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INTERPRETING MATERIAL EVIDENCE: RELIGION AT THE "ORIGINS OF ISLAM"

Thirty years ago, Kojiro Miyahara wrote a seminal article on charismatic authority, critiquing major contributions by Max Weber, Edward Shils, and others while arguing for conceptual clarity.[1] Rejecting psychological explanations of charismatic leadership, he argued for a return to Weber's initial sociological insights that charismatic authority is essentially produced by a charismatic community. For Miyahara, "The actual personality of a leader has little to do with charisma."[2] Following up on these arguments, sociologists and anthropologists have produced a number of fascinating studies of charismatic communities, demonstrating that such groups offer many benefits to their members. Ethnographic research by Marie Griffith, Pnina Werbner, and Helene Basu indicates complex authority structures where many social actors, espe-

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[1] Kojiro Miyahara, "Charisma: From Weber to Contemporary Sociology," *Sociological Inquiry* 53 (1983): 368–88.

[2] Ibid., 383.

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cially women, can gain leadership experience.[3] Further, Len Oakes's sociological analysis demonstrates that followers of charismatic individuals do not appear to differ appreciably from the general population.[4] Far from being "brainwashed" into religious belief, Oakes suggests that community members use the leader to produce their own great works.[5]

I believe that there is much more historians of religion can learn from these studies of living charismatic communities, specifically as we connect them to the topic that interested Weber, the production of leadership authority. For example, Oakes found that followers are in a dynamic relationship with living charismatic leaders in New Zealand and Australia, but members of the Women's Aglow Fellowship (now Aglow International), chronicled by Griffith, display many of the same characteristics despite the fact that their "leader" is a man who died nearly two thousand years ago. In other words, this dynamic relationship can continue, even when the charismatic figure is an exemplary human being from the past.[6] Whether it is a matter of mystical communion with long-dead Sufi saints or having a personal relationship with Jesus, religious followers have no difficulty engaging with charismatic leaders who are no longer in this world. Just as in the communities that Oakes observed, followers in established religious traditions use their connection to a charismatic leader to legitimize their own leadership and to perform extraordinary acts of power.[7] But there is more. I argue further that this dynamic rela-

[3] R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu, *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (London: Routledge, 1998). Werbner and Basu's book is just one of many on charismatic authority in Sufism; recently, however, scholars of Islamic history have adapted Weber's theories of leadership to analyze the history of Shiism, beginning with Hamid Dabashi (*Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads* [New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1989]) and now including Liyakat Takim (*The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007]) and Maria Dakake (*The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008]).

[4] Len Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 125. Oakes reached this conclusion based on administration of the Adjective Checklist to over 100 members of emerging religious traditions in Australia and New Zealand.

[5] In his chapters on the charismatic leader, Oakes adapts insights first made by Heinz Kohut, which he discusses and extends on pp. 30–43 (of *Prophetic Charisma*).

[6] I offer a fuller explanation of this dynamic in Jonathan Brockopp, "Theorizing Charismatic Authority in Early Islamic Law," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005): 129–58. Even in these historical cases, I believe (*pace* Miyahara) that the personality of charismatic individuals could be of importance, and I do not reject the possibility that such individuals are directed by divine forces. But when speaking about historical figures, questions of actual charismatic personality are all but irrelevant, since everything we know about that leader, whether Jesus, the Buddha, or Muhammad, is filtered through the memories and interpretations of their followers.

[7] This is not the same as Max Weber's notions of routinization. While Weber held that a historical instance of pure charisma was at the heart of many "traditional" and "rational" leadership struc-

tionship also has an effect on the past as well as on the present; legitimation of present leaders depends on veneration of historical figures, raising them up to even higher planes of existence and increasing their charismatic power. However impressive Pope Francis or the Dalai Lama might be, they are always superseded by the memory of Jesus and the Buddha.[8]

I find that this understanding of charismatic communities helps us to make sense of a particular problem that has vexed historians of early Islamic history: the ways that Muhammad was perceived by his followers in the first century after his death. As is well known, the central creed of Islam has two articles: "There is no god but God" and "Muhammad is God's messenger." It took centuries, however, to work out the meaning of these statements, and even then, significant disagreements led to fissures within the Muslim community that still resonate today. For example, by the end of the second Islamic century it was commonly accepted that Muhammad's example (his *sunna*) should serve as a basis for Islamic law. But how, so many years after his death, could one best know what his example was? Some held that *hadith*, narratives passed down by various authorities, were the best source, while others claimed the living practice of the people of Medina was more reliable.[9] Further, once Muhammad's sunna was established, there was disagreement as to whether it, or the Qur'an, was more authoritative.[10] Equally divisive debates over following Muhammad's example in political leadership contributed to the Kharijite and Shiite divisions. In other words, by the end of the second century Muhammad's followers were still arguing intensely over his meaning for the Muslim community.

There is broad agreement on these points among scholars of all stripes, but a significant controversy persists concerning the two centuries that led up to these debates. This controversy is partly based on a skepticism over the historical value of the literary sources—histories, biographies, and collections of sayings—composed orally and written down centuries after the events they purport to record by historians who, quite naturally, were partisans of a partic-

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tures, routinization creates permanent structures that are fundamentally opposed to charismatic states (Max Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968], 18, 58–61).

[8] Brockopp, "Theorizing," 143–47. The exception is when the followers break off to establish an entirely new religious tradition, in which case the cycle begins once again.

[9] Robert Brunschvig, "Polémiques médiéval autour du rite de Malik," *al-Andalus* 15 (1950): 377–435. See also Abū Mus'ab, *Mukhtaṣar*, ms. Fās, Qarawiyyīn 874, fol. 2b, analyzed by Joseph Schacht ("On Abū Mus'ab and His 'Mujtasar'," *al-Andalus* 30 [1965]: 1–14) and Jonathan Brockopp ("Competing Theories of Authority in Early Mālikī Texts," in *Studies in Islamic Legal Theory*, ed. Bernard Weiss [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 3–22).

[10] A whole section of the *Risala* of al-Shafi'i (d. 204/819) is devoted to an argument that these two sources could not disagree. See Joseph Lowry, *Early Islamic Legal Theory: The* Risāla *of Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Dates in this article are generally given according to the Muslim calendar (AH), followed by the equivalent date in the Christian or Common Era (CE).

ular viewpoint. Various attempts have been made to analyze these literary accounts with a hope of extracting "factual" information from "overlays" of myth.[11] While some impressive results have come from this work,[12] revisionist scholars have suggested that the fundamental bias of the sources cannot be escaped. In other words, literary accounts of Muhammad's life and the development of the Muslim community during the first century after his death tell us far more about the communities that produced and wrote down these narratives than they do about the events of the first/seventh century.[13] This controversy may never be fully resolved, but I suggest here that it has been made unnecessarily difficult due to misperceptions of the ways that charismatic communities arise and develop. In particular, the modern predilection to see Islam as a political force rather than as a religious movement has caused scholars to misread evidence.

Recently, scholars who are interested in these questions have turned to material evidence to solve some of these debates. This is a welcome and important move, since archaeologists, numismatists, and others have uncovered a wealth of information about the early Islamic period. Likewise, scholars have started to pay far more attention to accounts of early Islam from a wide variety of non-Muslim sources.[14] Any inquiry into how Muhammad was perceived by his followers must take these new sources into account, especially since quite a bit of this material is dated, including gravestones, papyri, coins, epigraphy, and architecture—even bits of fabric with Arabic woven into them. What must also be understood, however, is that this material can be just as problematic as the literary evidence that some revisionist scholars reject.

Like historical photographs, a tombstone or a coin gives us a snapshot from a specific moment in time, and it is tempting to take these pieces of evidence as representing a far greater truth than can be reasonably supported. A photograph is staged and framed; it reveals some truths and excludes others, since it is produced by a person for an audience. In the case of material evidence from the first Islamic century, most stems from Amirs and other elite individuals who were part of the literate minority and had the wherewithal to produce

[11] Rudolf Sellheim, "Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte: Die Muhammed-biographie des Ibn Isḥāq," *Oriens* 18–19 (1965–66): 33–91, esp. 45–48.

[12] Michael Lecker, *Muslims, Jews, and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), and "Glimpses of Muḥammad's Medinan Decade," in *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad*, ed. Jonathan Brockopp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61–79.

[13] See Uri Rubin's discussion in *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims; A Textual Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1995), 1–3. A particularly significant proponent of this thesis in the area of historical Judaism has been Jacob Neusner, especially his groundbreaking *Eliezar ben Hyrcanus: The Tradition and the Man*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

[14] Robert Hoyland provides a useful summary in *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1997).

items of lasting value in metal and stone. As for less durable materials, such as papyrus, most of this comes from Egypt, which has both an ideal climate for the preservation of papyrus and also significant rural areas that escaped the ravages of warfare. Finally, the vast majority of this material comes from men, who wielded political power without exception during this period. In other words, our material evidence is biased in favor of a male elite primarily interested in exercising political power; only the material from Egypt provides any possibility of complexity, and this material is geographically limited. When the interest of scholars is in, say, the economic history of Egypt in the early Islamic period, this material is an outstanding resource.[15] But when scholars wish to say something about Islamic religious belief in general, the material evidence will relate to us only the kind of story it is designed to tell.

VIEWS OF MUHAMMAD

A brief survey of the literature demonstrates the wide variety of positions that modern scholars take on the life and meaning of Muhammad during the first two hundred years after his death. First is the noncritical view that takes its inspiration in part from verses in the Qur'an that are understood to refer to Muhammad. There is, for example, the general command: Obey God and his messenger (Q 3:32).[16] Other key verses include: "We have sent you (male, singular) as a mercy to the worlds" (Q 21:107), and Jesus's foretelling of the coming of "Ahmad" in 61:6.[17] This view of Muhammad as God's chosen servant is then combined with another verse from the Qur'an addressed to the second person plural: "This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion" (Q 5:3). This verse is understood to be God's speech, revealed to Muhammad and addressing the Muslims of Medina late in Muhammad's life. In this view, Islam was perfect and complete in Muhammad's lifetime, and all the fundamental tenets, rituals, and mores were established before his death. Problems and divisions arose only in the faulty interpretation or memory of these events. Aspects of this view are found already in our earliest written material deriving from the second/eighth century, and it is common among both Muslim and

[15] Kosei Morimoto, *The Fiscal Administration of Egypt in the Early Islamic Period* (Kyoto: Dohosha, 1981); Petra Sijpesteijn and Lennart Sundelin, eds., *Papyrology and the History of Early Islamic Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), especially the contribution by Sijpesteijn ("Travel and Trade on the River," 115–52); Petra Sijpesteijn, *Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[16] Compare Qur'an 3:31; 3:132; 4:80; 8:24; 24:47–51; and 33:36. None of these mention Muhammad by name.

[17] See Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 22, and Uri Rubin, "Muhammad," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001–5). All translations from the Qur'an are my own.

non-Muslim scholars today, although it would be quite inaccurate to suggest that this is the only view of Muhammad found in either premodern or modern Muslim texts.[18]

Other views of Muhammad engage, to one extent or another, a historical-critical approach to the texts. The most common method is to read these texts within their historical and social contexts, paying attention to the literary texts more for what they can tell us about the communities that wrote them than for historical information about Muhammad himself. Among the scholars who hold to this method, some attempt to delve into literary texts to sift factual gold from mythological dross in order to uncover this "historical Muhammad." But even here, his life and death are contextualized within the multireligious environment in which he lived, and it is presumed that Islam changed and developed over time in response to these and other sociological pressures.[19]

More critical are those who attempt to reconstruct early Islamic history without a historical prophet Muhammad, either as a heuristic exercise or out of some other motivation. This group, naturally, is the most intriguing, challenging other scholars to defend their presumptions about Muhammad and the early history of Islam. All members of this group reject the historicity of the *Sira*, the life story of Muhammad as it has come down to us, purportedly from eyewitnesses, and has been transmitted both orally and in written form to the ninth- and tenth-century historians who preserved it.[20] Of the scholars

[18] Several taxonomies for categorizing scholarly approaches are available. What I describe here as the noncritical view corresponds with Donner's "descriptive approach," Berg's "sanguine" scholar, and Esack's "uncritical lover." See Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 14 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1998), 16–26; Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period*, Curzon Studies in the Qur'ān, ed. Andrew Rippin (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 111–13; Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide; A Guide to Its Key Themes, History and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 2–8.

[19] This category is very large and includes most introductions to Islamic history meant for general audiences; it also includes what might be called "progressive Muslim" voices, such as those of feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991) and popular authors, such as Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2005).

[20] As Robert Hoyland points out, the foundation for this line of research was laid in the early twentieth century, though not widely accepted ("Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions," *History Compass* 5, no. 2 [2007]: 582–601, at 583–84). In 1980, Patricia Crone reasserted this thesis, characterizing the traditional sources, especially the *Sira*, as "a monument to the destruction rather than the preservation of the past" (*Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980], 7). This was quite in contrast to what had become the standard position, expressed by Rudolf Sellheim, "Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte," that the *Sira* preserved historical layers that could be judiciously peeled back by the researcher. It is interesting to note the gradual effect of Crone's restated thesis on historians such as Hugh Kennedy. His first edition of *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman, 1986) reflects Sellheim in arguing that the *Sira* was fixed "as early as the time of 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 94/712)" (354) and records

who hold this view, some are close to the second position above in claiming that Muhammad may have been the name of an Arabian leader upon whom later tradition thrust the mantle of prophet.[21] As I will discuss in detail below, however, others suggest that Muhammad was a historical figure not of the seventh but of the eighth century, and still others say he never existed at all. Of this last group, a few hold that the word *muḥammad* was taken out of context from intra-Christian debates and mistaken for a person, while others suggest that he was entirely a fiction of the ninth-century historians.

Given the quantity and quality of our evidence, there is no reason why a range of this breadth should persist among serious scholars. While I hope that my analysis in this article will help guide the nonspecialist through these debates, my purpose here is not merely to narrow the range of possible ways to interpret the evidence; I am also interested in methodological and theoretical questions of how we view Islamic history. More specifically, I want to draw attention to the fact that focusing primarily on material sources limits our perspective and removes the affective voice from history, a voice that is central to establishing charismatic authority. Further, material sources are often products of the bureaucracy, whose relationship to a charismatic past has already been attenuated and routinized. Understood correctly, the products of a bureaucracy can offer us significant insights into charismatic authority, but if we mistake bureaucracy for religion, we risk making the same error that Weber made: seeing disenchantment in a world that is religiously still very much alive.

THE EVIDENCE

Three different classes of material evidence may be separated: (1) legends on coins; (2) ink-based writing on papyrus, parchment, and (by at least 252/866[22]) paper; (3) epigraphy, including inscriptions on tombstones, buildings,

"numerous and serious objections" (357) to Crone's thesis. By the second edition Kennedy has dropped both this claim and these objections, adopting more or less Donner's view and admitting that "the old certainties have disappeared" (Kennedy, *Prophet*, 2nd ed. [2004], 350).

[21] Most researchers on the material evidence of the early Islamic period, to the extent that they express their opinions at all, probably fit into this category. It appears, for example, to be Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds's view in *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25, where they write: "In the Sufyānid period, apparently, the Prophet had no publicly acknowledged role. This is not to say that he did not matter in the Sufyānid period, though exactly what he was taken to be at the time is far from clear." Two recent examples of attempts to recount early Islamic history with historical-critical insights fully in mind are Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) and the opening chapters of Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[22] Abū Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām al-Baghdādī (d. 223/837), *Gharīb al-Hadīth*, Leiden Or. 298 (241 fol.); now edited by Muhammad Azim al-Din (3 vols. [Hyderabad: Osmania Oriental Publications Bureau, 1964]).

and other structures. Coins are the most important of these three classes for several reasons. First, coins are durable and therefore fairly common; we have a large (though not exhaustive) selection of them from a wide variety of specific places. Second, coins have a very limited sociological function: they are minted by the state for the purposes of commerce. Third, coins contain specific information: we generally know where they are minted, who minted them, and when; we often know something of where they were found. Finally, while coins are produced by the state, their monetary value is dependent on a certain conservation of symbols; sudden changes in appearance might signal a change in substance and so undermine the value of the coinage in the public eye.

It is therefore intriguing, but not at all surprising, that the earliest coins from the Islamic period retain images of Byzantine or Sassanian emperors, as well as religious symbols that, theoretically, would be anathema to Muslims: crosses and fire altars. The ubiquity and durability of coins make them excellent witnesses to changing viewpoints since they are almost impervious to revision. When their symbols no longer conform to current standards, the only recourse is to mint new coins, but old ones continue to circulate. On the basis of this and other evidence, Fred Donner argues that an early "Believers' movement" did not have a strong Islamic identity and that "it would be historically inaccurate to call the early Believers' movement 'Islam.'"[23] Donner's argument seems to gain force the more closely we look at these coins. The first Arabic word on these coins, added alongside Sassanid symbols of authority, simply states جيد , meaning "good" or "valid." Other early Arabic phrases are: "In the name of God" and "praise belongs to God."[24] Such phrases are unobjectionable from a Christian, Jewish, or even Zoroastrian context. Muhammad's name first appears alone in Arabic on a few eastern coins from 38 and 52 (of the Yazdgird era, so 670 and 684 CE),[25] but in 70/689, in Pahlavi script, a legend appears that reads "*mḥmt' ptgmbl Y yzdt'*" (Muhammad is the mes-

[23] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 195.

[24] Heinz Gaube, *Arabosasanidische Numismatik* (Braunschweig: Klinkhardt u. Biermann, 1973), 18–37.

[25] Ibid., 36. Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren do not mention these "Muhammad" coins, presumably because the reference is ambiguous, in *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 2003), 247–51. As I will discuss below, other scholars have more radical interpretations, but one of Volker Popp's notions must be addressed here. In his "The Early History of Islam, Following Inscriptional and Numismatic Testimony," in *The Hidden Origins of Islam*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin (Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 2010), 17–124, he writes that "Muhammad" appearing without that patronymic cannot refer to a person, but rather to "an inscription that expresses an ideology of authority" (53). In fact, however, prophets are regularly referred to, both in the Qur'an and in literature, by their first names only. In short, the only reason a patronymic would be necessary is if the person were not already well-known. Popp also argues for an earlier dating for these coins based on his notion of an Arab solar year beginning in 622 CE.

senger of God); in 72/691–92 another coin appears that includes this statement plus the Pahlavi equivalent of "There is no god, but God."[26] Similar statements also appear in Arabic on western coins a few years later, a progression that seems to have its culmination in Abd al-Malik's aniconic coin in 77/696–97 with an extensive legend in Arabic:

> [obverse center] There is no god but God alone; he has no partner. [margin] Muhammad is the messenger of God; He sent him with the guidance and the religion of truth to make it prevail over all religion.
>
> [reverse center] God is one, God the everlasting. He has neither borne nor been born. [margin] In the name of God, this dinar was struck in the year seventy-seven.[27]

At first glance, the change in content is undeniable: coins that originally portrayed the symbols and languages of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires gradually see those languages and symbols replaced, first with a few Arabic phrases added in, and then with no symbols and all in Arabic. Moreover, the Arabic phrases seem to gain greater theological content with time, culminating in several key theological statements sixty-four years after Muhammad's death: God is one; Muhammad is his messenger; Muhammad's "religion of truth" should prevail over other religions. But there is good reason to be cautious. Coins represent authority, but they do so from a specific place and for a particular purpose. Comparing a coin minted in Dārābjird in 689 with a coin minted in Syria in 696 may tell us something about the developing religion of Islam, or it may reflect merely local differences between a recently conquered Persian city and the capital of a newly emerging empire. Further, what appears to be a significant change may be the accidental result of the coins that happen to have survived. The fact that the early Abbasids also used some Sassanid symbolism in their coinage cautions against making too strong of an argument about religious development.[28] What we can say is that these coins

[26] Malek Mochiri, "A Pahlavi Forerunner of the Umayyad Reformed Coinage," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1981): 168–72. My thanks to Gonzalo Rubio for assistance in interpreting these coins. For discussion, see Popp, "Early History," 65–66. See further: A. S. Eshragh, "An Interesting Arab-Sasanian Dirhem," *Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter* 178 (2004): 45–46. The first dated appearance of this phrase was actually a few years earlier on a Sasanid style coin in Arabic, but I focus on the Pahlavi inscription here in order to address another argument by Popp below; see Gaube, *Arabosasanidische Numismatik*, 62; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 552–53, 694; Stefan Heidemann, "The Evolving Representation of the Early Islamic Empire and Its Religion on Coin Imagery," in *The Qur'ān in Context*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 149–95; Stuart D. Sears, "The Sasanian Style Coins of 'Muhammad' and Some Related Coins," *Yarmouk Numismatics* 7 (1997): 7–17.

[27] This coin is widely attested; see, for example, the collection of the British Museum. http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/g/gold_coin_of_abd_al-malik.aspx accessed December 13, 2012.

[28] Noted by Popp, "Early History," 91, though he does not draw the same conclusions.

are a reflection of a public expression of authority, deriving from both religious and nonreligious sources.[29] That is, religious practice is partially reflected in coins. Recently, however, some scholars have reversed this causality, arguing that the Umayyads used coins to establish religious policy.

For example, in an extraordinarily creative article, Volker Popp suggests that "*mḥmt*'" on the Pahlavi coin mentioned above does not refer to a person but rather is an adjective meaning "praised" and that the legend should be read: "The bearer of the message/word from God is chosen/is to be praised."[30] It follows then that the Arabic of Abd al-Malik's coin should not be read as "Muhammad is the messenger of God," but rather "Praised be the messenger of God; He sent him with the guidance . . . " Only later was this adjective mistaken for a person's name. Popp suggests further that the "messenger of God" here is actually Jesus, and that Abd al-Malik is engaging in intra-Christian polemics. Just as Emperor Heraclius promoted his compromise theology of monothelitism, Abd al-Malik, Popp argues, is using coins to promote his own form of Christology, "erecting an Arabian church of the Arabian empire."[31]

Popp is joined in this imaginative reconstruction of history by Karl-Heinz Ohlig, a scholar trained in early Christianity, and "Christoph Luxenberg," a pseudonym for a scholar who has written a well-known, though not entirely well-regarded,[32] book on provocative new readings of Qur'anic texts. In a recent book edited with Gerd Puin, Ohlig expresses "shock" that highly regarded scholars of early Islam do not conform to his brand of historical-critical scholarship.[33] Popp, Ohlig, and Luxenberg are certainly right in suggesting that

[29] To be clear, this is the limited claim of most of the researchers mentioned in these notes; Popp, Luxenberg, and Ohlig are outliers here.

[30] Popp, "Early History," 65.

[31] Ibid., 57.

[32] For a positive review, see Claude Gilliot, "Langue et Coran: une lecture syro-araméenne du Coran," *Arabica* 50, no. 3 (July 2003): 381–93. For negative reviews, see François de Blois, "Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache by Christoph Luxenberg," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003): 92–97; and Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'an and History—a Disputed Relationship: Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2003): 1–18. Luxenberg presumably writes under a pseudonym for fear of Muslim reprisals—a political choice that speaks volumes to his own impressions of his work. In this I wholeheartedly agree with De Blois's comments, pp. 96–97.

[33] While my references here are to the English version (which is more recent and includes some slight updating), Ohlig (and Puin) are primarily concerned with German-language scholarship. On page 9 Ohlig takes Rudi Paret to task for being naïve in his reading of both the Qur'an and of Islamic history; there, he also misrepresents van Ess's position on the first century. The German version of Ohlig and Puin's book was published as *Die dunklen Anfänge: Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam* (Berlin: Schiler, 2005). The debate then moved to the newspapers, with an opinion piece by Ohlig on November 21, 2006, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and replies by Nicolai Sinai (December 28, 2006) and Stefan Heidemann (February 28, 2007). See G. R. Hawting's review of the German version in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006): 134–37.

forms of Christianity continued to play a significant role in the Near East in the seventh through ninth centuries. Our best evidence suggests that local populations in these areas were majority Christian up through the tenth century.[34] But these scholars go well beyond that observation. Ohlig quotes with approval Nevo and Koren's claim that "Muhammad is not a historical figure, and his official biography is a product of the age in which it was written."[35] Luxenberg agrees, stating that "historical Islam began at the earliest in the middle of the eighth century."[36] If there was no Islam at the time these coins were minted, *mḥmt'* must refer to something other than the name of Islam's prophet.

Reading Luxenberg's reinterpretation of the inscriptions inside the Dome of the Rock, which date from around the same time as these coins, it is surprising just how far he can take his premise. He notes first that Jesus is referred to as "*rasūl Allāh*" in these inscriptions, and then he finds a single Christian text (the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*) in which one finds the statement "Lord, God almighty, Father of this beloved and *praised* servant Jesus Christ."[37] If translated into Arabic, that last phrase might resonate, however distantly, with محمد رسول الله so long as we read *muḥammad* as "praised be" and "the messenger of God" as referring to Jesus. It seems plausible, so long as we ignore material evidence in coins and papyri. Popp, on the other hand, has a more difficult task, because he needs to explain why "*muḥammad rasūl Allāh*" appears first on Sasanid-style coins in Arabic script and only later in Pahlavi. The phrase quoted above, *mḥmt' ptgmbl Y yzdt'*, contains three words, the first of which (*mḥmt'*) has no meaning in middle Persian. If the meaning of this phrase is supposed to be "praised be the messenger of God," then one would expect the entire phrase to be translated into middle Persian, not only the last two words.[38] Again, Popp is backed into this corner because he is convinced that Islam did not exist when

[34] Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). Recently, scholars have gained new insights on old materials by probing these influences, including Hoyland's new interpretations of Abd al-Malik's coins as a site of a propaganda war with Justinian II ("Writing the Biography," 593–96), and "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69, no. 3 (2006): 395–416 (my thanks to anonymous reviewer 2 for this reference). See also Nancy Khalek's fascinating study of the veneration of St. John the Baptist in Umayyad Damascus in her *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 85–134.

[35] Ohlig and Puin, *Hidden Origins*, 8. Hoyland points out that this claim has a long history ("Writing the Biography," 591).

[36] Christoph Luxenberg, "A New Interpretation of the Arabic Inscription in Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock" in Ohlig and Puin, *Hidden Origins*, 141.

[37] Ibid., 131 (italics mine); Luxenberg does not tell us what the original states, nor whether this derives from the Greek or Coptic tradition.

[38] Popp, "Early History," finds scant support in that *mḥmd* is used to mean "most desired" in a Ugaritic text from 2,000 years earlier (53 n. 93). So far as I know *mḥmt'* is nowhere found on Sassanid coins previous to the rise of Islam, nor attested anywhere in Pahlavi inscriptions.

these coins were minted. Undaunted, he presses on, spinning what can only be called an elaborate fantasy that supporters of Abd al-Malik in old Sassanid territory developed a new Christology that was meant to unify all Arab Christians under the notion that Jesus was the Servant of God (i.e., not God himself) to be "praised" (*muḥammad*);[39] the phrase *muḥammad rasūl Allāh* / *mḥmt' ptgmbl Y yzdt'* was part of this campaign that started in the east and gradually moved west.

As the example of Heraclius shows, royal campaigns for a new, unifying Christology rarely turn out well, and Christian scholars of his period reacted vociferously against his monothelitism. Luxenberg, Popp, and Ohlig do not explain why the supposed Umayyad campaign did not raise a similar fuss, but Luxenberg at least offers one suggestion for how the new Christology ended up turning into a new religion. Non-Muslim observers, he offers, misunderstood the meaning of the Arabic phrase. By this he means the Greek and Syriac historians who recorded the rise of Islam; Luxenberg assures us: "Even if written Christian sources from the first half of the eighth century speak of a 'Muhammad' as the 'prophet of the Arabs,' this phenomenon is to be explained as that this Arabian name for Christ was simply not current among Aramaic- or Greek-speaking Christians. Therefore, this metaphor, which would have sounded strange to them, must have seemed to be the name of a new prophet. Regardless, there was no talk at this time of 'Islam.'"[40] Luxenberg's suggestion, however, seems extremely unlikely given the existence of dual language protocols (protective papyrus leaves) from the time of Abd al-Malik and later that contain the same Arabic phrase and its translation into Greek as follows: MAAMET (or MAMET) ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ.[41] As with the Pahlavi coin,

[39] Popp, "Early History," 52–57.

[40] Luxenberg, "New Interpretation," 141–42; this is meant to counter the many mentions of Muhammad in contemporary texts, published by Hoyland and others. As I will demonstrate below, Luxenberg's last assertion is directly contradicted by a tombstone from 71/691 that mentions Islam.

[41] Adolf Grohmann, *Protokolle*, Corpvs papyrorvm Raineri archidvcis Avstriae III Series arabica; tomvs I, pars. 2–[3] (Vienna: F. Zöllner, 1924). Several undated examples appear in Raif Georges Khoury [Adolf Grohmann], *Chrestomathie de papyrologie arabe: Documents relatifs à la vie privée, sociale et administrative dans les premiers siècles islamiques*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, erste Abteilung (nahe und der mittlere Osten), Ergänzungsband II, 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 1–4. For dated examples, see Beatrice Gruendler, *The Development of the Arabic Scripts: From the Nabatean Era to the First Islamic Century According to Dated Texts*, Harvard Semitic Series, 43 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 24–28. Gruendler's interest is in paleography, but in the process she provides an excellent summation of dated Arabic references for the first Islamic century. Another, slightly different, selection of these materials is found in Appendix F of Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 687–703. On June 26, 2015, Dr. Lajos Berkes suggested that the protocol of SB 3 7240 (now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art) might well be dated to October of 697. The only published work on this papyrus, however, suggests that 712 is a safer date. H. I. Bell, "Two Official Letters of the Arab Period," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 12, no. 3/4 (October 1, 1926): 265–81, at 273.

the word *muḥammad* is transliterated while the phrase "messenger of God" is translated. Apparently, Ohlig's brand of historical-critical scholarship requires us to accept not only that non-Arabic-speaking Christian historians confused an adjective (*muḥammad:* praised) with a proper name, but also that scribes from the Egyptian governor's own chancellery also misunderstood the Christological claim of their masters in that they also treated the word *muḥammad* as a name.

Writers like Ohlig, Popp, and Luxenberg are so caught up in their web of causation that they ignore evidence that does not fit their expected pattern; they may be safely excluded from the ranks of revisionist scholars and placed with polemicists, such as Daniel Pipes and Robert Spencer, who manipulate the evidence to suit their purposes.[42] However, because several of their fundamental historiographical and sociological presumptions are shared by genuine scholars, their work serves to highlight specific problems with these presumptions. First, these writers contend that they alone adhere to a sufficiently high bar for the authenticity of evidence.[43] By limiting themselves to materials that can be securely dated, they clear the field of most literary texts, since these were written down centuries after the events they purport to discuss. To be sure, dated material evidence is useful insofar as it helps highlight the ways that historical events are colored by the reminiscences of later authors. However, it does not follow either that literary evidence is worthless,[44] or that material evidence is unbiased. Second, the presumption that material evidence is somehow superior to literary evidence is based on a misunderstanding of the role of the interpreter in historical writing. No evidence, whether a coin or a history text, speaks the truth; all is open to interpretation, and these interpretive frames must be mapped out and analyzed. Finally, like most of our material evidence, coins are productions of the state, produced for a speci-

[42] Esack, *The Qur'an*, discusses the position of the polemicist on p. 9. I believe this title is warranted because these writers make no useful contribution to scholarship, and in fact sow confusion in the minds of people who are not experts in the field.

[43] Personally, I consider the establishment of such a bar more of a heuristic exercise than serious scholarship. While it is important to understand that literary texts cannot give us objective accounts of historical events, it is a mistake to believe that material evidence is any less biased. In some ways, material evidence is more problematic if we take it to be a true representation of an event.

[44] Excellent recent scholarship has provided us with new tools for making use of literary sources in combination with material sources. Donner's earliest work was primarily dependent on literary sources (e.g. *Early Islamic Conquests* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981]). Then, in his "Formation of the Islamic State," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 2 (1986): 283–96, he responds to "the skeptics" by developing an argument about the origins of the Islamic state based solely on documentary evidence. These two streams are combined in his recent work, such as his *Muhammad and the Believers*. For another fine example on a more limited subject, see Leor Halevi, "The Paradox of Islamization: Tombstone Inscriptions, Qur'ānic Recitations, and the Problem of Religious Change," *History of Religions* 44, no. 2 (November 2004): 120–52, discussed below.

fic purpose; they can only present us with a view of public religion in the seventh century.[45] Scholars who use numismatic evidence to back their insistence that Islam did not exist prior to the mid-eighth century miss the fact that coins can tell us almost nothing about when individuals started to believe in Islam; they can only signal when the state felt it necessary to react publicly to the changing religious landscape. A distinction between public and private religion therefore both restricts the importance of material sources and also raises the question of audience for these public expressions of religion in the seventh and eighth century. If coins were effective in utilizing religious language to legitimate the regime, it must have been because private individuals had already imbued those words with religious meaning.

The problems of treating dated material evidence in isolation, and of not recognizing the limited sociological function of coins, also plague us when we approach literary papyri from the first one hundred years and try to use them to construct the history of Islam. Only a small percentage of early Arabic papyri has been investigated, and most of this material is undated. Eva Grob has shown that too much of this undated material is wrongly placed in the third/ninth century, and further research may help us to date these texts more accurately.[46] The dated texts that have been analyzed, however, tell a story similar to that of the coins. This material is largely made of official correspondence in Egypt concerning taxes and the like; little is to be seen here of religious content, other than the formulas found on the document covers. As with the coins, our earliest papyrus, dated 22/642, contains only the words: "In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate" with no mention of Muhammad.[47] Only on a protocol (document cover) from 90 to 91 AH/709 to 710 CE do we have the statement "Muhammad is the messenger of God."[48] Again, this is similar to the progression we saw in early coins, though there we saw the phrase appear twenty years earlier. Finally, there is a third parallel to the coins in that earlier texts are more likely to be written in multiple languages (Arabic, Greek and Coptic), while later texts appear solely in Arabic.

[45] For a good discussion of "public religion" as viewed by sociologists and other scholars of religion, see José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 40–66. In particular, note Casanova's astute commentary on al-Ghazzali's views on pp. 48–50. These coins certainly reflect, in part, the use of religion "to legitimate political rule and to sanctify economic oppression and the given system of stratification" (49). But, as Casanova points out, "private religion" is not without influence and impact on the public world (50), and so these coins may also represent ways that public religion is influenced by private beliefs.

[46] Eva Mira Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus: Form and Function, Content and Context* (New York and Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 4–7.

[47] Archduke Rainer Collection, Austrian National Museum, Vienna (PERF 558). See Gruendler, *Development*, 22, and references there.

[48] Egyptian National Library, Cairo, Inv. no. 67. Gruendler, *Development*, 24.

Given that we only have a handful of dated papyri from the first Islamic century, it would be hazardous to make definitive claims, but it appears that Muhammad was not an important part of public religion in Egypt. To conclude from this material, however, that Muhammad was not central to a "believers' movement" (or that he never existed) requires a specific *argumentum e silencio*, not "Muhammad does not appear in coins and papyri, therefore he was not important (or did not exist)," but something rather different. First, we must postulate that had Muhammad existed his status would have been such that he could not have been ignored on coins and papyri. Second, we must further argue that had Muhammad existed, it would have been in the interests of the state to put his name on coins and papyri. From what we know about both public religion and the history of religious emergence,[49] I do not find these assumptions self-evident. Whatever Muhammad's status was in the seventh century, Islam could have been nothing more than a minority religious tradition, claiming the allegiance of only a fraction of the population, even of the Arabs; as a religious movement it was initially of little interest to the Greeks, Jews, Persians, and other peoples living in the region. No matter the religious conviction of the state leaders in the seventh century, they would not have used a religious symbol, such as Muhammad, until it resonated with a significant proportion of the population.[50] Further, there's every reason to believe that within the small, early "believers' movement" there would have been multiple views of who Muhammad was—the founder of a new religion, a prophet in an old religion, a political and social revolutionary, and so forth—and it was very likely to the advantage of the Umayyad rulers not to clarify this point.[51] We do not need Islamic history to suggest that leadership of a charismatic community after the death of the founder would be contested (which is exactly what the Muslim historians record). Confusion on these political and religious matters is to be expected, and we must be wary of folding the information we have into a single, linear narrative. But that does not exclude the

[49] I am thinking here primarily of the history of early Christianity, which has been especially well-documented, but Weber's keen insights into the ways that religions continue after the death of the charismatic leader (Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma*, 54–57) were based on a very wide survey of religious traditions.

[50] According to an early Syriac source, for example, Mu'awiya had to reinstate Byzantine symbols on coins because the local population refused to recognize the currency (Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 24n).

[51] Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma*, 61. Along these lines, it is worth considering why Muhammad's name only appears in papyri twenty years after it appears on coins and fifteen years after the very explicit Umayyad dinar. It is possible that this omission simply reflects a lacuna in our record, but it could also be a desire not to antagonize already tense relationships with Coptic authorities in Egypt who, after all, were responsible for collecting the taxes that ran the Arab government (Morimoto, *Fiscal Administration*, 15–52). It is important to remember that most of our early papyri stem from the chanceries of provincial governors.

very real possibility (I would argue, the necessity) that a group among these believers retained a powerful, emotional attachment to the Prophet, one that maintained and developed his charismatic qualities. Further, such charismatic communities follow their own guidelines, often acting in a way that is antithetical to statecraft.[52]

Happily, our final class of evidence provides us with something a little firmer than Weberian types on which to hang the suggestion of an early community, apart from the state, devoted to the Prophet Muhammad. Examples of dated epigraphy from the first century are rare, but this gravestone from a woman in Aswan is important for several reasons. First, it does not derive from the political elite. Second, it mentions the Prophet Muhammad in a unique fashion; third, it has been ignored by polemicists and revisionists alike. The inscription is short and I will quote it here in full:

> In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.
> The greatest calamity of the People of
> Islam is their being bereft of the Prophet Muhammad,
> may God bless him and grant him peace.
> This is the tomb of ʿAbbāsa, daughter of
> Jurayj, son of Sanad. May the compassion,
> forgiveness and satisfaction of God be upon her.
> She died on Monday, four-
> teen days having elapsed from Dhu l-qa'da,
> of the year seventy-one,
> confessing that there is no god, but God
> alone, He has no partner, and that
> Muhammad is His servant and His apostle,
> may God bless him and grant him peace.[53]

This well-preserved stone has been known to scholars since it was first published in 1932 by Hassan El-Hawary; Gruendler mentioned it in her dissertation, published in 1993,[54] and Halevi wrote an excellent article addressing it and other early tombstones in 2004.[55] Nonetheless, this tombstone is mentioned by none of the revisionists cited above, and not even Donner makes use

[52] Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma*, 22.

[53] Hassan Mohammed El-Hawary, "The Second Oldest Islamic Monument Known, Dated A. H. 71 (A.D. 691): From the Time of the Omayyad Calif ʿAbd-el-Malik ibn Marwān," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (April 1932): 289–93, at 290–91. I have slightly modified El-Hawary's translation, which is to be preferred over that of Halevi, "Paradox of Islamization," 125–26.

[54] Gruendler, *Development*, 17.

[55] Halevi, "Paradox of Islamization."

of it in his analysis.[56] The fact that it derives from a private person may account for Donner's lack of interest, since the text cannot be said to be representative of any official group but only of those who cared for Abbasa after her death. According to my analysis, however, it deserves far greater attention than coins or bureaucratic texts, since it gives a unique insight into private religion during this early period.

As a philologist, El-Hawary was primarily interested in Abbasa's tomb for the fact that it presents the first, datable appearance of two Arabic formulae referring to Muhammad: "The greatest calamity of the People of Islam is their being bereft . . . " and "May God bless [Muhammad] and grant him peace."[57] El-Hawary noted the absence of these formulae in other early inscriptions from the first century, but given the very small sample size, he argued that this "does not necessarily mean that it was not used in this period."[58] Robert Hoyland, in contrast, has suggested that the statements on the tombstone better fit with those of the next century and so has argued for its redating to AH 171 instead of AH 71.[59] I find this argument unconvincing and deeply problematic, since it depends on a model of early Islamic practice to challenge evidence that is literally inscribed in stone.[60] Rather than change evidence to fit our model we should try to develop a model that accounts for all the evidence. Further, not only must this model make sense of this tombstone, it should also account for the fact that such statements would only appear on a tombstone if they resonated with the local community. We might also speculate that there must have existed some form of religious authority in this Upper Egyptian village to instruct Abbasa at her conversion and to instruct the stone mason precisely what to inscribe on her tombstone. If my analysis is correct, then this

[56] Donner does not mention the tombstone in his recent *Muhammad and the Believers*; he did make mention of it at the end of a footnote in *Narratives* (81 n. 88), but either he did not read El-Hawari's article or did not recognize its significance for his argument. Halevi provides one plausible explanation for Nevo and Koren's oversight (though not for Donner) in "Paradox of Islamization," 121 n. 2. Still, the continued slighting of this evidence in volumes printed after the article appeared is not so easily explained.

[57] El-Hawary, "Second Oldest Islamic Monument," 292.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Robert Hoyland, "The Content and Context of Early Arabic Inscriptions," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21 (1997): 77–102, at 87, and *Seeing Islam*, 695 n. 29. Halevi, "Paradox of Islamization," 125 n. 8, notes Hoyland's objection and dismisses it by providing evidence connecting the language on the tombstone with ostensibly contemporary debates preserved in literary texts.

[60] As a reviewer of this article correctly pointed out, Hoyland also bases his claim on his opinion that the script on the tombstone is "ornate" (*Seeing Islam*, 695) or "elaborate" ("Content and Context," 87). This is an impressionistic, not a scientific, judgment. In fact, El-Hawari noted that the script is full of "archaisms" and painstakingly compared it with other dated examples from the period, declaring "a great resemblance" to these examples as well as significant differences to examples from the second Islamic century (El-Hawary, "Second Oldest Islamic Monument," 291). The tombstone also fits well into Gruendler's comparative paleography (*Development*, 17, and the accompanying charts).

tombstone is evidence that at least for a small group of people in Upper Egypt in 71/691: (1) there were not only amorphous "believers" but also "people of Islam"; (2) it was possible to become a member of this group through conversion; (3) conversion was made possible through "bearing witness" to this truth with two articles of faith. Any attempt to explain the origins of Islam ought to account for this evidence.

In my view, the best way to make sense of this evidence is to begin with a solid theory of charismatic followership, one that presumes competing groups all in the process of routinizing Muhammad's authority for different ends. Such a theory helps us discern a relationship between official coins and documents and this private monument, but to understand that relationship we must first appreciate the differences. When they appear on coins and official correspondence, religious phrases enhance state power: the state speaks "in the name of God," and its coins are the conduit through which all may know that Muhammad was sent from God. His political leadership justifies theirs. In contrast, the gravestone is full of emotional attachment: grief for the death of Abbasa is mixed up with grief for the death of Muhammad, and both of these are tied to love and longing for the deceased. Her declaration of Muhammad as God's messenger is not a claim to authority but a hope for salvation. The feelings and experiences on display here have been passed over by most observers,[61] perhaps because emotional attachment to the Prophet Muhammad seems at odds with an objective view of history. When speaking about a charismatic group, however, emotion is a central aspect of their attachment.

Long before feminists and anthropologists drew our attention to the power and importance of affective states in religious practice, William James noted "feelings" first in his definition of religion: "Religion . . . shall mean for us *the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*."[62] James argues that feelings and personal experiences are the wellspring of religion, and that "myths, superstitions, dogmas, creeds and metaphysical theologies" arise from them spontaneously.[63] In other words, there is

[61] Halevi, "Paradox of Islamization," is a notable exception; on page 126 he points to several striking features regarding this monument, including its "elegiac quality."

[62] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 42 (italics in the original). Quoted in Casanova, *Public Religions*, 44. Like Casanova, I would argue that religion derives from both social as well as personal experiences, but Casanova unfairly takes James to task for only emphasizing the personal—in fact, James is quite clear that this is a provisional definition specifically meant for addressing his quarry, the personal experience of religion.

[63] James, *Varieties*, 339. While Weber is more interested in the economic aspects of the transition from pure charisma to its routinization, he did regard the charismatic group to be "based on an emotional form of communal relationship" (Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma*, 50). It is the routinization of charisma that creates religious institutions.

a causal and temporal link between private and public religion, with private religious feeling causing the rise of religious writings and institutions. More recent theorists regard emotional discourses as "pragmatic acts and communicative performances,"[64] ones that can tie communities together or undermine status hierarchies.[65] Therefore, those of us interested in the religious experience of early Muslims ought to pay particular attention to emotional discourses in those rare cases when they appear.

Given their public purpose, monuments and coins are ill-suited for the emotional, personal register. Literary texts, in contrast, include many stories of emotional attachment to the Prophet Muhammad and to Islam, but these were passed on orally and cannot be securely dated to the earliest centuries.[66] Personal letters are another matter entirely, and a surprising number from the early centuries of Islam have been preserved.[67] One such letter, full of emotional attachment, has been preserved in an unusual papyrus. This letter from Khunas bt. Muslim and two other women to their female correspondents in Fayyum has been dated to the early second/eighth century but may very well be earlier.[68] This letter was first edited by Otto Loth in 1880, and in his discussion he scoffed that it was almost pointless to provide a translation since the letter was *ganz inhaltslos*—content-free.[69] In fact, the letter contains one pious formula after another. For example,

[64] Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz, "Emotion, Discourse, and the Politics of Everyday Life," in *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.

[65] For the former, see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1986), 30–31; for the latter, see Helene Basu, "Hierarchy and Emotion: Love, Joy and Sorrow in a Cult of Black Saints in Gujarat, India," in Werbner and Basu, *Embodying Charisma*, 117–39, at 135.

[66] As for our earliest dated literary texts, they are the products of an emerging scholarly environment and demonstrate a professional detachment from their subjects. Our first dated literary papyrus comes from 229/844, a history of King David, attributed to Wahb b. Munabbih, d. 725 or 737; see Raif Georges Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, Codices Arabici antiqui, Bd. 1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972). Nabia Abbott (*Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, 3 vols. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957–72]) edited several undated fragments which she judged to derive from the end of the second/eighth century, including a text from Ibn Ishaq (1:80–99) and a fragment of the *Muwatta'* of Malik b. Anas (2:114–28). We have no earlier dated literary texts.

[67] Grob, *Documentary Arabic*; Khaled Mohamed Mahmoud Younes and Faculteit der Letteren, "Joy and Sorrow in Early Muslim Egypt: Arabic Papyrus Letters, Text and Content" (diss., Leiden University, August 27, 2013), https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/21541.

[68] P. Berol. Inv. 8505, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Adolf Grohmann thought it might be as early as the end of the first century; *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte zur Religion und religiösen Literatur in ägyptens Spätzeit*, ed. Friedrich Bilabel and Adolf Grohmann (Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg Library, 1934).

[69] Otto Loth, "Zwei arabische Papyrus," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morganländischen Gesellschaft* 34 (1880): 685–91. See now Grob, *Documentary Arabic*, 106–10, and Younes, "Joy and Sorrow," 16.

Peace be upon you! I praise God—other than whom there is no other god—for you! May God keep both us and you in His best protection in both this world and the world to come, and may He, according to His compassion, grant paradise to both you and us as our reward. I am writing you that we are well and healthy, which will give you joy. God be thanked and praised! We beg of God, for us and for you, that He grant, both to us and to you, the fruits of His bounty and the excesses of His grace, for we are for Him and we belong to Him.[70]

The correspondents continue in this vein for many lines, decorating each new subject with similar phrases and exhortations. A few decades later, Adolf Grohmann edited the verso side of that same piece of papyrus, which contains four short Qur'anic suras: 1, 112, 113, and 114.[71] Sura 1 is the *Fātiḥa*, the opening sura of the Qur'an, and contains an admonition that "praise belongs to God" and an appeal for guidance from God. Sura 112 is a succinct statement of God's unity, also partially reproduced in the Dome of the Rock mosaics and on Abd al-Malik's coin of 77/696–7. Suras 113 and 114 are appeals to God for protection from evil. Grohmann found these suras on many objects from the first two centuries and suggested they had an amuletic power. Those verses, along with the phrases in the letter, confer blessing and protective power on the senders, carriers, and recipients of the letter. A comparison with public uses of the same content is instructive. For example, a similar phrase appears:

a. On Abbasa's tombstone (71/691): "There is no god but God alone; He has no partner."
b. On the coin (77/696–97): "There is no god but God alone; He has no partner" and "God is one, God the everlasting; He has neither borne nor been born."
c. In the undated letter: "God, other than whom there is no other god."
d. On the back of the letter: "Say: God is one; God, the everlasting; He has neither borne nor been born, and nothing is equal to Him."

These similar phrases have very different effect in their various contexts. In the case of the coin (and similarly for the Dome of the Rock), the phrase is discriminating, distinguishing one view from others, supplemented by an implied threat that God sent Muhammad (and by extension his representatives) to establish his religion over all others. This distinguishing value is also pre-

[70] My translation from Loth's edition (in German) of the Arabic text.

[71] The side of the papyrus with the Qur'an verses is reproduced in a volume of plates (*tafel* 13) published as a companion (*tafelheft*) to Bilabel and Grohmann, *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte*. While it is possible that the suras and the letter were written on separate occasions, I follow both Grohmann and Loth in treating them as a unit.

sent on the tombstone, where it marks Abbasa as different from her father and grandfather (who carry Christian names), though without the threat of violence. The effect is quite different in the letter, however, where the statement of God's unity prefaces a string of appeals for his blessing. Likewise, on the back, Sura 112 is surrounded by other suras that appeal to God for guidance and protection. In this period, therefore, we see women wielding religious phrases of enormous power for their own purposes. This letter, I would argue, is an exercise of religious agency on the part of the women composing it and also a reaffirmation of the Prophet's own charismatic moment as recipient of the revelation which they quote.

It may seem foolish to equate the evidence of hundreds of coins and papyri with one gravestone and one letter, and I recognize the inherent limitations presented by these scraps of evidence. However, I believe they point to a serious problem that plagues scholarship on the origins of Islam. By virtue of their dates and conservation of symbols, coins lend themselves to progressive analysis. As religious symbols arise or fall away, notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are established, and Islam—if there is an Islam—is seen as emergent, becoming, not fully real. In contrast, the religious worlds of this tombstone and letter are quite complete. Long before there were madrasas, theological treatises, systematic commentaries on the Qur'an, or compendia of Islamic law, Abbasa and Khunas were accessing a tradition and a community that provided comfort and meaning to their lives. Islam, in their perspective, is not an emergent, incomplete phenomenon; it is just as real and complete as they can imagine.

In a way, Loth's dismissal of Khunas's letter as "*ganz inhaltlos*" continues today, as scholars, following the lead of both material and literary evidence, pursue early Islamic history as a story of politics and warfare.[72] In a world where women did not partake of political power, nor exercise scholarly authority through the writing of history, much of the social history of women is lost in this process. Moreover, scholars who dismiss the contents of this letter and tombstone risk missing a key aspect of the means by which political and military leaders maintained their authority. As Miyahara reminds us, authority must be recognized by followers to be effective, and this letter and tombstone provide a rare glimpse into the private lives of those men and women who, through their affective attachment to the Prophet Muhammad, built the charismatic community that gave power to the symbols wielded by caliphs and

[72] It is not only the material evidence that emphasizes the public sphere, many of our earliest histories, whether Ibn Abd al-Hakam's *Futūḥ Miṣr*, al-Baladhuri's *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, or the oral literature on which these were based, focus on warfare, with little regard for the affective range of attachment to Islam and a studied avoidance of domestic affairs or of the lives of most women.

amirs.[73] Abbasa bt. Jurayj and the six women named in this letter (Khunas bt. Muslim, Umm al-Arab bt. Ammar, Bint Hayyan, Umm Abd al-Rahim, Maryam, and Maryam's daughter) are not otherwise known to history; they do not appear to be connected to men of power and authority, yet their witness to the authority of Muhammad and the Qur'an is vital to the charismatic process.

To understand the implications of these women's exhortations within their society, it is helpful to pay attention to cultural anthropologists observing modern Muslim societies. Whether from Geertz's examination of Morocco and Java, Abu Lughod's participant observation of Egyptian Bedouins, or Anna Gade's ethnographic work in Indonesia, we note the centrality of the affective range of religious attachment over the rational, legal range.[74] Unlike Muslims in seventh-century Egypt, men and women in modern Muslim societies have at least the possibility of access to a rich, 1,400-year tradition of Islam, full of institutions and texts. Yet much of their religious experience is transmitted through oral means, part of an ephemeral network of communication that is utterly lost to written history. For example, Nadia Abu Zahra's study of practices surrounding the shrine of the Lady Zaynab in Cairo exposes a rich oral culture of healing stories, songs, and popular sayings that are full of emotional attachment to the saint and the whole family of the Prophet Muhammad. Abu Zahra recorded this oral exhortation in 1987 from "a simple woman from the country":

> O God, heal us, make us recover from the illness from which we suffer. O God, O God, take away the ache from our heads, take away the weariness from our hearts, for the sake of the Prophet, for the sake of our Lord al-Husayn. You, whose grandfather is the Prophet. O Lady [Zaynab], give us a look! Husayn, give us a look! For their sake, please God take away the headache, take away the unhappiness in our hearts, take away illness, take away illness from my head. O God, my head!
>
> O Lady, you Pure One, for the sake of the Prophet take away the pain, for the sake of the Prophet, may he be blessed, for the sake of the Lady. O God, Father of all. Please God heal us, make us recover from the illness from which we suffer. May we successfully achieve our goals. May God guide the disobedient. Please God hear me, for the sake of the mystery of the Prophet, for the sake of the mystery of the Opening [sura of the Qur'an].[75]

[73] Part of my interest in this article is to explore the role of women in the charismatic process, but in no way am I suggesting that affective attachment to the Prophet Muhammad is unique to women. While material evidence also elides the male affective voice, it is powerfully present in heroic (*manāqib* and *faḍā'il*) and devotional (sufi and penitential) literature.

[74] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*; Anna Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

[75] Nadia Abu Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful: Studies in Contemporary Muslim Society* (Reading, NY: Ithaca Press, 1997), 154 (slightly modified).

The formal similarities between this prayer and Khunas's letter are striking. Both are full of emotional appeals to God; both are concerned with health and healing; and both invoke the mysterious power of the first sura of the Qur'an. As with the gravestone and the letter on papyrus, this prayer speaks to central tenets of the faith: God is in control of all but is involved in human affairs and responds to appeals. Muhammad (and by extension his family) is close to God, and those who invoke his name can expect salvation and miracles of healing and comfort.

The relationship between personal appeal and community is underlined by the fact that this prayer is no private exhortation, but rather a public performance that appeals to, and reaffirms, a common, public religious sentiment.[76] The repetition of these truths, both in modern Egypt as well as in the seventh century, is part of the process by which the charismatic community continuously creates the authority of Muhammad. While informal in tone and full of colloquialisms, the prayer partakes of a fund of common religious symbols that resonate with the crowd. The efficacy of these words is particularly evident in the case of this shrine, dedicated to Zaynab bt. Husayn, the granddaughter of the Prophet who is understood as particularly sympathetic to pain, given her experience on the battlefield of Karbala'. Architectural historians have pointed out, however, that it is highly unlikely that this particular Zaynab is buried in Cairo.[77] It is possible, of course, that the Lady Zaynab responds to her petitioners no matter their location; it is also possible that these women (and men) produce Zaynab's charismatic authority through their prayers. Similarly, we do not need to resolve the question of Muhammad's historical life or self-understanding to appreciate the fact that the lament on Abbasa's tomb appeals to a religious language that would have resonated with her community. Muslims do not need madrasas and theological tracts to understand their faith, nor do they need to have been present with the Prophet in Medina (or with his granddaughter at Karbala') to connect with the charisma of those exemplary individuals. Rather, through the emotions of grief, love, and longing, they forge a direct and powerful bond, one that has specific effects on the broader community. Like James, I find that feeling and personal experience of religion is primary, and that public institutions arise from them.

To summarize, attachment to the Prophet Muhammad and to Islam in modern Muslim societies is often found in oral and performative modes of

[76] Grob, *Documentary Arabic*, 110, also points out that the letter was also likely "performed" or read aloud to the whole household.

[77] Caroline Williams, "The Cult of 'Alid Saints in the Fatimid Monuments of Cairo Part II: The Mausolea," *Muqarnas* 3 (1985): 39–60, at 44. In "Transforming the Old: Cairo's New Medieval City," *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 457–75, at 458, Williams mentions that the Sayyida Zaynab mosque, along with Hussain and Nafisa, are being renovated as a part of an overall, and disastrous, renovation of old mosques.

communication; studies of modern society that only focused on written texts would miss much of this profound religiosity. Further, these oral exhortations depend on a broad foundation of common religious conviction to make sense. Therefore, scholars of Islamic history must also give greater weight to the few scraps of evidence that capture aspects of oral and performative religion. Those who privilege political representations of religion, as found in both material and literary evidence, have the arrow of causality reversed. When Abd al-Malik prints statements about the Prophet Muhammad on his coins, he is not creating Islam as an official religion ex nihilo; rather, he is responding to popular support for his Zubayrid rivals who were the first to stamp Muhammad's name and the confession of faith on coins. In turn, however, neither the Umayyads nor the Zubayrids would use this language if it were not for the existence of a powerful community of followers of Muhammad as represented in the sentiments on Abbasa's tombstone. That grave marker and the women's letter on papyrus offer us an important glimpse into what must have been a broad set of oral practices in early Muslim societies.

CONCLUSION

As scholars develop new methodologies for addressing the literary evidence of early Islamic history, especially hadith, the conclusions that writers like Popp and Luxenberg come to about Muhammad and the origins of Islam need a response. These writers make much of the notion that the origins of Islam are "hidden" and that material evidence may tell a different story than what we find in literary accounts. These claims are misleading in several ways. First, origins and narratives of origins are human constructs designed to make a specific point about present concerns. Depending on one's purpose, one could put the origins of the United States at several different points: 1776, 1787, even 1492. Likewise, Muslim theologians sometimes suggest that Islam began with Muhammad and sometimes that it began with God's creation of the world. Second, much of the shock value involved with the search for the origins of "Islam" comes from the notion that Islam in the seventh and eighth century was different from what we would recognize today. But if we are honest, then we must also admit that Islam in Egypt today is not what Islam is in Senegal today, or in Indonesia today. The very phrase "origins of Islam" presumes a clarity and definition of Islam that breaks down immediately upon further examination. This presumed clarity is at the heart of a third problem, a notion that for Islam to exist, it must produce a self-conscious literature attesting to sophisticated uses of theology and law. But neither the devotees of the Lady Zaynab in twentieth-century Cairo, nor the correspondents in eighth-century Fustat and Fayyum, show any need for madrasas, ulama, or religious texts. They, along with Abbasa's community, appear to have had a fully suffi-

cient notion of Islam, one that shared some features in common with Muslims today, though it was clearly a minority tradition in the eighth century.

The question I have tried to address here is far more limited: what was the status of Muhammad after his death? Most of the literary and material evidence will present only one part of this answer.[78] I suggest, in contrast, that sociological theory can provide a fuller framework to balance the quantity of the evidence produced by the state bureaucracy against the quality of private evidence preserved in Abbasa's tombstone and Khunas's letter. As a charismatic figure, Muhammad's followers would consist of concentric circles of individuals, from a few close insiders to a large group of hangers-on, with many people in between. We also know from anthropological studies of similar communities that there would be a large variation among these individuals, with some strongly committed to the founder's project, while others intend to use the founder's charisma to achieve their own ends, and still others resent or reject the founder but stick around for social, financial, or other reasons. Each of these individuals would recognize and remember different aspects of the founder's personality.

The death of the founder causes a crisis of leadership, one that can be resolved in a number of ways; in the case of the seventh-century Near East, the danger for any new religious idea would be absorption into one of the far better organized and established traditions of the area. This much of the Luxenberg-Ohlig-Popp thesis is reasonable, but they do not account for the fact that, were a new religious tradition to emerge, it would appear as something on the order of the history of early Christianity, with small groups of individuals holding on to various and differing aspects of the faith. These small groups would be members of charismatic communities who held on to an emotional attachment to the founder after his death. Their rituals and their devotion to his memory would be simple in comparison with later developments, but strong and fulfilling nonetheless.

This very basic framework helps us interpret the surviving evidence of the seventh century in a number of ways. First, it throws into relief the biased nature of the material evidence. This evidence represents public, not private, religion and therefore displays a pragmatic depiction of Islam, only gradually including the most general aspects of the faith; it also tends toward an eclectic, not a dogmatic or protective, posture regarding religious iconography, certainly not the least because the boundaries of Islam were so ill-defined in comparison with surrounding religious traditions. Abd al-Malik's coins and monuments are a shift in this public representation, but not because the amir is establishing

[78] Donner carefully summarizes the conclusions that can be drawn from this evidence in *Muhammad and the Believers*, 205–11.

a new tradition, as Popp argues and Donner seems to suggest,[79] but rather because he is responding to pressure built up by charismatic communities. Abd al-Malik needed the support, not only of the political communities (Alids and Zubayrids) attested in the literary sources, but also of the anonymous pious communities, such as the group in Upper Egypt that produced Abbasa's tombstone. Second, the framework of a charismatic tradition reminds us that most of the material evidence is entirely lacking the affective register of human experience. We should expect that devotion of these small groups to the now dead founder would be oral, ephemeral, and emotional, none of which we see in coins and official correspondence. Further, much of the surviving literary material focuses on war and the experience of warriors. Donner suggests that warriors did have an emotional attachment to religion, based on the Qur'an, Muhammad, and imminent apocalypse.[80] This seems as reasonable a definition of Islam as any, but it can only be representative of one of many competing notions of Islam in this early period and perhaps neither the most widespread nor the most powerful.

The status of Muhammad, therefore, depends on the memories and emotional connection of followers to reinforce the power of his charismatic authority. Therefore, we should expect that Muhammad's authority was used for the very different purposes of many groups. On the one hand, his example seems to justify the existence of the state, which inscribes his name on buildings and coins. Here, Muhammad is remembered as a warrior and statesman. On the other hand, grieving for Muhammad, and perhaps for members of his family, serves a quite different purpose, one that endows Muhammad with new powers and capabilities as healer of illness and intercessor for salvation. Similar to the dynamic that Oakes observed in studying new religious movements, individuals in the seventh and eighth centuries likely used Muhammad's charismatic status to enhance their own projects while simultaneously contributing to an increase in Muhammad's charismatic power.

Revisionist scholars often suggest that their methods are more objective, since they avoid the "myth-making" of the literary sources. Because most his-

[79] Ibid., 205–6. Donner credits both Ibn al-Zubayr's "stern piety" (205) and also a program to separate out Christians and Jews from the believers' movement (206). As for the first, it doesn't strike me that Abd al-Malik would have bothered responding to pious Zubayrid statements unless there was a large "charismatic community" worth appealing to. As for the second, one has to buy Donner's notion that Jews and Christians were initially seen as part of the believers' movement to accept that Abd al-Malik is now trying to keep them out. More likely, it seems to me, is that Jews and Christians continued to follow their religious traditions while joining forces with the Hijazi Arabs when it seemed fruitful to do so. I fail to see that the anti-trinitarian statement on Abd al-Malik's coin would have offended Arab Christians any more than the visage of a hated Emperor. See also Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts," 397.

[80] Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 57–61; this is also a major theme of Donner's *Early Islamic Conquests*.

torical artifacts derive from a male political elite, history is skewed toward their political activities and their public representation of religion. It is the taking of these artifacts as representative of "Islam" (or of the lack of "Islam") that I take as problematic. As I have argued, however, I do not think the material evidence is useless in telling us about the broader religious influence of Islam in the seventh century, and in fact a better theory of religious emergence helps us make sense of all the early materials. Dismissing the literary evidence out of hand, therefore, is just as unacceptable as pretending that this literary evidence yields a single narrative of Islamic origins. Yet, revisionist scholars do a great service to the study of religious origins by pointing out alternative ways to read the evidence. This creative work not only puts information from archeology, numismatics, and other forms of material culture into perspective, it also helps us understand the ways by which dominant historical narratives become established.

We are helped in these matters if we begin with the premise that Islam is not defined by the arrival of a single marker (a book, a creed, or an empire), but by a polythetic set of markers that is constantly under negotiation.[81] Islam (s) are far more likely to have originated out of competing interpretations of the salient historical events, arising from several centers of political and intellectual activity. Further, in most cases these expressions of authority gained their force as much from new applications of local usages as they do from anything specifically Islamic. In the case of Muhammad, that meaning was based on a group of believers for whom Muhammad continued to be a person of importance in their lives. Whether they faced fundamental questions of death, battle, illness, or governance, the memory of his example continued to be efficacious, and this emotional bond with a shared past was a key factor in establishing an enduring religious tradition.

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[81] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3–8.