

### III. From Restoration to Reinterpretation

The first chapter of this project discussed Khan's the engagement of Khan's early religious writing with the debate surrounding the representation and role of Muhammad for the individual. We have seen that Khan developed a negative stance towards the progression of history, assuming a general decline related to the increasing distance from the time of Muhammad. This period was perceived as the shelter of original Islam.

In this chapter, I aim to contrast Khan's first phase with his *Al-Huṭbāt al-Aḥmadīyah* (1870), an extended Urdu version of his original *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (1870). Since Khan was only insufficiently acquainted with English – his knowledge being restricted to reading – the English version was translated from Khan's records by his son while the Urdu version was published afterwards. In this work, Khan discusses different topics related to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and aims to refute charges against him; the biography can be described as a reaction to William Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* (1861) which presented several statements that were unbearable for Khan.

Equipped with the background of Khan's early writings, my discussion here will examine whether it can be reasonably argued that there was a rupture between his pre- and his post-1857 writings. In particular, I will consult second and more extensive biography of Muhammad as a contrasting point of reference in order to question the assertion that the new approach applied here can be traced only to his engagement with critical historiography as he found it in Muir.

#### 1. William Muir

As I have discussed above, Khan imagined history as a gradual distancing from the days of the Prophet Muhammad, implying a deviation from pure Islam. He interprets the alarming dissemination of innovations he observed in his time as a corruption of pure Islam. He recognises that the sole possibility of restoring una-

dulterated Islam is the abandonment of any kind of innovation. Innovation is described as inherently vicious, for the *sunnat* of Muhammad does not require any addition or adjustment. It is the perfect guideline for a Muslim of any and all times. Khan calls for a total restoration of the customs and practices of the days of Muhammad and for an eradication of all innovations. Hence, Khan's early texts clearly reflect the early 19<sup>th</sup> century's reformist discourse – and Khan himself can be described not only as a participant, but at the same time a product of these developments.

From the early 1850s onwards, however, we can observe a shift. Khan relinquishes his focus on merely inner-Islamic issues and begins to confront the Christian mission, as has been discussed in the preceding chapter. In the following paragraphs, I will shift my focus to William Muir, who was also present at the *munāẓarah* between Pfander and Kairanawi.

When Pfander was compelled to leave India as the result of the debate that was perceived to be a resounding defeat for Christian missionaries, Muir continued the debate with Muslims through an approach reminiscent of Pfander's. In fact, when he penned *The Life of Mahomet* (1861), he followed the suggestion of Pfander, as he explains in the preface:

The work was undertaken, and the study of Oriental authorities first entered upon, at the instance of the Rev. C. G. Pfander, D.D., so well known as a Christian apologist in the controversy with the Mahomedans, – who urged that a biography of the Prophet of Islam suitable for the perusal of his followers, should be compiled in the Hindoostanee language, from the early sources acknowledged by themselves to be authentic and authoritative.<sup>1</sup>

*The Life of Mahomet* is characterised by its utilisation of only such sources recognised by Muslims. The underlying aim of apologetic intentions stood in stark contrast to the initial claim of providing a reliable biography of Muhammad in a vernacular language. Yet, while the biography was published only in English, the “Hindoostanee” version remained incomplete. Hence, his targeted audience was primarily made up of Christian readers. Muir's apologetic intention can hardly be denied, as will be elucidated in the following passage in detail. But, keeping in mind Pfander's apologetic approach argued on the grounds of Islamic sources, his request that Muir compile a biography based on authentic Islamic sources already suggests that Muir's biography would constitute Christian apologia.<sup>2</sup>

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1 William Muir: *The Life of Mahomet: and History of Islam to the Era of Hegira* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861), Vol. I, iii.

2 Avril A. Powell: *Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 127f.

In the following paragraph, I will first discuss Muir's educational background in order to more thoroughly comprehend his historical approach for *The Life of Mahomet*.

## 1.1 William Muir and Critical Historiography

### 1.1.1 Educational Background

William Muir was born in 1819 in Glasgow. He was the youngest son of the merchant William Muir senior, who died only two years afterwards. Left alone with eight children, all younger than eleven years old, his widow returned to her hometown of Kilmarnock, where she educated her four sons in the newly established educational institutions of the town. The Muir brothers grew up in a time that saw significant evangelical missionary activities in Scotland, these being targeted against the Catholic Church. Since the Muir brothers' mother retained the strong evangelical aspirations of their deceased father, she arranged the brothers' education very carefully. Thus, their early education reflected the evangelical orientation of their environment.<sup>3</sup>

In her extensive study of the Muir brothers, Avril A. Powell calls for a differentiated view of Evangelicalism, which scholars have perceived as a synonym for anti-rationalism. She emphasises a radical shift in Evangelicalism from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, recognising a strong tendency toward rationalism and learning:

Usually considered antithetical to intellectualism in its firm emphasis on the biblical 'word' over other claims to truth, followers of Evangelicalism have seemed to inhabit a completely different world from the eighteenth-century 'men of reason'. But some recent re-evaluations have brought some of Evangelicalism's influential adherents in Scotland into the orbit of Enlightenment thinking to inflect the relationship rather differently. [S]ome Scottish evangelicals are now seen rather as advocates of a form of 'rational Calvinism', embracing 'an increased respect for learning, including the "new learning" of the Enlightenment' [...].<sup>4</sup>

Powell describes the general curriculum of the Muir brothers' early education as merely secular at first glance. Explicitly religious instruction was not given in the academies. That said, "the teachers were ordained clerics, and no doubt sought to

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3 Ibid., 27-32.

4 Ibid., 14.

reinforce the Christian message in informal ways.”<sup>5</sup> Powell states that, despite an obviously secular curriculum, “religious and moral values were indirectly reinforced.”<sup>6</sup> The extent of these religious and moral instructions depended considerably on the individual teacher, however. In discussing the example of an English and history master, Powell notes significant religious stances, as the teacher states in his textbook that: “the Bible, ‘the best of all histories’, was literally true, that what they studied in natural history confirmed the ‘argument from design’.”<sup>7</sup>

During his early education in Kilmarnock, as well as his university days in Glasgow and Edinburgh, Muir absorbed a conception of history that emphasised the value of classical Mediterranean civilisations as a referential golden age. As Powell writes, “[...] the renaissance idea that the ‘classical era’ in the Mediterranean provided the single and sufficient paradigm of ‘civilization’ remained virtually unchallenged.”<sup>8</sup> In the course of this approach, philosophy was taught through classics, and comprised of moral philosophy as well as logic. Influenced by this education, William Muir also retained – into his later years – a perception of history structured by a past standard, with regard to both his own and other civilisations. The classical period was perceived as the single and authentic point of reference for all subsequent historical developments.<sup>9</sup>

Leaving his studies in Glasgow and Edinburgh uncompleted, Muir received the opportunity to begin an administrative career in the East India Company. In 1804, the Company had decided to establish Haileybury College in Hertfordshire in order to improve the preparation of its administration personnel. The college was divided into two departments, these being the European and the Oriental departments. Both were compulsory parts of the curriculum. The European department again emphasised classical learning: “[...] like the Scottish curriculum, the learning of history [was conveyed] through the classics, thus, reinforcing their [i.e. the Muir brothers’] strong induction into Hellenic and Roman civilization.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the Oriental department was intended for the acquisition of the “classical and vernacular languages of India.”<sup>11</sup> Powell notes a significant shift between the early and later teachers of the college’s Oriental department. While the first generation consisted of exceptional scholars and language instruction by Indian teachers, the generation of teachers of William Muir’s time in the 1830s lacked this exceptional learning, and Indian teachers were no longer employed

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5 Ibid., 36.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 37.

8 Ibid., 39.

9 Ibid., 40f.

10 Ibid., 60.

11 Ibid., 62.

because of “their domestic complications, often following marriages in Britain, having involved huge expenditure.”<sup>12</sup> But apart from this change, there was also a shift in attitudes towards Indian civilisation.

At this time, the classical languages – Sanskrit and, in particular, Arabic – experienced a loss of influence in the college. While Sanskrit was required only to a certain extent from 1826-36, dependent upon the area of the students’ future employment, it was made compulsory from 1838 on. Arabic, however, was taught only as a voluntary class in the 1820s and 1830s, and participants were few. Still, William Muir decided to learn Arabic, and “was a prize-winner in a class of only two.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1837, Muir entered civil service through the administration of the East India Company. After initially being stationed in smaller district towns like Kanpur, Bundhelkund, and Fatehpur Sikri, as was usual for a young civilian’s early years, he obtained the post of secretary to the governor of the North-West Provinces in Agra. There, he had the opportunity to follow the controversy between Pfander and Kairanawi. During his initial time in rather remote district towns, Muir had devoted his leisure time, like many would-be scholar-administrators, to language-learning, reading, translating, and writing. Moreover, his studies were bolstered by the dearth of British colleagues in these remote places. He benefitted, however, from the exchange with local, religious authorities, this time further being enhanced by the fact that those *qasbahs* were often centres of scholarship and religious learning. Nevertheless, Powell emphasises Muir’s text-based approach: “Not that the Muirs would necessarily choose to frequent the temples, mosques and shrines on their doorsteps in search of insights into ‘popular’ religious practice for both John and William opted for a narrowly ‘bookish’ encounter with textual Islam and Hinduism, showing little interest in temple and shrine practices.”<sup>14</sup> In 1876, William Muir eventually retired as Lieutenant-Governor after nearly forty years of service.

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12 Ibid., 63.

13 Ibid., 65.

14 Ibid., 78.

## 2. The Life of Mahomet

During 1857 and 1861, Muir published his four-volume magnum opus, *The Life of Mahomet*. He had previously published a series of articles in the *Calcutta Review* and compiled them in his *The Life of Mahomet* in a consistent and revised format. The book starts with an extensive introduction discussing the original sources which Muir utilised for the preparation of his work, and addresses their authenticity and reliability. In the following paragraphs, I will analyse the implications of this introduction with regard to Muir's approach to the sources and his historical approach in general. I will also examine how his conception of history influenced his views on Islam.

Having described the impetus to compile this biography in the preface with regard to Pfander, Muir proceeds to discuss the referenced sources and their reliability. He introduces a categorisation of historical material in "legendary tales," "tradition", and "contemporary material." The first category is compared to the stories of Hercules and described as being less reliable. Legendary tales are rather read with regard to their underlying, abstract principles, their origin in "real facts" being doubtful. Tradition, however, may be related to "actual or supposed events." But its fashion of transmission distorts its reliability. It is the task of the historian to derive the factual parts of the traditions with reference to context, as it may be presented in reliable contemporary or historical material.<sup>15</sup>

Concluding this concise description of his historical approach, Muir states that the sources of the history of Islam cannot be exclusively associated with any one of these categories:

It is *legendary*, for it contains multitudes of wild myths, such as the "Light of Mahomet," and the cleansing of his heart. It is *traditional*, since the main material of the story is oral recitation, not recorded until Islam had attained to a full growth. But it possesses also some of the elements of *History*, because there are contemporary records of undoubted authority, to which we can still refer.<sup>16</sup>

Muir emphasises the difficulty of deriving a reliable biography of Muhammad due to the inconsistency and heterogeneity of the material available. But, in the following passage, he sets out to classify the present sources and develop an approach for how to utilise this material. He recognises two main sources, the Quran and the

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<sup>15</sup> Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. I, i.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, i-ii.

*ḥadīṣ*-tradition. Besides these, Muir also recognises Arab poetry and other unspecified contemporary material, but rejects its reliability, as this material is also transmitted via the tradition of *ḥadīṣ*.

First, Muir discusses the Quran and its reliability as a historical source. Here, he negates the Muslim stance of holding the Quran as divinely inspired:

The Coran consists exclusively of the revelations or commands which Mahomet *professed*, from time to time, to receive through Gabriel, as a message direct from God; and which under an *alleged* divine connection, he delivered to those about him. At the time of *pretended* inspiration, or shortly after, each passage was recited by Mahomet before the companions or followers who happened to be present [...].<sup>17</sup> (Italics added)

Muir denies any divine character of the Quran and rather recognises Muhammad as its author. Nevertheless, Muir acknowledges the uncorrupted state of the Quran as it was compiled during the reign of the first caliphs: first, the memory of the companions was still fresh at this time and, secondly, various transcripts prepared by the companions existed. Any deviation in the early editions of the first caliphs would thus have been identified, as Muir argues. He acknowledges the reliability of the Quran regarding its transmission, yet once again denies its divine inspiration:

[W]e may upon the strongest presumption affirm that every verse in the Coran is the genuine and unaltered composition of Mahomet himself, and conclude with at least a close approximation to the verdict of Von Hammer – *That we hold the Coran to be surely Mahomet's word, as the Mahometans hold it to be the word of God.*<sup>18</sup>

This acknowledgment of the reliability of the Quran may reflect Muir's intention to fashion his biography as a psychological study of Muhammad, thus utilising the Quran as crucial insight:

The Coran becomes the ground-work and the test of all inquiries into the origin of Islam and the character of its founder. Here we have a store-house of *Mahomet's own words recorded during his life*, extending over the whole course of his public career, and illustrating his religious views, his public acts, and his domestic character. By this standard of his own making we may safely judge his life and actions, for it *must* represent either what he actually thought, or that which he desired to appear as thinking. And so true a mirror is the Coran of Mahomet's character [...].<sup>19</sup>

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17 Ibid., ii-iii.

18 Ibid., xxvii.

19 Ibid., xxvii.

In Muir's biography, Muhammad is humanised and studied as an ordinary man, rejecting Islamic claims for his prophethood and divine inspiration. Still, acknowledges the Quran as a crucial source, providing a reliable record of Muhammad's words, which may be utilised to study his personality.

Of even more relevance for the present study is, however, Muir's approach to the tradition. He views the *ḥadīṣ* far more critically than the Quran. The time of early Islam, following the death of Muhammad, was, according to Muir, characterised by "arms." The intervals of long marches between fights were filled with, as he writes:

calling up the past in familiar conversation or more formal discourse. On what topic, then, would the early Moslems more enthusiastically descant than on the acts and sayings of that wonderful man who had called them into existence as a conquering nation, and had placed in their hands "the keys both of this World and of Paradise?" Thus, the converse of Mahomet's followers would be much about him.<sup>20</sup>

Muir describes this environment as encouraging not only the growth of the tradition, but, in the course of time, its exaggeration:

[A]s time removed him [i.e. Muhammad] farther and farther from them [i.e. the companions], the lineaments of the mysterious mortal who was wont to hold familiar intercourse with the messengers of heaven, rose in dimmer, but in more gigantic proportions. The mind was unconsciously led on to think of him with supernatural power, and ever surrounded by supernatural agency. Here was the material out of which Tradition grew luxuriantly. Whenever there was at hand no standard of fact whereby these recitals might be tested, the Memory was aided by the unchecked efforts of the Imagination; and as days rolled on the latter element gained complete ascendancy.<sup>21</sup>

When, furthermore, the growing territory required a more sophisticated jurisdiction, the Quran alone could no longer suffice. The *sunnat* of Muhammad, as transmitted via the *ḥadīṣ*, came to be consulted as an additional source. As a consequence, tradition received a hitherto unknown status, and Muslims perceived Muhammad as infallible:

The recitals regarding the life of the Prophet now acquired an unlooked-for value. *He* had never held himself to be infallible, except when directly inspired of God;

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20 Ibid., xxviii.

21 Ibid., xxviii-xxix.



but this new doctrine assumed that a heavenly and unerring guidance pervaded every word and action of his prophetic life.<sup>22</sup>

Muir describes both the gatherings of the companions as well as the addition of the conduct of Muhammad as sources for jurisdiction crucial for supernatural exaggerations as well as the fabrication of tradition:

The prerogative now claimed for Tradition stimulated the growth of fabricated evidence, and led to the preservation of every kind of story, spurious or real, touching the Prophet.<sup>23</sup>

Since these traditions were not preserved in written form until the later part of the first century of Islam, and were transmitted only orally, Muir furthermore adds his suspicion of error in remembrance, on the one side, and intentional distortion due to political circumstances as well as bias and prejudice on the other.<sup>24</sup>

In Muir's view, the collectors of tradition had to rely on this orally transmitted material, partially partially fabricated as it may have been and partially distorted by superstition, to provide evidence for particular Muslim convictions. Still, the collectors developed a critical approach to this material:

It is evident then that some species of criticism was practised by the Compilers, and that, too, so unsparingly that out of a hundred traditions not more than *one* was accepted, and the remaining ninety-nine entirely rejected.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, Muir refers to significant shortcomings in their approach, which was based on the authority and reliability of the chain of the transmitters (*isnād*). A tradition had to be traced back without interruption to a companion, including the name of every single transmitter. His criticism of the collectors consisted of investigating their character and reliability.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, Muir criticises the lack of any examination of the transmitted content:

But the European reader will be grievously deceived if he at all regards such criticism, rigorous as it was, in the light of a sound and discriminating investigation into the credibility of the traditional elements. It was not the *subject-matter* of a tradition, but simply the *names* attached thereto, which decided the question of credit.

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22 Ibid., xxxi.

23 Ibid., xxxi-xxxii.

24 Ibid., xxxvi.

25 Ibid., xlv.

26 *El*: "ḥadīth"

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[...] No inherent improbability, however glaring, could exclude a narration thus attested from its place in the authentic collections.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, in identifying a contradiction in the spirit of Islam that suppresses “free inquiry and real criticism,” Muir explains the reason that the collectors’ maintained a merely superficial level of criticism:

The blind faith of Mahomet and his followers spurned the aids of investigation and evidence.<sup>28</sup>

Muir thus aims to develop a critical approach that utilises the vast material of tradition, as the Quran alone cannot suffice for a biography due to its disordered arrangement. The collectors’ criticism cannot provide a certain basis of tradition – despite their rigorous exclusion of material – for any inquiry into content or “internal probability” is lacking. Muir therefore proposes the Quran as a reliable and authentic point of reference:

And here we are fortunate in having at hand, as a standard of comparison, the Coran, which has been already proved a genuine and contemporary document.<sup>29</sup>

On these grounds, Muir proceeds to reject any aspect of superstition to be found in the tradition, as this implies a direct contradiction made against the statement of the Quran that Muhammad had never performed any miracle. Still, Muir does not recognise much practical applicability for this method apart from the aforementioned refusal of miracles in the *hadīṣ*.<sup>30</sup>

Since the *hadīṣ*-tradition is entirely “*ex parte*” – i.e. the material of tradition is completely self-referential, lacking any external verification by any opposing position – Muir concludes that the biographer of Muhammad must rely on internal criteria:

In this view, the points on which the probability of a tradition will mainly depend, appear to be *first*, whether there existed a bias among the Mahometans generally respecting the subject narrated; *second*, whether there are traces of any special interest, prejudice, or design, on the part of the narrator; and *third*, whether the narrator had opportunity for personally knowing the facts. These topics will perhaps best

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27 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. I, xlv.

28 Ibid., xlv.

29 Ibid., l.

30 Ibid., l-li.

be discussed by considering the *Period* to which a narration relates, and then the *Subject* of which it treats.<sup>31</sup>

In breaking the lifetime of Muhammad into separate periods, Muir thus aims to distinguish the certain knowledge his companions could have had regarding any particular period. In analysing the subject of the tradition, he aims to disclose “*personal, party, and national, bias*” as motives for fabricating false *ḥadīṣ*. He mentions the merely personal interest in being associated with Muhammad as well as the purpose of increasing the position of one’s own party, tribe, family, etc. Finally, he discusses the impact of national bias, i.e. prejudices which are not confined to a particular faction, but which had obtained a universal character among Muslims. Muir assigns any glorification of Muhammad to this category, as well as the attribution of miraculous powers to him. The latter can be disclaimed with reference to the Quran, while any other glorification remains impossible to be checked and verified. Muir describes the narrators as blind toward rational thinking regarding Muhammad, as they readily believed even irrational, miraculous stories in their faith:

On a subject so impalpable to sense, so readily apprehended by imagination, it may be fairly assumed that reason had little share in controlling the fertile productions of fancy; that the conclusions of his susceptible and credulous followers far exceeded the premises granted by Mahomet; that even simple facts were construed by their excited faith as pregnant with marks of supernatural power and unearthly companionship; and that, after the object of veneration had passed from their sight, fond devotion perpetuated and enhanced the fascinating legends.<sup>32</sup>

Still, Muir states that those traditions may contain a true core which had been adorned with superstitious exaggerations. Moreover, the lack of an external perspective meant that traditions unfavourable to Muhammad fell into disrepute or were rejected “because they appeared to dishonour Mahomet [...]”<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, Muir identifies a set of principles that may be applied to verify a tradition as reliable, including: agreements between independent traditions, agreements between portions of independent traditions, verbal coincidence, pointing to a common written original, and correspondence with the Quran. Strikingly, he also acknowledges the “disparagement of Mahomet” as a reason for credibility:

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31 Ibid., lii-liiii.

32 Ibid., lxiii.

33 Ibid., lxxii.

When a tradition contains statements in disparagement of Mahomet, such as an indignity shown to him by his followers; or an insult from his enemies after his emigration (for then the period of his humiliation had passed, and that of his exaltation arrived); his failure in any enterprise or laudable endeavour; or, in fine, anything at variance either in fact or doctrine with the principles and tendencies of Islam, there will be strong reason for admitting it as authentic: because, otherwise, it seems hardly credible that such a tradition could be fabricated, or having been fabricated, that it could obtain currency among the followers of Mahomet.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, any tradition that describes an incongruence in Muhammad's acts in comparison to the doctrines of Islam is perceived as credible, as Muir sees such an invention and its subsequent preservation as highly unlikely.

Hence, Muir concludes with an assertion of the general credibility of the tradition, without, however, accepting all traditions unquestioned. Instead, he believes that Islamic traditions require further investigation and verification, for the Muslim criticism of merely judging the credibility of the transmitters does not suffice, as aspects relating to the content of a tradition are ignored entirely. Muir suggests principles of internal verification which situate a particular tradition within its historical context as well as an analysis of its congruity in relation to other traditions as well as the Quran.

Muir's approach to history is thus characterised by two main aspects: first, a preference for a textually based view on Islam and, second, source criticism. In the conclusion of his later *Annals of the Early Caliphate* (1883), Muir explains his view of history with regard to Islam more explicitly and describes Islam as a static system which is incapable of even slight change:

As regards the spiritual, social, and dogmatic aspect of Islam, there has been neither progress nor material change since the third century of the Hegira. Such as we found it to have been then, such it is also at the present day. The nations may advance in civilisation and morality; but Islam stands still.<sup>35</sup>

Any reform is incompatible with Islam, as "a reformed Islam, which should part with the Divine ordinances on which they rest, or attempt in the smallest degree to change them by a rationalistic selection, abatement, or variation, would be Islam no longer."<sup>36</sup> Thus, Islam can be studied only by investigating its early history, this being the essential, immutable Islam. As Powell argues, Muir was influenced

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34 Ibid., lxxxii.

35 Muir: *Annals of the Early Caliphate* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1883), 459.

36 Ibid., 458.

by his educational background to the extent that he perceived the past as an irretrievable point of reference that cannot be regained, and transferred this approach to his study of Islam. Islam is viewed as a fixed system with immutable precepts and rules, disallowing even the slightest deviation or adaptation. Any further development is denied, thus informing Muir's lack of interest in contemporary, lived Islam. Instead, his perspective focuses on the early history of Islam, with Muhammad and his lifetime providing a crucial point of reference in identifying essential Islam. Nasir Abbas Nayyar describes this attempt to recover an original historical essence as a general trend in 19<sup>th</sup> century historiography and traces this back to etymology, which had been universalised as a general methodological approach in historical studies. As Nayyar writes, "No matter how different the meanings of a present word appear in comparison to its origin, they cannot evade their origin [...] Thus, in understanding the present meanings of a word, it is inevitable to refer to its origin."<sup>37</sup> This universal approach came to be utilised in historiography as well, thus mandating the recovery of an origin to which the present form of a religion etc. is inextricably bound.<sup>38</sup>

Muir took a generally positive stance towards Islamic sources that, to a certain extent, resembled the arguments of Pfander. Muir recognised the Quran as a certain and uncorrupted source, albeit one that does not provide much material for a biography due to its inner structure. In order to gather such material, Muir had to rely on the *ḥadīṣ*-tradition, a vast collection of rather uncertain material. For Muir, its critical standards did not suffice, however, as criticism was restricted to the mere verification of a chain of transmitters and their credibility. Muir bemoaned the Muslims' failure to take into account the subject matter of a particular tradition. He thus developed his own critical approach which depended crucially on contextualising tradition internally as well as referencing the Quran as a verified source.

To a certain extent, Muir's approach to history also resembles the view of early reformist approaches in South Asian Islam as well as the Wahhabism of the Arabic peninsula, which have been described in chapter one. Muir, like other British officials, did not distinguish these practices as distinct tendencies, but designated both as Wahhabism. Powell argues that Muir initially had a very positive attitude to Wahhabism, as he hoped:

that meaningful 'reform' might be emerging from a group he described as the 'Protestant Moslems' or 'Delhi Wahabies', regarding them at first as critics of Sunni tradition, revivers perhaps of a modern form of Mu'tazilite rationalism. When he first became aware of their existence he hoped that

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37 Nasir Abbas Nayyar: *Urdū adab kī taškīl-i jadīd: nau ābādiyātī aur pas-i nau ābādiyātī 'ahd ke urdū adab ke muṭāla 'āt* (Karācī: Oxford University Press, 2016), 61.

38 Ibid., 61f.

their reformist agendas might open them to an appreciation of his own criticisms of the sources of Islam, and hence to an interest in Christianity.<sup>39</sup>

With this positive attitude towards “Wahhabism” in mind, it appears to be reasonable that Muir found his historical approach reinforced in early South Asian reformist thought. The reformers likewise perceived history as a continuous distancing from the pure Islam of the days of Muhammad. Both approaches emphasise the *origin* as a crucial point of reference, presuming an immutable essence that is to be derived from this “original” referential period.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, I do not aim to overemphasise these parallels as an adoption on Muir’s part, but rather to suggest that his interest in and support of “Wahhabism” appeared to reinforce his educational background.

## 2.1 Criticism of Islam

Having discussed Muir’s historical approach and his conception of history in detail, some aspects of his views on Islam shall be discussed in the following passage. As has been mentioned above, Muir compiled *The Life of Mahomet* upon the insistence of Pfander for openly missionary purposes. Likewise, Powell has identified his support and interest in Wahhabist reformist thought with the unexpressed purpose of eventually converting Muslims to Christianity. Thus, it is not surprising that this apologetic attitude is also mirrored in his biography of Muhammad. In the concluding volume of his biography, Muir sums up the three main evils of Islam, while disregarding its benefits as being “of minor import”:

Setting aside considerations of minor import, three radical evils flow from the faith [i.e. Islam], in all ages and in every country, and must continue to flow *so long as the Coran is the standard of belief*. First: Polygamy, Divorce, and Slavery, are

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39 Powell: *Scottish Orientalists*, 166. However, when it became apparent that “Wahhabist” reform tendencies would not lead to a conversion to Christianity, Muir instead began to emphasise the resistance to reform in Islam as being linked to an essentialised understanding of the latter. Still, Muir retained a positive stance towards “Wahhabism.”

40 Muslim reformist tendencies perceived the Quran and *hadīṣ* as ends in and of themselves, and identified them as mirroring the “original” Islam which was to be restored in order to stop an otherwise inevitable decline. Muir, however, introduces one more twist and distinguishes between the “origin” and its presentation in the sources. The latter are already perceived as part of the decline and as deviating from the historical “origin”. Muir believes that sources lose their unquestioned status and must be reviewed critically in order to uncover veiled indications of the “origin”.

maintained and perpetuated; – striking as they do at the root of public morals, poisoning domestic life, and disorganizing society. Second: freedom of judgment in religion is crushed and annihilated. The sword is the inevitable penalty for the denial of Islam. Toleration is unknown. Third: a barrier has been interposed against the reception of Christianity. They labour under a miserable delusion who suppose that Mahometanism paves the way for a purer faith. No system could have been devised with more consummate skill for shutting out the nations over which it has sway, from the light of truth.<sup>41</sup>

Muir acknowledges these evils as irreformable because Muslim belief in the Quran as the word of God closes any path to reform. Strikingly, Muir recognises Muslims' unwillingness to abandon Islam for the sake of converting to Christianity as an evil of Islam. He clearly presumes the superiority of Christianity.

When Khan read Muir's *The Life of Mahomet*, it is said that he became enraged and shortly thereafter set out for England in order to gather materials to respond to Muir. His *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* – wherein he addresses the first volume of Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* discussing in detail the history of Arabia and Islam until the birth of Muhammad. Besides this, Khan dedicates chapters to defending the reliability of his sources, presenting their exacting response to the above quoted evils that Muir discerns in Islam. In the following section, I aim to analyse Khan's historical approach in comparison to his early texts which have been discussed in Chapter 1. I will examine how his conception of history changed and in what way this transformed his view of Islam.

### 3. Joining the Threads

A.H. Hālī in *Hayāt-i Jawēd* describes how in 1868 [...] they found Sayyid Ahmad Khan in a restless and agitated state of mind over Muir's work and the attacks it made on Islam.<sup>42</sup>

Khan identified the great danger posed by Muir's *The Life of Mahomet* because it circulated tremendous misrepresentations of Islam, unsettling young Muslims who were not yet established firmly in their faith. Thus, Khan made the decision to travel to England. During his stay there from 1869 to 1870, he spent the entirety of

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41 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. IV, 321.

42 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 113.

his free time on gathering Islamic as well as European material for his response to Muir's biography. As mentioned above, his focus was on the first volume of *The Life of Mahomet*. Hence, his discussion of the reliability and criticism of Muslim sources became a crucial topic of his response.<sup>43</sup> Since Troll gives a very detailed description of Khan's reply to Muir's source criticism, I will not reproduce every detail here, but will instead delineate its implications for Khan's conception of history and Islam.<sup>44</sup>

In the first place, Khan appreciates Muir's generally affirmative stance towards the reliability of the present state of the Quran. However, Khan obviously does not accept Muir's view that the Quran is Muhammad's word rather than divine inspiration. Apart from this point, only minor disagreements distinguish their views regarding the reliability of the Quran, such as Muir's assumption that a part of "Muhammad's 'revealed words may possibly have been lost, destroyed or become obsolete.'"<sup>45</sup> Thus, their works do not pose any substantial difference in interpreting the credibility of the Quran as a reliable source.

The situation is different when it comes to the *hadīṣ*: Khan does not agree with Muir's general assumption regarding the dishonesty of the collectors and transmitters of traditions. Instead, he warns that one should not draw the hasty conclusion of "inventions and fabrications of the narrators" as a sole explanation for variety among the traditions, "since, besides the fabrication of hadeeses, there are also other natural causes which might occasion such differences."<sup>46</sup> He mentions the real possibility of misunderstanding the original sense of a saying, of a failure of memory, or differences which occur "naturally" during continuous oral transmission.<sup>47</sup>

Still, Khan acknowledges the insufficiency of criticism as demonstrated by the collectors and agrees with Muir that a mere verification of the *isnād* (chain of transmitters) is not adequate source criticism. That said, he argues that this procedure was due to the vast amount of narrations:

Persons who undertook the task of collecting hadeeses had neither time nor opportunity for examining and investigating all the above particulars, and some of them

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43 Ibid., 113, 127.

44 For a detailed discussion of the sources referred to in his *Essays*, cf. Gulfishan Khan: "A Critical Review of the Biographical Literature (Sira) of the Prophet Muhammad by Syed Ahmad Khan," in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Vision and Mission*, ed. Shahabuddin Iraqi (Aligarh, New Delhi: Centre of Advanced Study Department of History Aligarh Muslim University; Manohar, 2008), 105–42.

45 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 129.

46 Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (Premier Book House, 1968), 200.

47 Ibid.



collected together all the hadeeses whatsoever that came under their notice, while others collected only those hadeeses whose narrators were acknowledged to be trustworthy and honest persons, leaving entirely upon their readers the task of investigating and examining all the above-mentioned particulars, as well as of deciding their comparative merits, their genuineness, and the quantum of credit due to them.<sup>48</sup>

Khan refutes Muir's assertion of an inability for critical thinking, as the latter argued regarding his second evil of Islam: Islam is viewed as inherently prohibiting the freedom of judgment. Khan rather describes a lack of time vis-à-vis the vast amount of material as the sole reason for this procedure, arguing that further criticism had to be left to later recipients. Thus, Khan argues, albeit with only marginal reference to Muir's critique, that there is no inherent and essential oppression of critical inquiry in Islam, but rather an abundance of material was the sole reason for this preliminary source criticism by the collectors.

Despite his reference to natural reasons for differences among the traditions, Khan does not ignore the fabrication of certain traditions, and thus presents a catalogue of his critical approach to the *ḥadīṣ*. Like Muir, Khan first enlists several personal motives for inventing traditions. He mentions persons who aimed to introduce particular practices among Muslims that they considered to be praiseworthy. Khan sees this type of fabrication as being restricted to traditions, suggesting the benefits of reciting quranic verses for curing disease, etc. Secondly, Khan recognises preachers who invented traditions in order to amuse their audiences. He sees this point as being restricted to the descriptions of heaven and hell. Thirdly, he notes those people who "made alterations in the pure religion of the Prophet [...] in order to favour their own interested views."<sup>49</sup> Lastly, Khan mentions infidels who deliberately disseminated spurious traditions.

Scholars of Islam were always aware of this issue, and thus developed critical rules in order to identify unreliable traditions:

Such persons examined the very words employed in such hadeeses, as well as their style of composition; they compared the contents [*sic*] of each hadees with the commands and injunctions contained in the Koran, with those religious doctrines and dogmas that have been deduced from the Koran, and with those hadeeses which have been proved to be genuine; they investigated the nature of the import of such hadeeses, as to whether it was unreasonable, improbable or impossible.<sup>50</sup>

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48 Ibid., 203.

49 Ibid., 201.

50 Ibid., 201f.

Strikingly, Khan describes a list of critical guidelines which virtually reproduces Muir's rules of *ḥadīṣ*-criticism in a condensed form. He hence aims to refute Muir's assertion of an uncritical stance of Muslims towards Muhammad and his utterances. Muir had argued that any criticism of a tradition which has been qualified through mere formal verification of the *isnād*-chain of narrators could not be criticised, as this would equal an act of disrespect for Muhammad. However, Khan adopts Muir's catalogue of source criticism almost verbatim and recognises these principles as being a common practice among scholars of Islam since long before Muir. Since Khan does not provide any references, nor does he elucidate his rules further, it remains questionable to what extent Khan's approach may be an adoption of Muir's critique. His emphasis of reason is striking, however. It cannot be observed in Muir in such an explicit form nor does it appear in Khan's earlier writings wherein he rather presents an outspokenly reluctant or even hostile stance towards this topic. The following section will address this issue of Khan's developing stance towards reason.

### 3.1 The Position of Reason

The last three criteria Khan presents, in order to evaluate whether a tradition "was unreasonable, improbable or impossible," herald a new phase in Khan's thought. He emphasises reason as a crucial means in this respect: the identification of spurious traditions is based on examining "whether the origin and content of traditions [*aḥādīṣ ke manṣā' aur bayān kī taḥqīq aur tadqīq*] contains any reference to an event unverifiable in history [*aisā tāriḥī vāqi'ah [...] jo az rū-i tāriḥ ke ḡalaṭ ho*] or any such miracles and wonderful incidents which reason would not accept [*aise 'ajā'ibāt [...] jin ko 'aql taslīm nah kartī ho*]," as Khan describes the very passage in Urdu with a bit more detail.<sup>51</sup> This passage raises the question of how reason (*'aql*) becomes such an essential criterion in Khan's critical approach, for Muir does not mention reason as a distinct criterion in his own approach to source criticism: Muir refers to reason only tacitly when he criticises the faith of early Muslims blindly accepting any irrational narrative about Muhammad.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Muir's critique does not provide considerable evidence for the relatively prominent position reason takes in Khan's source criticism. In particular, if compared to his early

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51 Ibid., 202; Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Al-Ḥuṭbāt al-Aḥmadīyah fī al-'Arab va as-sīrat al-Muḥammadiyah* (Alīgarh: Sar Saiyid Akaidamī, 2003), 229.

52 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, lxiii.

stance towards reason in his pre-Mutiny period, we can see that Khan had an utterly hostile attitude toward reason and rejected its licit position in religious issues entirely. Only *shariat* and Muhammad's *sunnat* were allowed a referential position, for reason was seen as a merely human faculty that could not provide any access to divine truth.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, in Khan's second-phase Biblical commentary, he does not attribute reason any decisive character or capability for inquiry into religious matters. But his initially hostile attitude changes: Khan here acknowledges reason as capable of recognising God's existence and acting in the world; however, he emphasises that any further insights into the nature of God can only be gained through the mediation of prophets.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, he frequently emphasises the conformity of the Word of God with His Work, the creation. Khan seems to have adopted this idea of natural religion from J. H. Pratt, to whose *Scripture and Science not at Variance* (1856) he repeatedly refers. This reference to natural religion shall be discussed in Chapter 5 in detail.

Regarding the question of the increasingly prominent position that Khan allows reason in his works, it is not possible to trace this shift back to a particular origin, as could be accomplished so far with other points of critique which Khan adapts or refutes. Neither Pfander, who had a rather hostile stance towards reason, nor Muir, who criticises the blind acknowledgment of irrational traditions, but still does not take reason to be a distinct criterion in his source criticism, can provide sufficient evidence for Khan's approach to reason. For Khan, reason rather seems to acquire an omnipresent position resulting from the increasing level of influence given to science. This new controversy, which, in contrast to those discussed thus far, cannot be identified in any single author, instead seems to be a sign of a general shift of paradigm that poses a tremendous contest for Khan and other contemporary reformers. Almost the entire last phase of Khan's work is dedicated to the question of how to reconcile religion and science, and shall be discussed in a separate chapter below. That said, we can trace the initial indications of this development in Khan's commentary as well as in the work discussed here, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*. But despite its elevation to a distinct criterion of source criticism, reason is not applied so much in practice and remains restricted to rejecting superstitious and miraculous traditions.

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53 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 408.

54 Khan: *Tabayīn*, Vol. I, 14; cf. also Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 237.

### 3.2 The Second Evil: Freedom of Judgment in Religion

The principal aim of Khan's inclusion of reason in this context seems to be, first of all, to refute Muir's critique of a lack of free judgment in Islam, as Muhammad came to be perceived as infallible over time. Thus, Muir argues that any tradition acknowledged according to the formalistic verification through the *isnād*-chain was exempted of a content-related critique, as this would dishonour the exalted status of Muhammad. In describing content-related critiques as common practice in the *uṣūl-i ḥadīṡ*, Khan rejects Muir's claim and asserts that Muhammad was not viewed as infallible, but rather as an ordinary human being in general, unless he received a divine message:

But the Prophet himself has informed us that (leaving the Holy Koran out of question) all his sayings are not to be considered as revelations; but that the two following kinds only are to be taken as such: First, those, which have reference to religious dogmas, to morals, or to the state and condition of the soul in the world to come.<sup>55</sup>

Khan thus introduces a strict distinction between the sayings of Muhammad concerning mundane matters and those concerning religious matters. Only the latter can claim relevance for religious concerns, while "the rest of the sayings and actions of the Prophet are looked upon by us in the same light as those of any other holy, virtuous, and truly pious personage."<sup>56</sup> Khan finds this assertion supported by a tradition of Muhammad:

'Verily, I am nothing more than a mortal. Accept and act according to what I say relative to your religion, but when I order you anything on my own account, then, verily, I am also a man.'<sup>57</sup>

Khan highlights Muhammad as an ordinary human being, disclaiming Muir's assertion that Muhammad was perceived as infallible by Muslims. This, in combination with his aforementioned insistence on the rational and contextual judgment of traditions, allows him to critically review Muir's charge of the suppression of critical thinking in Islam. Because Khan does not view Muhammad as infallible, critical questioning does not dishonour him, and content-related tests of traditions are thus allowed.<sup>58</sup>

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55 Khan: *Essays*, 190f.

56 *Ibid.*, 191.

57 *Ibid.*, 191.

58 Khan quoted this or a reminiscent tradition already in his *Rāh-i sunnat va al-bid'at* when arguing that *bid'at* relates only to matters of religion (*dīn*) (Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V,

But Khan does not end his critique here. He takes this issue much further than a mere discernment between religious and mundane issues. When establishing the Quran as an ultimate point of reference to identify spurious traditions, Khan introduces a distinction between explicit commands of the Quran vis-à-vis implied principles:

From the earliest times of Mohommedan history the Holy Koran has always continued to be, as it will for ever remain, a real and abundant source of Mohammedan law; and it is the belief of every Mussulman that the Prophet himself always acted conformably to the Koran - that is, in perfect obedience to the commands contained in that holy book, both when expressly enjoined or only tacitly implied.<sup>59</sup>

Khan emphasises that Muhammad always acted according to the commandments of the Quran, and hence aims to demonstrate the Quran as the ultimate, certain source. Any tradition implying a contradiction to the Quran must, therefore, be recognised as wrong. At first glance, this point may be viewed merely as a counter to Muir's general acknowledgment of any tradition *contradicting* traditional Muslim dogma. But a closer examination reveals his introduction of "only tacitly implied" commands in the Quran. Thus, the Quran does not contain only explicit commands, but also implicitly uttered principles: principles which must not be understood as perennial like the explicit commandments, but rather as requiring continuous adaption, as Khan elucidates in further detail in his introduction.

Khan cautions the reader against misunderstanding religion (*mazhab*) as a mere compendium of precepts and rules (*majmū'ah-i aḥkām*), however. Instead, he develops a distinction between perennial commands and inherent principles:

[I] hope that every lover of truth [...] will candidly and impartially investigate the truth of Islam, and make a just and accurate distinction between its real principles and those which have been laid down for the perpetual and firm maintenance and observance of the same, as well as between those that are solely the perfections of those persons whom we designate as learned men, divines, doctors, and lawyers. It is the want of such an accurate discrimination as this, between all these different descriptions of principles, which has caused men to rush headlong into all sorts of mistakes, a want or deficiency, on the part of a Mohammedan, which is called Takleed (a blind belief in the opinions of others), and which, when exhibited in that of foreigners, is known by the name of partiality, bias, prejudice or bigotry.<sup>60</sup>

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368f.). It seems that his understanding of religion was apparently broader, as he included customs, habits, and religious services likewise in the category *dīn* (Ibid., 360).

59 Khan: *Essays*, 190.

60 Ibid., vi.

Khan emphasises an urgent necessity to distinguish between the “real principles” of Islam, and those which are the mere interpretations of Muslim scholars, in order to prevent misrepresentations of Islam like Muir’s. Unfortunately, as Khan argues, this discrimination has been ignored by Muslims themselves: *taqlīd* is condemned as an outcome of this uncritical thinking, which triggered the foreign view of a suppression of free thinking in Islam. Khan identifies Muir’s view of Islam as a result of this misconception of *taqlīd* among Muslims. Muir’s perspective is refuted with reference to an intra-Islamic discourse. Khan translates Muir’s critique into an Islamic context and rejects it by re-activating and transforming the Muslim understanding of *taqlīd*.

While still in his early period, Khan held an affirmative position towards *taqlīd*, but he has here changed his view and now perceives it as a blind following of established doctrines of the Sunni legal schools, instead calling for an unbiased perspective on the tradition.<sup>61</sup> In his early works, Khan propagates a return to a purified, original Islam, as it can be found in the four legal schools which represent Muhammad’s *sunnat*, the single, licit point of reference for a pious Muslim life. The legal schools provide the practical application of the *sunnat*, while disagreements among the schools are traced to differences of opinion among the companions and interpretations (*qiyās*) of the founders of the schools. These differences are negligible, however, as all of them can be followed.<sup>62</sup>

This restorative approach of a return to an original, uncorrupted Islam in Khan’s early works is contested by the perspective presented in his *Essays*. The static character of Islam that Khan finds in his early approach is therefore replaced by flexibility and adaptability. To put it pointedly, while Khan initially viewed the eating of mangoes, if not as *bid‘at*, as at least a dubious act because Muhammad is reported not to have eaten mangoes, the concept of *bid‘at* becomes irrelevant for his later texts. His approach is no longer based on mere retrospection, aiming to restore an origin, but rather implements a forward-looking, prospective position. Khan develops an analytical approach to Islam and its sources that allows for their contextualisation. He conceives of particular aspects as general and perennial while others remain merely tacit implications that require adaption. Muhammad and, thus, tradition are no longer viewed as verbatim points of reference, but rather provide a historicised realisation of Quranic implications. Thus, aspects of the Prophet’s habits and conduct, unless they explicitly refer to religion (i.e. tenets, etc.), lose their compulsory character.

In his “Islam and the Impact of Print in South Asia,” Robinson describes this as a shift in the conception of history from a “negative vision of Islamic history as

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61 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. V, 422.

62 Ibid.

a process of constant effort to hold back the inevitable decline since the time of the Prophet” towards a “positive vision which saw that the essence of Islam could be kept vital and pertinent.”<sup>63</sup> The adaptation of critical historiography, induced through the controversy of Muir’s *Life*, allows Khan to develop a distanced view of Islam, the Quran, and the *hadīs*, which Robinson describes as “an understanding of Islam as an object, which might be analysed, conceptualized and even presented as a system.”<sup>64</sup>

But Khan surpasses the approach of Muir’s, who merely aimed to discover essential Islam through inquiring into its early history. Muir’s goal largely resembled early Muslim reformists’ efforts to restore uncorrupted Islam, much like Khan in his early works. Any developments after this early period of Islam are perceived as a deviation, while only the origin could provide a glance at the essence of Islam. Muir’s methodology differs tremendously, however, as he reads the Quran not as a divinely inspired book, but as authored by Muhammad, thus questioning the reliability of tradition on the basis of contextualisation. He perceives Islamic sources as historical sources which can be analysed and scrutinised. The Muslim claim of its divine inspiration does not constitute any obstacle for Muir, who reads the sources from an external perspective.

In combining both approaches, Khan develops a new perspective on history: a reading irrespective of interpretations (*taqlīd*) which views Muhammad’s life and the early period of Islam as a crucial point of reference, but not as a static one. Khan’s introduction of a distinction between eternal commands in the Quran and the temporary interpretations of men, as well as the discrimination of Muhammad as generally being an ordinary man vis-à-vis his role as a prophet restricted to occasions of inspiration, allows him to abandon the view of Islam as static and immutable. History no longer means a continuous distancing from original Islam, which can only be stopped by a complete emulation of Muhammad’s and his companions’ conduct. Development and change are no longer viewed as mere deviation, but rather as a necessary process of preserving the essence of Islam, which is not restricted to a fixed catalogue of commands and precepts but abstracted to adaptable implications and principles alongside eternal commands. Khan no longer propagates mere imitation, aiming to restore and preserve an immutable essence with a verbatim outlook, but instead proposes a reinterpretation. Thus, his conception of history shifts away from inevitable distancing and deviation towards a progression with changing circumstances, implying the adaptation of the abstract essence of Islam with implicit principles.

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63 Robinson: *Islam and Muslim History*, 90.

64 Ibid., 91.

In his study of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Harder describes a noticeably parallel strategy in Bankim's view of the *Bhagavad Gita*, on which he penned a commentary. When Bankim describes the *Gita* as no divine word, however, he pronounces a thesis Khan could not utter with such distinctness, for the orthodox Muslim doctrine of the verbatim inspiration of the Quran prohibited such theses. This is demonstrated vis-à-vis the fact that Khan had to face attacks on his integrity as a Muslim for even minor issues, starting with his social intercourse with the British.<sup>65</sup> The fronts further hardened when Khan published his commentary on the Bible and a translation of Mountstuart Elphinstone's *History of India*, wherein the author speaks of the "false prophet" in reference to Muhammad, which Khan faithfully translates as "*paigambar-i bāṭil*." Though Khan discusses Elphinstone's position in a footnote as illegitimate, this was an affront for Muslim orthodoxy: "In this controversy Sir Sayyid was called a *kāfir* (unbeliever)."<sup>66</sup> His later engagement with education and establishment of the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh – the predecessor of the Aligarh Muslim University, founded in 1875 – even brought upon him the procuration of *fatvās* (legal decisions) "from ulama of various Indian cities and also from Mecca and Medina, declaring Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 'officially,' among other things, 'the *khalīfah* (representative) of the Devil himself who is intent upon leading Muslims astray,' whose 'perfidy is worse than that of the Jews and Christians.'"<sup>67</sup> This might explain Khan's cautious approach, which is always backed up with rather orthodox positions, while unorthodox positions are uttered inexplicitly, and become obvious only inherently. Thus, Khan could not propagate conclusions as bluntly as Bankim, saying for instance that "all *books* of *dharma* are of human origin."<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Bankim's implication heads in a very similar direction to Khan's. In Bankim's view, the "*Gītā* continues to be regarded, ultimately, as a divine utterance, but only on a level of sub-textual content; as a text, by contrast, it belongs entirely to the human sphere."<sup>69</sup> As Harder explains, Bankim perceived the text as "time-bound" due to its grounding in the restricted human knowledge in order to be comprehensible to its contemporaries. Thus, the text inevitably had to refer to this restricted knowledge. Consequently, the text required continuous adaptations:

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65 "According to Hali, open attack on Sayyid Ahmad Khan's integrity as a Muslim started when he began a social intercourse with the English, i.e. in the early 1860s when he accepted their dinner invitations and invited them to his home" (Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 21).

66 Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 20.

67 Ibid., 21.

68 Harder: *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 172.

69 Ibid.



Knowledge of the Absolute, according to his [i.e. Bankim's] concept, is transmitted together with the surrounding 'customary beliefs' or science, i.e. in the epistemic frame of the respective age, and both merge in the verbal representation. The perishable, time-bound part of that representation then needs updating; the knowledge of the Absolute has to be contextualised anew.<sup>70</sup>

This continuous adaption of the inherent, universal implications of the *Gita* reminds one significantly of Khan's approach, which I will discuss in the following passages with respect to its application to particular examples.

### 3.3 Refuting the First Evils of Islam

Khan devoted a great part of the first volume of his *Life* to his response to Muir, primarily discussing his historical approach and the reliability of Islamic sources. I have illustrated Khan's own counterapproach in detail above. Yet, in addition to this methodological discussion, Khan also responded to the fourth, conclusive volume of Muir's *Life*, wherein he criticises Islam for three evils it either introduced or reinforced. Those are, as mentioned above: first, polygamy, divorce, and slavery; second, the suppression of free thinking; and, third, interposing an obstacle in the "reception of Christianity."<sup>71</sup>

Khan criticises Muir for an inherent inconsistency in his study: having extensively illustrated his source criticism, noting strong doubts about the reliability of a great part of the *ḥadīṣ*-tradition, Muir relies on an eminent part of a source, which is itself viewed as less reliable among Muslims themselves.

The best [of] all the biographies of Mohammed from the pen of foreign authors, and the one which is executed in the most learned and masterly manner, is the "Life of Mahomet," by Sir William Muir. [...] The extensive and intimate acquaintance of this talented author with Oriental literatures is highly esteemed and justly appreciated by all educated Europeans. As regards the merit of the work itself, besides the defect of its subject matter being almost entirely based upon the authority of Wackedee – an author who, as I have before remarked, bears the least reputation in the Mahommedan literary world, and who is the least entitled to claim our belief as to his assertions – the intention and animus with which the work was written are to be deprecated as having been the fruitful source of error and deficiency.<sup>72</sup>

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70 Ibid., 177.

71 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, Vol. IV, 321.

72 Khan: *Essays*, x-xi.

Khan's initial critique of a double standard among European authors in their application of source criticism, which was most likely pointed particularly at Muir, becomes even more explicit in a later reference:

Persons, therefore, who may be inclined to comment upon the principles of our religion; to write concerning our ecclesiastical history; or discuss various points of our sacred literature, must not be content, as many critics are, with quoting such Hadeeses as those just described [i.e. apocryphal] for their authorities in support of their opinions and convictions, but should, first of all, patiently and carefully investigate the truth of the source whence such Hadeeses are said to have been derived. It is either from being unacquainted with, or from neglecting, the above essential rules, that several foreign writers have – unconsciously it is to be hoped – been guilty of great injustice when writing either the Prophet's biography, or history, especially when, for the fair and legitimate arguments of a sound and liberal criticism, they substitute invective, ridicule and sarcasm.<sup>73</sup>

Khan criticises an indiscriminate utilisation of uncertain and unreliable traditions by European scholars to affirm their positions, as in his view the *sīrat*-literature (biographical literature on Muhammad) must be reviewed very critically – in comparison to the *hadīṣ*-literature, which, in his view, was based on a highly elaborated critical approach. By contrast, the *sīra*-literature integrated several fabulous stories from Jewish and Christian traditions.<sup>74</sup> As a result of this unacquaintance or neglect of source criticism by Muslim authors, Khan argues that misrepresentations like Muir's three evils emerged. Thus, Khan aims to refute these evils in the remaining chapters of his *Essays*.

Following the model of Muir's *Life*, Khan describes the geography, manners, customs, as well as the various religions of pre-Islamic Arabia. In discussing the evils of Islam, Khan's illustration of the customs of the pre-Islamic Arabs will be

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73 Ibid., 181.

74 “[T]he author expressed dissatisfaction with the existing [T] books of *Sira* and questioned their authenticity as compared to the books of *Ahadith*, given the differences in the methodology of collection and compilation of the two historical sources, the *Hadith* and *Sira*. Consequently, the author sought to argue, that the Prophetic traditions were more reliable, and more authentic as a source of information for the purposes of a biography of the Prophet than the extant biographical literature on the subject. [...] [S]ir Syed pointed out that it is difficult to separate facts from fables in almost all these books of *Sira*. Moreover, he suspected that many of the stories which would have been current amongst the Jews in those days crept into the text of these compilations. Therefore, he stressed the fact that none of the above-mentioned works [i.e. *Sira*] should be utilized uncritically.” cf. Khan: “A Critical Review of the Biographical Literature (*Sira*) of the Prophet Muhammad by Syed Ahmad Khan.”

of most interest. He bases his description mostly on Arabic poetry in order to depict general living conditions, habits, and customs. Nevertheless, two topics occupy a central position in his illustration: the idolatrous practices of most Arabs and the status of women in pre-Islamic Arabic society. Regarding the latter, Khan notices an unblushing practice of “adultery, fornication, and incest.”<sup>75</sup> In a concise way, Khan summarises the situation of women as follows:

The fair sex was in a very wretched and degraded condition indeed. Persons had entire liberty to marry as many women as they pleased.<sup>76</sup>

Khan states that the pre-Islamic Arabs knew and adhered to a law of marriage. But he bemoans an imbalance of rights which granted a woman almost no rights, while men could make unlimited use of divorce. The woman was prohibited to marry after divorce for a fixed period of time:

Persons very cruelly and inhumanly took advantage of this custom. They married a woman, divorced her on some pretext, the poor woman had to wait for the fixed period without marrying anyone; when, however, the time was about to expire, her former husband again reconciled her to himself and renewed the marriage, but after a very short time he would once more divorce her, and again marry her at the close of the appointed term, and this he would repeat for any number of times. The Arab practised this merciless custom, because every person considered it a reproach that the woman who had been once his wife should marry another man.<sup>77</sup>

Khan bemoans the asymmetry of power between men and women in pre-Islamic Arab society, this having granted almost all rights to men while women were dependent and impotent.

Khan applies this understanding as the background for his discussion of Muir’s evils of Islam in a subsequent chapter, “On the Question Whether Islam has been Beneficial or Injurious to Human Society in General and to the Mosaic and Christian Dispensations.” First, he discusses Muir’s critique of polygamy and hastens to clarify that polygamy is by no means made compulsory in Islam:

[O]n the contrary, the general practice of it is not even recommended, the privileged use of it being reserved for such physical reasons as may stand in need of it, but in the absence of such an excuse the indulgence in it is wholly contrary to the virtues and morality taught by Islam.<sup>78</sup>

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75 Khan: *Essays*, 111.

76 *Ibid.*, 120.

77 *Ibid.*, 121.

78 *Ibid.*, 147.

Khan does not deny the permission for polygamy in Islam, but he diminishes its unpleasantness with regard to the inherent morals of Islam. He proceeds in arguing for the necessity of polygamy from three perspectives – nature, society, and religion – of which his argument regarding nature shall suffice here as an example. One has to inquire, in the will of God, whether “He intended man to be universally polygamic or not.”<sup>79</sup> Khan views nature as the point of reference, reflecting His intention and will, “for it is evidently impossible that His will should be at variance with the productions of it.”<sup>80</sup> He continues his argument stating that only those beings which give birth to their young in pairs, while polygamic beings give birth to one or more than two, thus, creating an inequality of the sexes.<sup>81</sup> But even though man is of the second category, he has been endowed with the exclusive property of reason. Thus, Khan tacitly argues that man occupies an exceptional position: despite being naturally compelled to polygamy, man’s endowment with reason allows him to surpass otherwise natural proclivities.

Thus, Khan argues that Islam is in fact aimed at limiting this natural necessity with stringent restrictions, “such as the observance of perfect equality of rights and privileges, love and affection, among all wives, etc. etc.”<sup>82</sup> Polygamy is inherently ruled out in Islam, as these strict regulations rather suggest that a pious Muslim abstain from it. In fact, polygamy is made nearly impossible, if all regulations are observed:

These restrictions and regulations materially serve to prevent truly pious and religious persons from indulging in polygamy, for they almost immediately discover that the availing themselves of this privilege, without fulfilling its conditions and observing its regulations, which are so strict as to be extremely difficult to be complied with, is incompatible with the due and faithful discharge of their religious duties.<sup>83</sup>

Khan therefore aims to establish a prospective implication of the Quran, pointing beyond its explicit prescripts. Khan cannot deny the permission of polygamy in the Quran, but he tries to view this permission as a context-specific concession, while the stringent regulations tied to its permission, reveal inherent implications of the Quran that highlight the higher moral inclination in man. Polygamy is permitted, but it is also impeded to a great extent.

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79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Unfortunately, Khan does not further elucidate this point nor does he give any examples which could clarify his argument.

82 Ibid., 148.

83 Ibid., 148f.

Khan locates this permission, first, in biological or climatic differences between Europe and Asia. He refers to the opinion of Godfrey Higgins, arguing that:

Biologists and natural philosophers have found other reasons which might serve as some apology for this allowance [polygamy], which will not apply to us cold-blooded, frog-like animals of Northern climates, though they may be applicable to the descendants of Ishmael, natives of the scorching sands of the desert.<sup>84</sup>

For, according to Higgins, both sexes age and decay equally, while in the warm regions of Asia “it is given to man alone to arrive at a green old age.”<sup>85</sup> This, Khan continues, might be perceived as a sufficient excuse for the permission of polygamy.

Subsequently, Khan contextualises the allowance of polygamy with reference to the general position of women in pre-Islamic Arabia as well as surrounding countries:

Nor should we be justified in leaving out from our impartial consideration the deplorable morals that were in general practice shortly previous to the advent of Mohammed. Persia stood foremost in the corruptness of her morals. The laws of marriage were set aside. [...] When we turn our attention to a little north-west of Persia, a locality mostly inhabited by Jews, we find that polygamy was a general practice, without any restrictions. Arabia, again, affords us a perfect combination of the customs of the Persians and the Jews, where there was no end to the number of wives, and where no law guided the people in their choice. All women, without any distinction of rank, age, or relation, served alike to the brutal appetites of the male sex. When we look upon the Christianity of that age [...] we see many of her professors pursuing a course diametrically opposite to the above-mentioned one; we mean that somewhat general practice of celibacy.<sup>86</sup>

Within this general disregard for women, deprived of any rights and without protection by law, “Mohammed’s genius codified a law, so perfect in its nature, so consistent with reason and propriety, so conducive to the health and prosperity of society, and so beneficial to the matrimonial existence of both the parties’ interest.”<sup>87</sup>

Khan describes the commandments and laws, as stated explicitly in the Quran, as progress and a crucial improvement in women’s situations within the historical

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84 Ibid., 149.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 150.

87 Ibid.

context, be it with regard to pre-Islamic Arabia or Persia, the Jews or the Christians.<sup>88</sup> However, the confrontation with missionary rhetoric, and in particular Muir's assertion of the evils of Islam, compelled Muslims to develop a new response, for the progress and improvement brought by Islam with regard to societies of the 7<sup>th</sup> century could no longer provide an answer to this new critique. Muir disregards the Islamic allowance of polygamy not as an improvement, but rather as a reinforcement of the existing conditions. Khan's response is characterised by a historicisation of Islam and its explicit commandments, which have to be appreciated but read within their historical context. Nevertheless, Muir's critique triggers Khan to instead highlight implications of the Quran pointing far ahead of a mere allowance of polygamy – namely to its link to several stringent restrictions which make its practical application almost impossible. The temporary improvement of a restricted and regulated allowance of polygamy in the days of Muhammad is therefore replaced by the far-reaching, implicit, and superior aim of Islamic morality.<sup>89</sup>

By the close of this chapter, Khan eventually turns the tables and points out crucial stimuli in the development of Christianity which were triggered by Islam. When Khan discusses the “advantages derived from Islam by Christianity particularly,” he describes Luther's Protestant reforms in overthrowing the “exorbitant power of the Popes” as being stimulated by Islam:

[L]uther, who, when he came in contact with the above-quoted passage of the Koran [admonishing “that the one of us take not the others for Lords (the High Priests and the Popes) besides God”<sup>90</sup>], at once comprehended the truth it inculcated, and, clearly perceiving the slavish and degrading position in which his co-religionists

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88 Yet, Christians rather seem to be criticised for their “unnatural” and repudiating stance towards women, as apparent in celibacy.

89 Closely resembling Khan's arguments, the prominent TV preacher, Zakir Naik, who founded the Indian TV channel Peace TV in 2006, regularly engages in discussions about the compatibility of Islam or the Quran and science. His “ideology mostly corresponds to *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* ideals.” (Ronie Parciack: “Brahmanic Codes and Sanskrit Vocabulary in the Political Language of Islamic Preaching in Contemporary India” *ROSA (Religions of South Asia)* 8, no. 3 (2015): 327). In a video, he presents the argument that the inequality of men and women is the crucial reason to permit polygyny in Islam (cf. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axOIGrL4M\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axOIGrL4M_s)). In another video, he emphasises the necessity of keeping complete justice between one's wives (cf. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_IUQd6DtmE8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IUQd6DtmE8)). Apparently, the first video seems to adopt Khan's argument. Yet, no direct reference is drawn and perhaps one is deliberately avoided. On the other hand, this argument has perhaps experienced a repeated sedimentation, veiling its link to Khan. This, however, would require further scrutiny on a much broader basis of material.

90 Khan: *Essays*, 174.

were plunged, at once stood up to preach publicly against that servile practice, and although some of his adversaries denounced him as being a Mohammedan at heart, he never desisted from his endeavours, and, at last, succeeded in affecting the grand reform generally known as Protestantism, or the Reformation; and for this emancipation of the human mind from the worst of all slavery – a priestly one – Christianity should for ever remain thankful to Islam.<sup>91</sup>

Protestantism is, thus, claimed as a mere result of the universal message of Islam. The authenticity of Christian critique is eventually questioned, as its ideals are in the end traced back to Islam. However, Khan does not further elucidate this assertion and merely seems to denigrate the authority of critique founded on a Christian perspective. A very reminiscent inclusivist approach will be discussed in Chapter 6 with the example of Shibli Nomani.

In the following passage, I will only briefly discuss Khan's response to Muir's remaining two critiques of divorce and slavery. His discussion of the former is an advocacy for the advantages of divorce, without overvaluing its disadvantages for society, and is thus not of much interest for the present study. With regard to slavery, however, Khan reproduces the argument presented in his discussion of polygamy, and his approach of historical contextualisation in general. While again, he cannot deny its permission, he argues with a higher goal tacitly implied:

According to his order, no act upon earth is more meritorious, more deserving of God's favour and blessing, than the granting of liberty to slaves [...].<sup>92</sup>

Khan diminishes the explicit permission of slavery by emphasising a higher implication in Muhammad's acts, saying: "Muhammad did almost entirely abolish slavery."<sup>93</sup> Khan did not counter the general allowance, but aimed at infusing the superior goal of an entire abolishment of slavery in society.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, Khan also offers proof of some positive intentions, which could be practised by means of the maintenance of its allowance:

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91 Ibid., 175.

92 Ibid., 161.

93 Ibid.

94 Khan's prospective argument of an intended abolition of slavery is repeated in a video by Zakir Naik. He argues that slavery was so much "engrained" in society that its immediate abolition was impossible, while, however, its future annulment was intended (cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-15no-m0jn4>).

It will be evident from the above passage that the order for making captives of the unbelievers, when overpowered, was with the intention of saving their lives.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the practice of “making captives” in war was rather practised for the purpose of redemption.

### 3.4 Continuous Reinterpretation

This flexible approach to origin and the Quran, with its tacit implications transgressing the temporary character of its explicit instructions, lays the foundation for Khan’s *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (1880-1904). His concept of knowledge is of essential importance in this respect. In his article “*Ittiḥād-i bāhamī aur ta’līm*” (Mutual Unity and Education), Khan discusses his view of knowledge:

Time continually progresses [*taraqqī kartā jātā hai*]. If time was finite, the idea that knowledge is finite would be correct. But everyone knows that time does not stop [for progress], it keeps going on. Therefore, to imagine the ancestors’ achievements as sufficient is wrong at all.<sup>96</sup>

Knowledge comes to be perceived as infinite and limitless. It continually progresses over the course of time.

This point has significant implications for the interpretation of the Quran, as Khan asserts that the standard of knowledge of his time must not be perceived as ultimate knowledge. As former knowledge has been refuted by the findings of science, so too those discoveries will perhaps be shaken by future findings. Thus, his interpretation of the Quran must not be misunderstood as final:

Its [i.e. the Quran’s] words have been revealed in such a miraculous way that however much our sciences [*‘ulūm*] progress [*taraqqī*], if we reflect on it [i.e. the Quran] from the perspective of these progressed sciences [*taraqqī-yāftah ‘ulūm*], it will become obvious that its words prove to be true from this perspective, too. We will realise that the meaning which we formerly attached to it and which is now proved wrong is only related to our [limited] knowledge, and not to the words of the Quran. Thus, if our sciences progress in future in such a way that today’s researches [*umūr-*

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95 Khan: *Essays*, 161.

96 Khan: *Maqālāt*, Vol. XII, 164.



*i muhaqqiqah*] prove to be wrong, then we will turn to the Quran anew and will surely realise its accordance with truth.<sup>97</sup>

According to Khan, the continuous progress of knowledge and science therefore requires a continuous reconsideration and reinterpretation of the Quran. Its meaning cannot be fixed but remains in a state of constant change, Ashraf writes:

Sir Syed leaves open the possibility that scientific developments in the future, too, even while contradicting many of our present-day scientific postulates, will provide us with a newer and more profound understanding of the *Qur'an*. This, to say the least, was not only a highly unorthodox but also a very dynamic way of *Qur'anic* interpretation.<sup>98</sup>

The formerly stable point of reference found in origin thus no longer guarantees a solid, invariable grounding. Origin rather comes to be instrumentalised as a means for innovation. Marilyn Robinson Waldman describes this in her article “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples”:

Traditions can be part of the ideology of modernity as well as of the ideology of tradition; and not all things from the past have to be recognized as tradition, just as not all traditions originated in the premodern past.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, tradition, or in Khan’s view the immutable, original understanding of Islam, cannot be equated with a standstill, but rather serves as a legitimation for change. Waldman thus views “tradition as a process rather than as a stage or type.”<sup>100</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the idea of progressive revelation can be found already in Shah Waliullah’s work, as I have discussed in Chapter 2 with reference to the latter’s equivocation of *shariat* with the prophets’ varying manifestations of Divine will, revealed according to the conditions and requirements of each particular context. This can be found also with regard to the concept of *nūr-i Muḥammadī* assuming varying manifestations of Muhammad’s light. These manifestations of his pre-existing light are perceived as adaptations of the Divine message in accordance with the respective time and space of occurrence. These concepts remain, however, limited up to the appearance of Muhammad, with whom

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97 Sayyid Ahmad Khan: *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān: Ma‘ uṣūl-i tafsīr* (Lāhaur: *Dost Aisosīyaṭs*, 2004), 59f.

98 Ali Ashraf: “Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Tradition of Rationalism in Islam,” in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mahmudul Haq (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 1992), 159.

99 Marilyn Robinson Waldman: “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples,” *History of Religions* Vol. 25, No. 4 (1986): 322.

100 *Ibid.*, 327.

the circle of revelations ended. On the other hand, saints are also perceived as having a share of Muhammad's light, thus sustaining a link to Divine knowledge even after Muhammad.

Moreover, the idea of a contextualising the Quran as a message revealed according to the capability of Muhammad, cannot be described as an invention of Khan nor as a mere adoption from European historians: its message is perceived as uncreated. That said, Khan believes that the Quran assumes a particular manifestation in the heart of Muhammad in a human language. This idea traces back to the Quranic reference to the *lauḥ mahfūz*, the safely preserved tablet. This tablet is interpreted in Sufi exegeses as the tablet of the original Quran, also termed *umm al-kitāb* (the "mother" of the book). It is kept in heaven and viewed as the cumulative message of all prophets – their message, thus being united under the umbrella of a universal, but uncreated message.<sup>101</sup>

Khan does not explicitly refer to any of the given concepts – understandably, as in the case of the *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, Muir explicitly describes this as a legendary attribution to Muhammad so that Khan would presumably disguise any reference.<sup>102</sup> Yet, his earlier discussions and dependencies on these ideas make it plausible to assume that Khan reactivates these ideas and rearranges them in order to answer Muir's critique.<sup>103</sup>

## Conclusion

In his analysis of *The Life of Mahomet*, it could be shown that Muir takes up a significantly analogous perspective of history, as could be found also in Khan's early religious writings and in early South Asian reformist thought in general. Shaped by his educational background, but perhaps also reinforced by the "Wahhabi" stance towards history whose reformist tendencies he appreciated, Muir's approach equally suggests a classical time, which is deemed as an unrivalled and unparalleled point of reference for subsequent history. With regard to Islam, he likewise aims to recover an essential Islam which can be traced only in the days of Muhammad. This early period is perceived as a guarantor of authenticity and

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101 *ET*: "lawḥ"; "Umm al-kitāb".

102 Muir: *The Life of Mahomet*, i-ii.

103 Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon: *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1964), 109f., 136f.; Schimmel: *Rhine to Indus*, 117. Cf. also Chapter 2.

can be scrutinised only through the study of early Islamic sources, in particular the Quran and the *ḥadīṣ*. Muir perceives later developments to be in conflict with these sources as deviations from essential Islam. Thus, through his text-based approach, Muir perceives Islam to be an immutable constant. That said, Muir applies source criticism to scrutinize these texts from an external perspective, concluding that the Quran is not the word of God, but is rather the word of Muhammad. He also views the *ḥadīṣ* very critically, stating that traditional criticism entirely ignored its content and focused merely on the transmitters and their reliability. While his stance towards the Quran is generally affirmative, he presents a critical catalogue for the verification of the *ḥadīṣ*. In Muir's view, then, the traditions of the *ḥadīṣ* have to be reviewed in terms of their conformity with the Quran as well as through their internal conformity with other related traditions. Apart from this point, he further states that an external contextualisation also has to be performed with other contemporary sources.

As a result of his study, Muir presents three evils of Islam that overshadow any minor improvements the faith has brought about. He criticises the reinforcement of polygamy, divorce, and slavery, as well as a suppression of critical thinking in Islam. These evils are perceived as irreformable, as “a reformed Islam [...] would be Islam no longer.”<sup>104</sup>

When Khan came across Muir's text, he felt compelled to respond and present a refutation of its theses, as he acknowledged the work's danger in misguiding young Muslims. In his resulting *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*, he revised several of his earlier positions. Khan's response consists of an adaption of several aspects of Muir's approach which are conjoined with some general implications of his own earlier position. Khan's *Essays* must therefore be read as a crucial turning point in his historical approach, but must not be misunderstood as a complete break from his earlier writings. For, as demonstrated here, Muir's essentialist approach was preceded by early Muslim reformists, and to some extent remains consistent with it. This made it easy for Khan to transform and integrate Muir's argument.

Muir's most significant innovation was his aforementioned external perspective on Islamic sources, allowing for a reading that was not restricted by traditional interpretation. However, the aspects of contextualisation and progressive adaption of the uncreated Divine message were by no means unfamiliar concepts in the history of Muslim thought, and in particular Sufi thought, and Khan's discussion of related topics in his earlier writings allows for the distinct probability that he was well acquainted with these ideas. Thus, it would be falling short of the truth to describe Khan's response to Muir as a mere adoption of the latter's approach.

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104 Muir: *Annals*, 458.

Rather, Khan seems to reactivate and reinterpret the ideas of *nūr-i Muḥammadī*, implying a progressive and adaptive revelation closely linked with the idea of the uncreated Quran that takes a particular shape only in the heart of Muhammad.

Although Khan could not accept Muir's stance towards the Quran as Muhammad's word, he acknowledges Muir's proposed set of guidelines for source criticism, yet attributes them to the traditional approach of *ḥadīṣ*-criticism. Khan thus recognises the necessity of relating traditions to the Quran and other important sources. Transgressing Muir's approach, he furthermore argues for a rational review of tradition – a point which Muir mentions, but does not develop as a distinct part of his catalogue of source criticism. This positive stance towards reason stands in sharp contrast to his earlier writings, although his commentary on the Bible foreshadowed a shift in his formerly hostile position.

The Quran is perceived as the last anchor for Muir as well as for Khan. The latter argues that the Quran can always be applied as the ultimate point of reference. If any tradition should contradict the Quran, the *ḥadīṣ* must be rejected, as Muhammad would not act in contradiction with the Quran and – this is a point of tremendous importance for Khan's newly established conception of history – its *implications*. In general, the importance of the *ḥadīṣ* appears to have decreased in his *Essays* in comparison to his earlier writings. While the latter abundantly quote traditions in support of Quranic quotes, his *Essays* argue comparatively less reference to the *ḥadīṣ*. Tradition, in Khan's view, thus experiences a general loss of reliability.<sup>105</sup> Even though references to tradition are by no means dispensed with entirely, Khan increasingly utilises other means of authority – in particular, his refutation of Muir's evils is based to a great extent on historical, natural, and social grounds. Nevertheless, Khan's depiction of the revelation of the Quran and its early transmission, for example, is described to a large extent with reference to the *ḥadīṣ*.

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105 In his *Essays*, Khan distinguishes three types of *ḥadīṣ*: *mutavātir*, *maṣhūr*, and *ḥabarī aḥād*. The first, Khan states, comprises such “hadeeses only that have always been, from the time of the Prophet, ever afterwards recognised and adopted by every associate of the Prophet, and every learned individual, as authentic and genuine, and to which no one had raised any objection” (Khan: *Essays*, 203). However, in point of fact, only the Quran and perhaps five *ḥadīṣ* apply to this category. *Maṣhūr* are those traditions which “in every age, have been believed to be genuine, by some learned persons” (Khan: *Essays*, 203), while *ḥabarī aḥād* “is an appellation given to hadeeses that do not possess any of the qualities belonging to the hadeeses of the first two grades. Opinions of the learned are divided on whether or not they can form the basis of any religious doctrine” (Khan: *Essays*, 203). Thus, Khan perceives that, except for perhaps a small amount of traditions, only the Quran is an unrestrictedly reliable source, while most of the *ḥadīṣ* are perceived as contested. Cf. Troll: *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 137f.

Khan also introduces a new attitude towards the immutability of Islam. The fossilisation of the interpretation of the Islamic sources in traditional, unquestioned readings (*taqlīd*) is challenged. Rather than seeing Islam as immutable, then, Khan comes to view it adjustable and flexible. On this basis, he distinguishes between general, universal commands of the Quran and ossified interpretations offered by men, concluding that religion must not be perceived as a mere catalogue of fixed regulations. Consequently, Khan opens Islam up for the recognition of subsequent developments, which must not be understood as deviations from an unchanging essence. Nevertheless, Khan does not develop a full-fledged elaboration of Islamic law. His view of Islam remains on a rather abstract level and discusses only select examples in his critique of Muir. Perhaps Khan even recoiled from applying this methodology on a more concrete level, for fear of critique.

Moreover, Khan combines his refutation of the Quran as merely a human interpretation with his approach of contextualisation gleaned from *hadīs*-criticism. By positioning the Quran as a historical document that must be related to its context, Khan is then able to historicise the commandments of the Quran and ultimately overturn Muir's assertion of the three evils of Islam. He views the Quran as a historical document which must be related to its context. Within this context, Khan acknowledges the progressive attitude of the Quran's explicit commandments, while its inherent implications even transcend these and point towards further innovation. Polygamy is thus perceived as permitted by the Quran, for example, due to natural and social requirements. Thus, historical circumstances prohibit a complete abandonment of polygamy. Khan therefore argues that, Islam initially introduced several improvements by regulating and rigidly restricting this very permission, with the inherent, higher goal of abandonment.

For Khan, the early period of Islam is thus historicised and related to its context. It loses its character of being an unparalleled point of reference in history and becomes flexible, providing only a historical expression of the essence of Islam. Because Islam no longer remains fixed to its original form, Khan argues for a maintenance of the essence of Islam within a completely changed context, as 19<sup>th</sup> century South Asia confronted a loss of power, missionary activities, and science. Within this context, it must, however, be questioned how far Khan's interpretation of Islam's higher goals, only tacitly implied in the Quran, is influenced by foreign criticism. Is Muir's critique the implicit higher goal which is imposed on Khan's interpretation of the Quran? Did he counter Muir's critiques by presenting them as inherent implications in his interpretation? This question will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Instead, Khan's approach, as presented in his *Essays*, can be described as a conjunction of his earlier "Wahhabist" tendencies with Muir's external perspective. Thus, Metcalf states that "Sayyid Ahmad's 'modernism,' as it is often called, was not a simple imitation of Western ideas but had its roots in indigenous movements of reform. Indeed, it was largely as 'Wahhabi' or *ghair-muqallid* that he was seen – and opposed – at the time."<sup>106</sup>

Fazlur Rahman describes Wahhabism as a predecessor for later modernist tendencies, and states:

But the most important aspect of Wahhābism was its normal motivation: it was a violent reaction at the moral degradation into which the Community had allowed itself to fall gradually over the centuries during which popular Šūfism had become the overwhelming factor. This moral motivation survived as a general legacy of the Wahhābī revolt after its first intolerant and fanatical phase had passed, and, combined with the general liberation of the mind and the spirit, paved the way for Modernist Muslims to overcome the literalism and fundamentalism of the Wahhābīs themselves and to allow for the scriptural text itself to be treated and interpreted on moral liberal lines.<sup>107</sup>

Khan does not abandon his "fundamentalist" approach, aiming for the restoration of an origin, however. He rather combines it with Muir's critical perspective. This methodology allows Khan to develop a distance from the Quran and *ḥadīṣ*, which, again, are treated as historical sources that have to be read within their particular contexts – even though Khan would refuse to accept this terminology, as he had to be very cautious in his approach. The violation of the doctrine of the Quran's verbatim inspiration would not have been tolerated by Muslim orthodoxy. Thus, Khan upholds orthodox positions, as we see in the above-mentioned example of polygamy, while letting his reformist positions seep through implicitly. In fact, his methods of approaching the sources and their contextualisation implicitly affirms his assertion of viewing the Quran and *ḥadīṣ* as historical sources. The essence of Islam is therefore flexible, in Khan's view, with only certain universal commands, while its major part consists of mere implications which require adjustment to a particular context. Origin must not only be restored literally, but has to be reinterpreted. Thus, the restrictive concept of *bid'at*, disallowing change, becomes obsolete in Khan's *Essays*. History is transformed from a continuous distancing from an unparalleled classical time to a steady progression that presents various expressions of the inherent implications of Islam.

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106 Metcalf: *Islamic Revival in British India*, 323.

107 Fazlur Rahman: *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 199.

That said, these inherent implications remain bound to the intentions of the prototypical golden age. Drawing from the examples of Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali and Ameer Ali, the following chapter discusses aspects of transferring contemporary topics to the projection surface of this golden age. I will interrogate the extent to which the conception of early Islam is influenced by present-day confrontations. In other words, can the golden age be perceived as a shelter of the unadulterated essence of Islam?

