

# The Contemporary Christians' Attitudes on Prophet Muhammad (Saw): A Critical Analysis of Muir's Historical-Critical Method

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8120305>

Received: 13 December 2024; Accepted: 17 December 2024; Published: 20 January 2025

## ABSTRACT

The spread and rise of Islam have been viewed as a significant threat to Christianity in the modern period. Because of its rapid rise, Christians were alarmed, and motivated them to seek any and all measures to eliminate it. Throughout the medieval period and into the modern period, Islam experienced numerous intellectual and military challenges. One of the strategies used is to find ways to investigate the historical context and origin of Islam. The most preposterous method was the "Historico-critical Method," which claimed to trace the original meaning of the text as seen by its early readers, rather than by current readers. Thus, the main point made by the defenders of this method has always been to view the text from its historical contexts and to argue that understanding it differently from the way their first readers understood it, is a great mistake. The main objective of this paper is to explore the development and patterns of transformation in modern Christian attitudes towards Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw), and to analyse Muir's application of the Historico-critical method. In order to achieve this goal, analytical and comparative approaches were used in this process. According to the findings of the investigation, this method was first introduced in biblical studies in the search for the historical Jesus. With the emergence of Orientalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the old method inherited from medieval writers and their sources regarding Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw) was continued. Muir applied the modern historical-critical method in dealing with Islamic sources and in the search for Islam and historical Muhammad.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Christian, Attitude, Prophet Muhammad, William Muir

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to present a brief survey of the Christian attitude on Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw) from contemporary periods and to analyze Muir's historical critical method. Orientalists began to critically study Islam from original Islamic sources during 19th century (Barton: 1998). However, the method known as historical criticism, which was first established in biblical studies, served as the basis for their comprehensive method to Islamic sources. This method not only examines the historical meaning of the text, but also what happened to these texts in the past. It also raises questions about the stages through which Islamic sources have passed. Although this method was a matter of dispute among Christian scholars themselves, Orientalists nevertheless used it in their study of Islam and the biography of the Prophet (saw). (Barton: 1998). Muir was among the Orientalists who used this method in dealing with Islamic literatures.

William Muir is a modern Christian scholar who specializes in Islamic studies. He was a Scottish scholar of Eastern cultures who worked as a colonial official. During his time in India, Muir was well-known for his close relationship with the missionary community. He was an evangelical orientalist who wholeheartedly supported their mission. Muir did, however, maintain a close friendship with Carl Gottlieb Pfander. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) chose German Pietists to lead their missionary efforts in North India. Following a letter of encouragement, Muir promptly began writing a biography of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). "The Life of Muhammad from Original Sources". (Daniel: 1966). Furthermore, it is vital to note that Muir has clearly articulated his numerous contributions to the advancement of Orientalist concepts concerning

Islam. Muir's books, along with those of other colonial experts such as Seale's *The Doctrine of Islam* and Thomas B. Hughes's *Dictionary of Islam*, have been widely recognized as authoritative reference works on the subject of Orientalist studies, particularly within missionary circles. (Guenther: 1997).

However, later Christian scholars have presented Muir's ideas as novel and a new perspective for the study on Prophet Muhammad (saw) and the Qur'an in Western scholarship. In academic circles and even within the Muslim community, Muir's publications are widely read and appreciated for the depth and scope of his research on Islam.

### **Problem Statements**

The issues that divided Muslims and Christians in the Middle Ages have persisted into the Contemporary period. The main difference lies in the methods and sources used in their writings. Some of them were prominent, especially the reformists. Almost all medieval writers, including Christian writers in the 16th century, and modern Christian writers continued to spread lies about Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw). William Muir's publications are among the most controversial because of his harsh portrayal of Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw). He attempted to promote misconceptions about the Islamic religion and cast doubt on the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw) by using Historico-critical Method. However, Muir's writings have been highly regarded and widely read in academic circles as well as in the Muslim community as a result of his extensive research into Islam. Hence, the researcher concludes that no one has analyzed Muir's historical-critical method to studying Islam in the broadest and most accurate sense. The study aims to bridge the intellectual gap and contribute to a new understanding of the Muslim-Christian dialogue on Islam in the Middle Ages and the Contemporary period.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the general Christian attitudes towards Islam from contemporary period?
2. How does Muir apply Historico-critical Method in the study of Islam?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To generally highlight Christian attitudes towards Islam from contemporary period.
2. To investigate and analyse Muir's Historico-critical Method in the study of Islam.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Historico-critical Method is one of the most important methods applied by many contemporary Christian scholars in the study of Islam and to investigate Islamic sources in order to prove or disprove the authenticity of the Glorious Qur'an and the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw). These two topics occupy a large space in modern Christian treatises. Among the most prominent Christian authors who dealt with these two topics in particular is Muir. William Muir was among the most thoughtful modern Christian writers to focus on these issues. Despite his numerous writings and speeches on Islam, his application of the historical-critical method has not been well analyzed.

In the book, "The Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the West," Jabal Muhammad Buaben discusses the major focus of Western scholars on the life of the Prophet (saw). He explores the unflattering portrayal of the Prophet (saw) in polemical texts spanning the Middle Ages and the 20th century. The author specifically mentions David Samuel Margoliouth, William Muir, and William Montgomery Watt when describing a variety of themes prevalent in contemporary Christian literature. However, his writings tend to be descriptive of the views regarding the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw) rather than analysis of Muir's historical-critical method. (Buaben: 1996).

Syed Ahmad Khan's paper "A series of essays on the life of Muhammad" examines Muir's works on Prophet Muhammad (saw). He argues that Christian biases influenced Muir's interpretation on Prophet Muhammad (saw). The author's writings are exaggerated compared to Muir's own, which have not been analyzed in the light of Islamic perspective and historical facts. The article will be valuable in examining modern Christian

attitudes against the Prophet (saw). (Khan: 1870).

Ghulam Hussain Babar and Muhammad Feroz-ud-din Shah Khagga's article, 'Attentive Muslim reflections on Orientalists' conception of Sirah, it is demonstrated how Muslim historians have become interested in orientalist approaches to the life of the Prophet (saw) after reading Muir's writings in the latter half of the 1800s. The article affirms Syed Ahmad Khan's views and his refutation on William Muir's book. However, the article does not undertake a comprehensive investigation and analysis of Muir's Historico-critical Method. Thus, the discussion appears to be descriptive on Orientalists' conception of Sirah rather than analyzing Muir's application on Historico-critical Method. (Ghulam: 2013)

In the article written by S. Mubarak Ahmad "Was Muhammad a Prophet or a King?", argues that Orientalists often misread the life and character of the Prophet (saw), and it is important to analyze and challenge their negative portrayal of the Prophet (saw) with factual evidence. This supports the claims of several Orientalists, such as R. Bosworth Smith and Arnold Toynbee. The article contains a great information on Christian views on the prophethood of Muhammad (saw). (Mubarak: 1985).

Nusairah binti Ramli's article, "Misconception against the Prophet and Qur'an in the Orientalist literature". The author discusses the views of some Orientalists who misunderstood beliefs about the Prophet (saw), including Richard Bell, David S. Margoliouth, and William Montgomery Watt. This work greatly improves our understanding of the Orientalist approach. (Nusairah: 2016).

Aijaz Ahmed Khan's article, "The offensive portrayal of Prophet Muhammad (saw) in Western media and its consequences" was published in Rajasthan. The author gives a quick account of how Western Christians have portrayed Prophet Muhammad (saw) since their first encounters with Islam and Muslims, and which has continued throughout the Middle Ages to the present day. (Aijaz; 2014).

## METHODOLOGY

This research is library-based, which means that the paper will be conducted using qualitative methods. Cresswell defined qualitative research method as a systematic process of studying a particular topic with the aim of arriving at a comprehensive understanding of it. (Cresswell: 2012). To understand and analyze William Muir's Historical Critical Method, it is necessary to use several important approaches, such as the descriptive, historical, and analytical approaches. Therefore, the descriptive as well as historical approach was used to trace the attitudes of contemporary Christian on Prophet Muhammad (saw), and analytical approach was used to study Muir's historical-critical method and his application.

The study will be divided into two distinct sections. The first part will focus on the development of contemporary Christian attitudes on Prophet Muhammad (saw), while the second part will analyze Muir's application on historical critical method in his study of Islam.

### **The Contemporary Christians' Attitudes on Prophet Muhammad (saw)**

The main focus here is to study the development of contemporary Christian attitudes on the Prophet Muhammad (saw) and to analyze the remnants of medieval Christian polemics preserved by some contemporary Christian scholars. The traditional hereditary polemics that we found in some contemporary Christian writings will be examined, along with the dynamic changes that led to a positive response to Islam. As a result, the modern era can be divided into two distinct periods: the early modern era and the later modern era. The early modern era began roughly in the early 16th century, while the later modern era began roughly in the 18th century. However, the issues that Christians and Muslims disagreed about in the medieval period which is the oneness of Allah and the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw), have not changed in the contemporary era. The only areas in which they differ are the methods they apply and the sources they use in their writings. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in European countries, this wonderful approach towards Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw) disappeared. (Ilhami:2012).

Another topic of discussion arose in the 18th century as a result of Western attitudes towards Islam. Orientalists claimed that they were free from theological connections. This paradigm change led to new developments in

Christian studies on Islam and Prophethood of Muhammad (saw). (Ilhami:2012). Moreover, Christian writers at that time claimed to rely on Islamic sources while not taking them into account, and they critically analyzed those sources before rejecting them. However, Orientalists claimed to avoid any hostility or bigotry in their writings. But the truth is that when they described Islam and the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw), they could not hide their bigotry. Muhammad Benaboud stated that “Western Orientalists focused on the primary Arabic sources, but their backgrounds, training, political views, environment, ideological tendencies, and religious views were still influenced by them”. (Benaboud: 1986). But in general, their works are better than those of medieval Christian writers because of their reliance on Islamic sources.

The first Orientalist to adopt the “historical-critical method” was Gustav Weil in his book “Mohammed der Prophet (1843)”. Many Orientalists such as Wüstenfeld, author of “Chroniken der Stadt Mekka (1861)” and “Das gebiet von Medina” (1873), and Nöldeke the author of the book *Das Leben Muhammads nach den Quellen Popular dargestellt* (1863) flourished after him, and many others. (Jeffry: 1926). In the 19th century, Orientalism began as a scholarly field and continued to grow in 20th century. Most of the classical works on the history of Islam, including Sirah which were written by such prominent figures as al-Waqidi, Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa’d, and Tabari, were translated into Western languages. Although early Orientalists had access to these artifacts and used them extensively in their early research, they were not afraid to distort many important issues and facts related to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw). (Jeffry: 1926).

These orientalists, in the name of scholarly writing, interpreted Islamic classics of Sirah, Hadith, and Tafsir freely and in a manner that was not sound or consistent with reality. A clear example of this attitudes is they claimed that the Prophet was the one who wrote the Qur’an, and they often reduced the Qur’an to a historical account of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). Likewise, Orientalists assumed that the hadiths were not from the Prophet (saw), but were later fabricated by different groups and individuals. (Yusuf: 2020).

However, it was understood by Western scholars that Prophet (saw) did not bring an original message from God, but rather that he founded this religion (Islam) on the idea of Christianity, Judaism, and even Mandaism, by receiving different ideas from each of these ancient religions.

Alois Sprenger (1813-1893) claims that when Prophet (saw) was forty years old, he imitated the Christian priests by practicing solitary confinement. When he wrote the thirty-sixth verse of Surat An-Nur, he was inspired by the lights of the churches he saw during his travels in southern Arabia. Furthermore, Sprenger claimed that in his later years, the Prophet (saw) included the stories of Prophet Musa and Pharaoh in the Qur’an after learning their details. However, according to Sprenger, he did not fully understand this story.

Bonn Abraham Geiger (1833) in his book *what has Muhammad received from Judaism?* he claimed that Prophet (saw) took from Judaism various things, including different concepts of beliefs and stories, and tried to prove his claim by comparing the Qur’an with several Jewish holy books. (Yusuf: 2020).

Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) claimed that almost all Islamic sources were incorrect, that Muhammad was the initiator of this lie, and that the method of selection was insufficient. But the “historical-critical method” led almost all Christian scholars to question the Islamic sources, and eventually to consider most of them fickle.

Norman Leo Geisler (1932) argued that the Prophet (saw) did not provide an answer to his critics that this was the fixed method that God had approved of proving his Prophethood in different ways, in different ages according to the genius of the time. Rather, he simply provided his own reference (the Qur’an) and said that the reason for rejecting him was disbelief, not his inability to perform miracles. Even when there are supernatural events associated with Muhammad’s life (even if they were not natural miracles like those of Moses and Jesus), they can be explained by natural means. For example, Muslims regard Muhammad’s stunning victory at the Battle of Badr in 624 CE as a supernatural sign of divine approval in his favor. But exactly one year after Badr, Muhammad’s supporters suffered a humiliating defeat. However, Muhammad did not regard this as a supernatural sign of divine disapproval. (Geisler: 1994).

At the same time, there are some contemporary Christian writers who have viewed the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw) in a positive light. The first and most important intellectual who portrayed the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw) in a positive light was the great German poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832).

Goethe, the author of the West-East (West-Ostliche Diwan), presents his feelings in a positive light and interprets Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in poetic form. In his poem “Muhammed’s Song” (Muhammeds Gesang (1773)) he praises the Prophet and uses the phrase Muhammad, the best of mankind (Oberhaupt der Geschopfe – Mohammed). (Aydin: 2002).

Another figure who managed to stay away from the campaign of distortion and abuse of the Prophet (saw) was the British historian and author Thomas Carlyle (1749-1832), who, although much younger than Goethe, corresponded with the latter and translated his works into English. In his book, Heroes, Hero-Worship, and Heroic in History, written in the 1840s, he classifies the Prophet Muhammad (saw) as one of the great leaders who changed world history. Carlyle argues that none of the accusations leveled against the Prophet of Islam up to that time were true, because his amazing achievements in creating a great civilization, as well as the fact that there were many wise men of great character who were followers of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), were enough to refute the negative accusations leveled against him. He also notes that the accusation that the Prophet was a false Prophet created more than it solved. (Yusuf: 2020).

Hons Kung explained the similarities between the Prophetic role of Prophet Muhammad (saw) and that of the Prophets of Israel in order to convince the Christians to understand the importance of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) to Christianity. He said that he was like the Prophets of the Old Testament:

Muhammad based his work not on any office given to him by the community (or its authorities) but on a special, personal relationship with God. Muhammad was a strong-willed character, who saw himself as wholly penetrated by his divine vocation, totally taken up by God’s claim on him, exclusively absorbed by his mission. Muhammad spoke out amid a religious and social crisis. With his passionate piety and his revolutionary preaching, he stood up against the wealthy ruling class and the tradition of which it was the guardian. Muhammad, who usually calls himself a Warner wished to be nothing but God’s word, not his own. Muhammad tirelessly glorified the one God, who tolerates no other gods before him and who is, at the time the kindly Creator and merciful Judge. Muhammad insisted upon unconditional obedience, devotion, and submission to this one God. He called for every kind of gratitude toward God and of generosity toward human beings. Muhammad linked his monotheism to a humanism, connecting faith in the one God and his judgement and redemption, threats against the unjust, which go to hell, and promises to the just, who are gathered into God’s Paradise”. (Aydin: 2002).

In this context, Kung provided Christians with an explanation of the status of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) by identifying three crucial steps they can take to ascertain his status. First, it is necessary for them to consider the characteristics of his teachings. Second, to compare them with the teachings of previous Prophets of Old Testament in order to notice the similarities between them, and finally to make their decisions about his status by considering these similarities. (Aydin: 2002).

William Montgomery Watt (1905-2006) was a prominent figure who praised the Prophet Muhammad (saw). He is one of the leading non-Muslim interpreters of Islam in the West, according to Carol Hillenbrand, a highly respected professor of Islamic studies and a name that is highly respected by many Muslims around the world. Watt points out that Western writers in their understanding of Muhammad’s Prophetic experience have tended to believe the worst about Muhammad, and when an unacceptable explanation for an action seems plausible, they have tended to consider it as fact. Watt emphasizes that this possibility in itself is not a sufficient criterion for judging a particular case, and therefore it is important to provide strong and sound evidence as a basis for evaluating Muhammad’s prophethood. (Aydin: 2002). He urged Christians to look at the events of the Prophet (saw) in the context of his own circumstances, rather than condemning them based on their own circumstances. In this context, he added that Christians accuse Muhammad of treacherous and lustful because of the events such as the destruction of the sacred month and his marriage to the divorced wife of his adopted son, without considering the circumstances of his time. He also mentioned that if these Christians carefully examined the early Islamic sources, they would easily be able to discover that judge Muhammad’s actions were without taking into account the moral criticism of his contemporaries. (Aydin: 2002).

In the 20th century, there were many publications about the Prophet Muhammad (saw). Those accounts tried to be fair and objective but also carried the broader argument and negative opinion of the Orientalists about

the Prophet and Islam. Although these academic studies, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, contain fewer of the derogatory accusations that were common in earlier works, the reason for the decline in negative narratives about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw) in the West is due to the Cold War, which took up the entire second half of the last century, and not to academic integrity.

### **Muir's Historico-critical Method**

Orientalists began studying Islam critically in the nineteenth century, drawing on original Islamic sources. However, their major approach to those sources is based on a method known as historical criticism, which began in Biblical studies. Although this method was a source of controversy among Christian scholars, Orientalists chose to apply it in their research on Islam and the life of the Prophet (saw). Muir was one of the Orientalists who apply this method in his dealings with Islamic sources, but before we learn about his application of this technique, it is important to shed light on its context, concept and general meaning, so that we can understand how this methodology changed his relationship with Islamic texts, especially the Holy Qur'an.

### **The Meaning and Concept of Historico-critical Method**

The historico-critical method is simply known as historical criticism. (Barton: 1998). This strategy focuses on investigating the historical context and origins of a text. It studies and traces the original meaning of the text as it was seen by the first readers, not by current readers, and claims that the way we see the word today may differ from the way it was seen by the first readers. Thus, the main point made by proponents of this method was to analyse the writings in their historical contexts and claim that it is wrong to perceive them differently from the first readers. (Barton:1998). The historico-critical method looks not only at the historical significance of a text, but also at what happened to it in the past. It also raises questions about how these sources developed. (Barton:1998). The purpose of this method is to recreate the circumstances in which the author and the recipient lived, as well as to reconstruct the true nature of the events detailed in the book. (Soulen: 2001). As a result, questions arise, including when, how, and by whom these documents were written. Therefore, in order to gain a clear understanding of the religious sources and to gain access to the "world behind the text," the historical meaning and historical setting of the text must be critically examined. In order to critically analyse and observe a text, we must set aside the sanctity attached to it.

However, as we have already mentioned, this method was initially used in biblical studies or in the search for the historical Christ. The previous method, which was inherited by medieval writers and their sources regarding Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw), was discontinued with the arrival of Orientalists in the nineteenth century. The modern historical-critical method has been used to evaluate Islamic literature and historical research on Prophet Muhammad (saw). Orientalists believe that every piece of information derived from Islam must be carefully verified before its value can be determined and accepted. (Yusuf: 2020). The historical criticism of Islamic books is the standard for assessing knowledge about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw) by Orientalists. The first effort of the Orientalists was to trace the original Islamic sources, and the second effort was to examine these sources and study them critically using the principles of historical criticism, and as a result many reliable Islamic sources were denied. This is understandable, since the Orientalists set the criteria that they used and continue to use in their historical criticism.

### **His Application of this Method**

Muir applied historico-critical method when investigating Islamic sources through. When the reader discovers Muir's criticisms of Islamic sources, he may conclude that he preferred to apply the principles put forward by Western intellectuals who rejected the traditions of the Prophet (saw). It was not surprising that he resorted to this strategy to fabricate reliable sources and verify the authenticity of unreliable sources. A good example of this is his claim to the authenticity of the Satanic Verses, in which he claimed that the Prophet (saw) accepted the Quraysh agreement and made reasonable concessions to al-Lat and al-Uzza. He claimed that Prophet (saw) was frustrated and longed for reconciliation, especially with the Quraysh leaders. Muir may have absorbed some evidence that Muslim leaders had fabricated this account, but decided to believe it because it fit his anti-Islamic sentiments. We have noticed the application of this method in the incident of Banu Qurayzah carried out by Nu'aim ibn Mas'ud, where Muir doubted the authenticity of the narration, and stated that the behaviour of the

Prophet (saw) was not just, but rather an act of horrific cruelty. (Yusuf: 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The study aimed to examine the contemporary Christians attitudes on Prophet Muhammad (saw) as the extent to which these attitudes were reflected in Muir's writings through the application of historico critical method. Muir applied the historico-critical method when researching Islamic texts, and he preferred to follow the concepts advanced by Western intellectuals who rejected the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw). However, it is noticeable that the attitude of some of contemporary Christian scholars towards Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw) has been generally negative, based on hostility and false allegations. In the medieval era, Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw) have been portrayed in a negative light. As for the Prophet Muhammad (saw), he has been portrayed as a magician, an epileptic, a thief, a lustful, a cruel, a power-seeker, a war-loving, who brought a curse upon his followers, and the greatest enemy of Christ and Christianity. However, as noted, such negative images have persisted throughout contemporary periods. But there has been significant development from time to time, especially after the Second Vatican Council.

Although attempts have been made to study contemporary Christians' attitudes towards the Prophet Muhammad (saw) and Muir's historico-critical method, there is a great need for a comprehensive and in-depth study of other Orientalists' methodologies on the study of Islam, such as Pfander, Sprenger, Watt, and others as well as Muir's Scepticism Method, Subjective Approach, and his Theory of Judeo-Christian Origin of the Glorious Qur'an. Moreover, Muir's study of Islam and Christianity in the present world, the influence of Islam, and Muhammad and Islam all deserve further attention. After reviewing the background information, the researcher has decided that there is a need for a comprehensive critical study and evaluation of his methodologies and views on these issues.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Mohammed Muneer'deen Olodo Al-Shafi'i, Assoc Prof. Ahmad Bazli bin Shafie and the Usul al-din department at the Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terangganu, Malaysia, for their encouragement and supportive environment that allowed me to successfully develop and write this paper.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors expressly declare that they have no competing interests, such as personal relationships or financial, in the authorship of this research.

## Author's Contribution

Upon conducting a comprehensive literature review and analyzing texts related to the appropriate topic. The researcher confirms the absence of a comprehensive analysis on contemporary Christian attitudes toward the Prophet (saw) and the Mui's application of historical critical method. The research seeks to address the intellectual gap and contribute the attitudes of contemporary Christian scholars on Prophet Muhammad (saw).

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