses serious methodological problems from a scholarly perspective. While populist writing may allow an author to decide to win approval from a particular audience before commencing writing, academic scholarship does not and should not allow this latitude to an author. On the positive side, Bennett has assembled a wide range of useful information relating to perceptions of Muhammad throughout history held by both Muslims and non-Muslims. As such his book should serve as a useful database for future research. However, Bennett's conclusions were really decided from the outset, as a result of his decision to set his aim as eliciting Muslim approval. In this context, readers should see this book as reflecting Bennett's personal journey in interfaith relations, but not as providing a blueprint for Christian-Muslims discussion of the role of Muhammad.

Peter G. Riddell

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## Endnotes

1. Preston D. Hunter, *Major Religions Ranked by Number of Adherents* (1999), [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html) (downloaded 24 May 1999).
2. Refer, for example to Muhammad Ali, *The Living Thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad* (London, Cassell, 1948); Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Lahore, Suhail Academy, 1983) and Rafiq Zakaria, *Muhammad and the Qur'an* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991).
3. See, for example, Tor Andrae, *Muhammad, the Man and his Faith* (London, George, Allen and Unwin, 1936); Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford, OUP, 1983) and F E Peters *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1994).
4. John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford, OUP, 1977)
5. Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987)
6. It is true that revisionist research contains much speculative theorising, and for this reason I too am unconvinced by much comment produced by revisionist scholars. However, I firmly believe that this school is right to pose searching questions about the reliability of Muslim traditional materials, questions which are difficult for Muslim scholars to ask themselves

because of hostile reactions from within their communities.

7. For a useful summary of research into these manuscripts, refer Toby Lester, "What is the Koran?", *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999. For a vitriolic Muslim response to this research, refer Aisha Geissinger, "Orientalists plot against the Qur'an under the guise of academic study and archive preservation", *Crescent International*, 28/5 (16-31 May 1999), p. 6.

#### Cosmos and Society in Oceania. Explorations in Anthropology

Daniel de Coppet and André Iteanu (eds) Berg, Oxford and Washington DC.

1995. vi+338pp

A not uninteresting collection. De Coppet and Iteanu work here somewhat under the shadow of Louis Dumont, author of *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966), and want to plot how preconceived levels of cosmic and social valency mirror each other, even in the apparently 'egalitarian' societies of Melanesia. Each contributor makes an important case. Alfred Gell writes on Polynesian back-and-front tattooing as the construction of another necessary body, to make up for intrinsic male incompleteness in contrast to females and to take on a social body for both war and marriage. Christina Toren explains Fijian sacrifices and cannibalism, among other ways by analysing the cosmogonic myth of two men who, sacrificing themselves to God, "become like chiefs" (:63). Nancy Munn mulls over the memory worlds of Kaluli songs presented in the context of the famous gisaro dances (already studied by Schieffelin and Feld), and argues these songs invoke a Symbolic space from the arena of past actions through which rememberers can better "find themselves" in their social world (:90). Denis Monnerie, skilfully reengaging with the older and partly unpublished ethnography of G C Wheeler, explores the analogous and conceptually relates rankings among Solomonese Mono Alu, commoners and chiefs being compared with the better remembered recently dead and longer deceased collective ancestors.

Iteanu, as one of the editors, leaves us with something of a 'methodological platform' article applied to the Papuan Orokaiva. It is his central argument that the great Orokaivan *jape* ceremony creates social relations - including those between men and women entering into exogamous marriages - "in an ontological esoteric form" (:150). Iteanu is already known for his monograph on exchange and ceremony (*La Ronde des Échanges* [1983]), and the next author Gilbert Lewis, explores cosmological aspects of the New Guinea Gnanu's medical system that he has already documented in his study *Knowledge of Illness in a Sepik Society* (1978). For Lewis, Gnanu attitudes to illness are an index to their cosmology.

Lisette Josephides is the one rebellious writer in the collection, wondering whether the 'organising principles' set for the book are 'privileged representations' (:189) not doing justice to the multivalency and complex nuances of Melanesian life (as she has found it among the Southern Highlands Kewa of Papua New Guinea). Eric Hirsch tries to 'tie the line' more, though, in paralleling the "holding together" of people through the *gab* ceremony and the linking of persons, things and land in cosmologic perspective among the Papuan highland Fuyughe. De Coppet, the other