Review Article

Orientalism on the Revelation of the Prophet: the Cases of W. Montgomery Watt, Maxime Rodinson, and Duncan Black MacDonald

by Muhammad Benaboud

W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1953), 192 pp., and *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1956), 417 pp.

Maxime Rodinson, *Mahomet* (France: Club francais du livre, 1961), 378 pp., English translation by Anne Carter *Muhammad*, (London, The Penguin Press, 1971), with New Introduction and Foreward (New York, Pantheon Books, 1980), 363 pp.

Duncan Black MacDonald, *Aspects of Islam* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1911), 375 pp.

The biography (*Sīra*) of the Prophet Muḥammad (SAAW) has attracted the interest of scholars in both the Islamic world and the West for centuries. Vast literature exists on the subject in Arabic and in numerous European and Asian languages. The reasons for this interest are numerous and complex, ranging from religious to ideological and political motivations. The earliest Arabic biographies of the Prophet date back to the second century of the Hijra/eighth century A.C. The *Sīra* of Ibn-Isḥāq and that of Ibn-Hishām (based on the former) have had the greatest influence on the vast literature concerning the *Sīra*. Yet there are *Sīras* dating back to the sixth and seventh centuries A.H. which are still in the form of manuscripts waiting to be edited.[1] The *Qur'ān* and the sayings and actions of the Prophet (*Hādīth*) are the two most important sources for studying the Prophet's *Sīra*.

The Prophet's biography has attracted great interest also in the West. During the Middle Ages, the Prophet was the object of attack by Christian priests and propagandists, whom we might call the original Orientalists. He was denigrated, his figure was deformed, and he was given insolent names like

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[1] Ibn-Hishām, *As-Sīra an-Nabawiyya li-Ibn-Hisham*, ed. by Mustapha as-Siqa, Ibrāḥim al-Ibyārī and 'Abd-alḤāfiẓ Shalabi, Vol. 1, undated, Beirut, p. 11 [z].

Mahound.[2] He was accused of being an imposter, a Christian heretic, and an epileptic.[3] It was during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, however, that he attracted the greatest interest among the Orientalists. A vast literature developed "to discover" Muḥammad.[4] As a result, he was denigrated and ridiculed, but also admired and venerated. He fascinated Goethe, but enfuriated Lammens. European scholars of different nationalities gave him much attention. Voltaire, for example, criticized French and European society by criticizing the Prophet. In other words, he did not have the freedom to criticize his society openly, but criticized it indirectly while simultaneously criticizing the Prophet and Islam. The German scholars were pioneers in studying the Prophet's *Sīra*, but scholars of various nationalities followed them, including British, French, and Italian.

The West's new analytical approaches were now targeted on the Prophet (ṢAAS). William Montgomery Watt studied him in the context of his social background and environment, relying heavily on Mannheim's approach and stressing statesmanship Maxime Rodinson applied a materialistic and Marx ist approach, resorting furthermore to techniques of psychoanalysis to explain the Prophet's Revelation. Several themes were developed and re-developed in a new context such as the Prophet's sexual appeal, his aggressiveness and violent temperament, his appetite for political power, his statesmanship, and his diplomatic skills.

Western Orientalists have relied on the primary Arabic sources, but they were also influenced by their own background, environment, training, ideological tendencies, political views, and even religious beliefs.[5] They were

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[2] William Montgomery Watt, "Muhammad in the Eyes of the West," *Boston University Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3 Fall 1974: 61-69.

[3] In fact these themes have continued to be developed during the twentieth century. The purpose of the present paper is to illustrate the continuous development of medieval interpretations of the Prophet's revelation in a modern way.

[4] Given the enormous literature on the Prophet still being produced in the West, however, it is perhaps appropriate to speak of the creation of the Prophet or of his image in the West. This false imagery results inevitably from the ahistorial character of much of this literature and from the numerous complex motivations behind this huge effort on the part of the Orientalists.

[5] This fact Orientalists no longer deny, although this consciousness has not let to any transformation of the ideological orientation of Orientalism. For example, in introducing his book *What Is Islam*, 1979, Watt stated, "the difficulty is that we are the heirs of a deep-seated religious prejudice which goes back to the 'war progaganda' of medieval times. This is now coming to be widely recognized, and recent studies have indicated the steps in the formation of the European image of Islam and the motives underlying the selection of points for special emphasis." Watt has stressed the influence of the Orientalists by their cultural and intellectual heritage by adding, "yet we should not allow ourselves to forget that we are not wholly freed from the entail of the past. . ." Rodinson has also made similar statements in several of his works, and so have other Orientalists before him. Yet the degrees to which different Orientalists have been able to free themselves from their prejudices differ tremendously.

particularly influenced by the tradition of Orientalism of which they formed an integral part. The studies of the *Sīra* by Western scholars during the twentieth century are in essence a reflection of their predecessors. Yet the vast literature they have produced has not been critically analyzed, or at any rate, not sufficiently so.

There has been no study of the history or development of Western literature on the Prophet's *Sīra*, of the different themes that have been developed on the subject, and of the different techniques and methods that have been applied to it, as well as the causes behind them. Important questions need to be asked in this context. For example, to what extent were the Western Orientalists (particularly from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries) objective scholars who relied on the primary sources and applied scholarly techniques of research and interpretation; and to what extent did they diverge from this direction to be influenced by their background and cultural values in their studies of the *Sīra*? To what extent did they follow the lines set up by their predecessors and to what extent did they innovate and contribute new ideas? What was the general ideological and cultural context in which they developed their studies on the *Sīra*? What was their contribution and what is it worth? For whom did they write? How and why? These questions need to be examined in a general context, but the purpose of this paper is less ambitious. We will concentrate on the specific question of the Revelation received by the Prophet Muḥammad (ṢAAS), namely the *Qur'ān*, and how it was approached by three orientalists, William Montgomery Watt, Maxime Rodinson, and Duncan Black MacDonald. Consequently, only four works on the *Sīra* will be examined carefully, W.M. Watt's *Muhammad at Mecca* and *Muhammad at Medina*, M. Rodinson's *Mahomet*, and MacDonald's *Aspects of Islam*. The question of the Revelation to the Prophet (ṢAAS) includes other questions such as the degree of Christian and Jewish influence on the Prophet. Other Orientalists who have shown some interest in this question will also be mentioned or cited, but the focus will be on Watt, Rodinson, and MacDonald.

The reason for this limitation to three authors is simple: their works are characterized by a predominantly materialist approach to the study of a prophet. Both were successful in that they attracted the interest of an essentially secular public to the history of an essentially religious figure and movement. Both contributed little to our knowledge of the Prophet's *Sīra* because they are not based on newly discovered historical sources, nor do they claim to be. Two of the works reviewed were published shortly after the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century and consequently constitute the latest positions of the Orientalists towards the Prophet's biography. Yet both of these works have presented some important questions concerning the Prophet's *Sīra* and have stimulated an old debate in the context of new developments

in the social sciences.

While sharply reflecting the materialist approach, these two works form part of a vast literature on the subject, including such works as Leone Caetani's *Annali dell'Islam* (Vol. 1, Milan, 1905) and Gauderoy Demombyes' *Mahomet* (Paris, 1957), which are equally worthy of study. The two works represent a Scottish and a French analysis of the Prophet's *Sīra*, or, to be a bit more precise, they represent a Scottish Orientalist who inspired a French orientalist in the study of the *Sīra*. Rodinson's study, having appeared several years after Watt's, could have been academically and methodologically more advanced. Instead, it is ideologically more radical without being more profound.

There is another fundamental difference between these two authors' works. Watt's two books contribute a serious historical study in the academic sense of the word despite certain criticisms that have been directed against it, while Rodinson's work can not be accepted as such for numerous reasons. This comment is not meant to undermine Rodinson's status as a well established Orientalist. His reputation is well deserved, and his numerous scholarly publications constitute a sufficient justification. Yet he has frankly failed to maintain his ususal academic standards in his work on the Prophet, in very much the same way as Louis Massignon's colonialist writings contrast with the methodological rigour and analytical depth of his work on al-Ḥallāj. On the other hand, the two authors are characterized by their strong and direct relation to the tradition of Orientalism or to different trends within this movement, and by the movement's continual revival of the Prophet's *Sīra* as a subject of capital importance and constant preoccupation in the Western mind.

The most important contribution of W.M. Watt's and M. Rodinson's works on the *Sīra* is that they have linked it to the social sciences in a new way. W.M. Watt's basic contribution lies in the fact that he was the first to study the *Sīra* and the Prophet's social environment at an unprecedented level of depth and scholarship. Other Orientalists had previously related the Prophet's biography to the contemporary pre-Islamic Arabian society, but Watt's work constitutes a critical synthesis of this trend and a further contribution in that the social setting is approached more profoundly and more technically, in line with the latest developments in the field of anthropology. Another attribute of Watt's work is his simple and clear presentation of fundamental questions and his attempt to present several possible answers before suggesting the one he personally finds most plausible. This does not imply that his choice is always correct, but it reflects the fact that he tries to examine the different available possibilities that others might find plausible.

Rodinson exploited the success of Watt's work on the *Sīra* to write his own version, and his work was indeed a great success by commercial standards. Rodinson's most original contribution lies in his "ideological approach" to the Prophet's *Sīra*. In other words, after studying the main sources related

to the Prophet's biography, Rodinson selected what fitted in his materialist or "Marxist" model most neatly, but omitted the spiritual elements. Yet the very use of the term "Marxist" model is relative, because not all self professed Marxists will accept his model as such or consider it as representative of Marxism. To quote Rodinson's own phrase, "Il y a cent mille especes de marxismes. The devil himself can cite scriptures for his own use." The ideological dimension is quite explicit throughout Rodinson's *Mahomet*. In the introduction, the author clearly specifies those for whom he is writing and those for whom he is not writing. In his concluding pages, he reminds the readers that his judgements on the Prophet are severe because he has tried to be objective, but that as a humanist he has tried to be lenient and even merciful when judging the Prophet, who was after all a human being. The relativity of the notion of objectivity becomes quite clear in this context. Rodinson claims that he has tried to be objective, although he does not appear to have succeeded. He recognizes "Muḥammad's sincere claim" to have been a prophet, but considers him to have attempted to achieve something that is not material, and which consequently does not exist. Rodinson's problem is that he has approached the spiritual dimension of the Prophet's *Sīra* in purely secular terms. Having emptied the *Sīra* of its spiritual content, the most important elements in the Prophet's life are totally absent in Rodinson's work.

By contrast, Watt is basically interested in the spiritual aspects of Islam, but stressed the materialist dimension without rejecting the spiritual one. He also did not obliterate the spiritual elements from his analysis of the social environment, of which they contribute an integral and fundamental part. Rodinson's innovation lies in his ideological contribution and is interesting because he has stressed some of the important ideological features of the Prophet's *Sīra* and of his social environment, but, in doing so, Rodinson also expressed the ideological motivations behind his own interest in the Prophet's *Sīra*, thus deflecting rather than reflecting the Prophet's *Sīra*.

The questions of Muḥammad's Prophethood and of the Revelation he received, that is, the Qur'ān, have always preoccupied Western Orientalists. The old accusations of the Middle Ages have in essence have been abandoned, but they have been replaced by more sophisticated modern theories. Hence Orientalists have been worried by "Muḥammad's problem," but in fact, the problem is theirs. The heart of their problem lies in the fact that they have tried to rationalize the Prophet's claim to have received Revelation, without believing it to have been true. In other words, they have tried to explain a purely spiritual experience in purely materialistic terms. Because they were dealing with religious beliefs that they rejected, they ended up refuting the Prophet's Revelation. Since they could not present this refutation in a religious terminology, however, as their predecessors had done during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, they chose to present their refutations in a modern ter-

minology which they have sometimes described as scientific and which is more easily understood by their modern, largely secular audience. The reason for not refuting the Revelation of the Prophet (ṢAAS) in religious terms, despite the essentially religious essence of the question, is due to the fact that the secular language is more widely comprehensible in this technological age of ours.

The Orientalists' numerous individual judgements, with each stressing one or more major points as the basic explanation of the Prophet's character or motives for claiming prophecy, range widely from Duncan Black MacDonald's stress on Muḥammad the poet, to Becker's stress on Muḥammad the *kāhin*, to Snouk Hurgronje's stress on Muḥammad as "possessed" by the idea of God's unity. These examples and others illustrate how the Orientalists have dwelled on those aspects that they personally found most puzzling or interesting.

Like many preceding Orientalists who specialized in the Prophet's *Sīra*, Watt and Rodinson attribute the formation of his personality to his social environment, which has led them to ask several questions related to seventh century Arabia and its particular characteristics. In a sense, the different approaches developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries culminated in the works of Watt and Rodinson. For example, Rodinson's explanation of the Prophet's Revelation as the product of his sub-conscience is not new. Others like Duncan Black MacDonald considered that a literary awakening through the development of poetry, a population explosion, and the birth of Arab consciousness and religious unrest constituted determining factors in Arabia during the Prophet's life.

Some of the views that Rodinson expressed in his *Mahomet* are identical to D.B. MacDonald's views on the Prophet expressed in his *Aspects of Islam*. Rodinson may have read MacDonald's work, both formed part of the same intellectual tradition, and both were influenced by similar trends within this tradition. Both were inspired by Medieval anti-Islamic literature, and both appear to have been motivated by a bitterness toward the Prophet that they hardly tried to conceal. In fact, it is difficult to determine which of the two expressed his attacks on the Prophet more outrageously. Both were ideologically motivated when referring to the Prophet's biography, MacDonald by his missionary zeal, having taught at Hartford Seminary, and Rodinson by his philosophical dogmatism. Ironically, both produced some excellent works in the field of Islamic studies. Yet when dealing with the Prophet, both allowed their emotions to dominate their thinking. MacDonald stated his latent objective rather bluntly:

> . . .there lies before the Muslim peoples a terrible religious collapse. Islam as a religion is not holding its own against the unbelief

> that is flooding it from the European civilization... And as education spreads and deepens, as history vindicates for itself its place, as the moral feeling becomes more watchful and sensitive, so the legend of Muhammad will crumble and his character be seen in its true light. And with Muhammad the entire fabric must go. It is then for the Catholic schools and preachers to save these peoples, not only for Christianity but for any religion at all.[6]

Rodinson went so far as to refer to the Prophet as "notre frere,"[7] but the spirit that animated his work on the Prophet was in essence identical to MacDonald's. Despite some exceptions, twentieth century Western biographers of the Prophet have preserved the tradition of their Medieval predecessors.[8]

To explain the Prophet's personality, MacDonald echoes previous European attacks on the Prophet in a more disguised and sophisticated manner, using a psychological approach. He writes:

> If there is one thing that is certain about him, his character, his personality, it is that he was essentially a pathological case. But for that fate, he too, might have been one of the great poets of the Arabian renaissance. As it is, you might describe him as a poet *manque*. He was spoiled for poetry by his prophethood...[9]

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[6] D.B. MacDonald, *Aspects of Islam*, pp. 12-13.

[7] Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, p. 313.

[8] In a private letter replying to my observations on his book, *Mahomet*, dated November 30, 1975, Rodinson referred to the nineteenth century Orientalists who inspired him in the most eloquent terms:

> ...My approach is indebted to many 19th century Orientalists, of course, as they were the first ones to use the methods (new at that time) of historical criticism (still necessary, to my mind, as to the mind of all true historians I think)...

Yet M. Rodinson does not seem concerned about certain problems that have faced Orientalists who studied the Prophet during the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries and which W.M. Watt described as follows in his article *"Muhammad in the Eyes of the West"*:

> Yet for Westerners, none of the world's religious leaders is so difficult to appreciate as Muhammad, since the West has a deep-seated prejudice against him whose roots go back to Medieval times.

In the concluding pages of the above mentioned article, Watt writes:

> ...pure objectivity in an abstract sense is impossible in the case of a man like Muhammad, since any judgement about him is bound to be relative to the writer's whole culture and system of values...

Finally, referring to the subjectivity of Western interpretations of the Prophet's *Sīra*, Sir Hamilton Gibb wrote, "...there are as many theories about Mohammed as there are biographies," *Islam* (formerly entitled *Mohammedanism*), 2nd ed., 4th re-impression (Oxford, 1980), p. 16.

[9] D.B. MacDonald, *Aspects of Islam*, p. 60.

Like MacDonald, Rodinson considers the Prophet to have been a pathological case:

> There was something in Muḥammad which made him overstep those bounds. This something was a certain pathological element in his make-up. Perhaps the stories about the angels who came and took him and opened his heart while he was pasturing flocks belonging to his nurse's family actually developed from accounts of some kind of seizure.[10]

Rodinson presents his psychological hypothesis concerning the pathological character of the Prophet's condition as follows:

> And yet, beneath this surface, was a temperament which was nervous, passionate, restless, feverish – filled with an impatient yearning which burned for the impossible. This was so intense as to lead to nervous crises of a definitely pathological kind.[11]

Examining the possibility of whether "Muḥammad was a *kāhin*", a poet, Rodinson concludes that he was a mystic: "Given the right conditions, Muḥammad had, from the first, exactly the temperament to become a mystic,"[12] which he associates with mental illnesses like hysteria and schizophrenia: "We find these ecstasies and sensory phenomena in a very similar form among persons suffering from recognized mental conditions such as hysteria, schizophrenia, and uncontrolled verbalization."[13]

Yet even as a mystic, the Prophet is considered by Rodinson to have failed when he uses the phraseology: "Muhammad, needless to say, whatever his shortcomings from a mystical point of view, . . ."[14] The pathological approach that Rodinson presents is similar to what Casanova wrote about the Prophet's state of mind when receiving revelation. Casanova's position was refuted by other Orientalists like Theodore Noldeke and Clement Huart, but the parallel of what he wrote with what Rodinson wrote is incredible. The following quotation from Casanova will illustrate this observation:

> . . .je crois qu'une contention cerebrale tres anormale, un regime non moins anormal de jeune et de solitude, sufisent a expliquer l'anemie ou la dyspepsie nerveuse (la neurasthenie. . .) dont Muhammad parait avoir soufert.[15]

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[10] Maxime Rodinson, *Muhamad*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 79.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[15] Casanova, *Mohamed et la fin du monde*, Paris, 1911, p. 21.

Two features stand out in what MacDonald wrote about the Prophet which were later reflected in Rodinson's study of the Prophet. The first feature is the arrogance of his language when denigrating the Prophet. Perhaps he sought his own intellectual elevation by ridiculing the figure of the Prophet, who is highly respected by millions of Muslims, thus perhaps feeling intellectually superior to the latter if only in his sub-conscious. The second feature that stands out strongly is the apparent innocence of "objectivity" (perhaps naivete) with which he tried to present his highly imaginative ideas as scientific truths. For example MacDonald evokes the possibility of the Prophet having been possessed by a *jinn*, but he uses modern terminology later developed further by Rodinson:

> It is evident that from comparatively early days, he had trances; fell into fits in which he saw and heard strange things. There came to him voices, either apparently in a trance condition or when he was awake. . .So there came to him voices; there he even saw figures. . . Now, the conception of possession by a spirit was a high possibility.[16]

Like MacDonald, Rodinson accepts the Prophets' sincerity and goes on to ask some questions that shed some doubt on the French Orientalist's motives for asking them. Rodinson went so far as to suggest that the Prophet could have been mad:

> Supposing he was sincere, that he really had what, for the sake of frankness, we can call visual and auditory hallucinations, does this mean that he was in some way abnormal, sick or mad?[17]

MacDonald relied on the technique widespread among many Orientalists, of advancing hypotheses and considering them as facts. Rodinson also mastered this technique rather successfully. In this context, it was easy for MacDonald and for Rodinson to transform a possibility into a reality. MacDonald and later Rodinson therefore found no difficulty in interpreting the revelation of the Qur'ān as the Prophet's own utterances in a state of sub-conscious inspiration:

> I cannot but believe here that we have a case of the re-appearance on the lips of Muhammad, in perfectly unconscious fashion, of some phrase which his sub-memory had picked up when he was in a Christian church, which he had heard read at a Christian service. . .[18]

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[16] D.B. MacDonald, pp. 63-64.
[17] M. Rodinson, *Muhammad*, p. 78.
[18] MacDonald, p. 65.

Since there is no historical source that refers to the Prophet (ṢAAS) as having attended a "Christian service" in a "Christian church," we can only conclude that this hypothesis is a product of MacDonald's imagination. Yet when Rodinson refers to the Qur'ān as the product of the Prophet's sub-conscience, the implication is that he unconsciously gathered his data somewhere, perhaps in a Christian church. Rodinson, however, does not go so far as to state that the Prophet stocked this information in his sub-memory when attending some religious ceremony in a Jewish synagogue. Yet this is just what is impled in the implication of Jewish or Christian influences on the Prophet. Rodinson also relies on the notion of the unconscious to explain the Prophet's revelation:

> It is therefore conceivable that what Muḥammad saw and heard may have been the supernatural beings described to him by the Jews and Christians with whom he talked. It is understandable that, in the words that came to him, elements of his actual experience, the stuff of his thoughts, dreams and meditations, and memories of discussions that he had heard should have re-emerged, chopped, changed and transposed, with an appearance of immediate reality that seemed to him proof of some external activity which, although inaccessible to other men's minds, was yet wholly objective in its nature.[19]

This fiction of the Christian church or Jewish synagogue as the source of the Prophet's spiritual inspiration is quite logical in the context of the hypothesis that the Qur'ān is the product of the Prophet's sub-conscience. Yet the ahistorical character of this premise, i.e., not based on any serious historical source, becomes more apparent when we consider that the psycho-analytical approach to the Prophet requires the following observations: First, neither MacDonald, nor Rodinson, nor Casanova are trained psychologists. Second, the school of psychoanalysis is by no means unanimously accepted as valid. Ask a behaviourist or a psychologist of the humanistic tendency what he thinks of the limitations of psychoanalysis. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether a Freudian psychiatrist would accept Rodinson as his *confrere*. Third, and this is perhaps the most important criticism, it is difficult enough to apply psychoanalysis to those who are alive, let alone to those who are dead. Considering that the Prophet died almost fourteen centuries ago, is it possible to apply psychoanalysis to him without abusing this method? Supposing that we accept the possibility of applying psychoanalysis to dead people, is it possible to do so with the kind of information that Rodinson had? In the context

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[19] M. Rodinson, p. 77.

of these observations, we can only conclude that MacDonald and Rodinson did not analyze the Prophet, but that they simply used jargon particular to the field of psychology to promote their respective ideologies. Hence it is not unusual for MacDonald to have referred to the Qur'ān in the following terms: "The Qur'ān is simply a collection of fragments gathered up from those trance utterances of Muhammad."[20]

The idea of seeking Christian and Jewish influences on the Prophet sounds strikingly modern because of its Darwinian connotation, the Orientalists' conclusions related to the Prophet's status as the Messenger of God contain striking parallels with the accusations of his contemporary pagan, Christian, and Jewish Arabians. The sole difference is that the former present their arguments in a modern, often scholarly manner.

The brutality of some of MacDonald's and later Rodinson's comments on the Qur'ān, however, hardly deserve scholarly discussion and criticism. MacDonald describes the content of the Qur'ān as "an absolute chaos, yet a chaos, curiously enough, with a mechanical arrangement."[21] He comments on the length and form of the *sūras* in a way that deprives them of the very aspects that have in many ways made the Qur'ān unchallenged as a literary masterpiece, thus unveiling His own ignorance of the Arabic language. At any rate, the following passage reflects the fact that he was either unable or unwilling to understand the literary dimension of the Qur'ān, or that he actually meant to deceive his American public at Hartford by ignoring the Arabic language: "We found a great many of them couched in short, broken, jerky language, and we find a great many others couched in long, winding sentences, clumsy and lumbering to the last degree."[22]

Because the longer *sūras* revealed at Medina are related to such matters as inheritance, marriage laws, etc., even MacDonald had to find a different explanation than that of the sub-conscience. He presents the following incredible substitute:

> But in his later life, especially during his life in Medina, I presume that these revelations can best be compared to sermons, or, as one man has very exactly said, to leading articles or editorials in newspapers.[23]

MacDonald describes the *Qur'ānic* style as being, ". . .exactly like the

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[20] MacDonald, p. 77.
[21] Id.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

language used in heathen Arabia by the soothsayers. . ."[24] The *Qur'ān*, however, was recognized as distinct even by the contemporary literary elite of Arabia at the time, which explains how far certain Orientalists have been able to go simply because their public was so uncultivated in matters of Islamic history.

Rodinson is equally critical of the Qur'ān. Very much as MacDonald had done, he refers to critics of the literary style of the *sūras*:

> But there has been no lack of independent spirits in Islam to shed doubt on the incomparable nature of the Koranic text. Some have actually set out to write imitations of the Koran. . . . And so the beauty of the Koran has been hotly contested by those who for one reason or another failed to fall under the collective spell. . . . In our own day the great German semitic scholar Theodor Noeldeke, a learned student of Arabic, has written at length about the stylistic defects of the Koran.[25]

It is important to note that, like Rodinson, MacDonald considered himself to have been an objective scholar when he studied the *Sīra*. Yet stating that one is objective obviously differs from actually being so. MacDonald does not use the term objective, but he presents his conclusions as "higher criticism" and one wonders how the Hartford audience to whom he presented his lectures could have swallowed, and presumably digested, his unusually far-fetched conclusions. From our point of view, however, this attitude must not be explained by MacDonald's personal viciousness, but by his excessive religious zeal, because as a missionary, his intentions must have been to spead the truth of the Gospel. Yet, although some of MacDonald's works are scholarly contributions, what he wrote of the Prophet clearly reflects Medieval literature.

We should relate MacDonald's attitude to his time and to the general attitudes toward Islam that have prevailed in Western circles. For example, the deep influence of earlier Orientalists on him and his close association with contemporary Orientalist circles is implicit in his statement, ". . .at best there is much left for us to do—for us of the Western world who come with clearer eyes, fewer prejudices, and a really wider knowledge of the external surroundings of Muhammad."[26]

Rodinson also believed himself to have been an objective scholarly critic:

> When I have rejected—explicitly or implicitly—any accepted version of the facts, it has never been without serious reasons. European criticism is perhaps mistaken on certain points, but if one is to criticize it in turn, in order to reject its conclusions, one must

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[25] Maxime Rodinson, pp. 92-93.
[26] MacDonald, *op. cit., p. 87.*

> study and refute its findings according to the same critical standards with regard to sources.[27]

The idea of the influence of Judaism and Christianity on Muḥammad had deep seated roots in the tradition of Orientalism and is widely propagated in the writings of the most eminent Orientalists interested in the Prophet's *Sīra*. Ignac Goldziher is among the earliest Orientalists who developed this theory rather forcefully and his direct influence on both Watt and Rodinson is obvious. What is extraordinary about Goldziher is that he considered Islam in its totality and *all* of the Prophet's ideas to have been the product of Christian and Jewish teachings. He therefore considers Muḥammad to have lacked any traits of originality whatsoever:

> From the point of view of cultural history it is of little account that Muhammad's teaching was not the original creation of his genius which made him the prophet of his people, but that all his doctrines are taken from Judaism and Christianity.[28]

The idea of the prophet of his people reflects Goldziher's mentality more than it does the Prophet's status, since the latter was and is considered as such not by one group of people, but by many peoples. Goldziher's influence on Watt is obvious from the latter's recognition:

> . . . he [Goldziher] combined a sureness of judgement, and his many articles in learned journals on theological subjects are still nearly all of the highest importance . . . so that with good reason he is generally regarded as the founder of the modern discipline of Islamic Studies.[29]

Depriving the Prophet of any original characteristics, Goldziher conceived of Islam as deviated, but nevertheless derived from Judaism and Christianity as practiced and understood by the Prophet's contemporary Arabian Christians and Jews. What motivated Goldziher, as well as many Orientalists who later developed their studies following this rationalization, was the fact that he refuted the Qur'ān as a Revelation and denied the Prophet any traits not pertaining to the ordinary human sphere. Yet this position did not lead all Orientalists who studied the *Sīra* to the kind of conclusions that Goldziher and his followers reached. Goldziher consequently sought the origins of Islam uniquely in the social environment and culture where the Prophet lived in Arabia.

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[27] M. Rodinson, p. xiii.
[28] Ignace Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, Vol. 1, p. 21.
[29] W.M. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1962), p. xviii.

Yet despite Rodinson's predominantly negative approach to the Prophet, his *Mahomet* does contain some positive elements. One of the most charming features in it is his literary eloquence. Rodinson's vast store of knowledge, his multi-disciplinary familarity with Islamic, Jewish, and Christian historical sources, and his perfect command of the French language make his *Mahomet* very interesting to read. The historical anecdotes and the fictitious elements have been harmoniously blended together thus constituting a delicious literary genre. The continuous presentation of hypotheses sheds much doubt on what would normally be accepted as historical and presents the hypothetical premises as most probably closest to the truth. Examples illustrating this technique are numerous throughout the book. It must be stressed however, that Rodinson's *Mahomet* is far from being a historical work, not only because the author develops nineteenth century themes that are outdated and have been rejected by some of the most eminent twentieth century Orientalists, but because he has ignored the most elementary rules that any serious historian must follow even while claiming to have written a serious historical study. Perhaps the most serious criticism of Rodinson's work is that he has in practice diverted from what he himself describes as the most elementary rules of historical research. For example, by rejecting the historical authenticity of the main sources for studying the *Sīra*, Rodinson has opened the possibility of introducing the personal dimension in his writing. In this respect, his work contrasts sharply with Watt's.

An important question that needs to be examined in the writings of Western Orientalists on the Prophet's *Sīra* is, why did they select this subject and for whom did they write. The answers to this question are numerous and complex, not only because different Orientalists addressed different audiences for different reasons, but also because this trend has existed for centuries and has consequently followed an inconsistent line of evolution. This question can not be answered without considering for whom they did not write, and, more specifically, without considering when the Orientalists began to consider the Muslim reader, who is after all more directly concerned with the studies of the *Sīra*, as part of the audience for their literature? When and how did they consider the Muslim reader's reactions as worthy of being taken into account?

It is only fair for critics of Orientalism to admit that despite the predominant attitude, there are Orientalists who have criticized this trend sharply, not only during the twentieth century but even during the nineteenth century. W.M. Watt states: "The difficulty is that we are the heirs of a deep-seated prejudice which goes back to the 'war propaganda' of medieval times.[30] He cites another

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[30] W.M. Watt, *What Is Islam?* 2nd ed., (London and New York, 1979), p. 1.

Orientalist of the late nineteenth century who criticized what other fellow orientalists had written and thought about the Prophet:

> Our current hypothesis about Mahomet, that he was a scheming Imposter, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to anyone. The lies, which well-meaning zeal has heaped round this man, are disgraceful to ourselves only.[31]

Given the period during which they published their works on the Prophet's *Sīra*, W.M. Watt, M. Rodinson, and MacDonald were fully aware of the fact that what they publish is accessible to a Western trained Muslim intellectual elite. Yet they approached these new readers in totally different terms. Expressing his evaluation of what was written about his work on the *Sīra*, Watt expresses the idea that while his work was basically written for the Occidental reader, having been published in a Western language in the West, the Muslim reader who is most directly concerned with the object of his study is equally present in his mind and his reactions deserve equal attention:

> Finally, a personal word may be in order. Critics of my books on Muḥammad have accused me of not stating my views clearly. Presumably they meant that I did not state a view obviously concordant with their own, or else one they could easily denounce as false. I may have fought shy of a decision, but the matter is difficult when one is writing for a great variety of readers who will understand the key concepts in many different ways. May I put my position as follows? I am not a Muslim in the usual sense, though I hope I am a *muslim* as 'one surrendered to God'; but I believe that embedded in the Qur'ān and other expressions of the Islamic vision are vast stores of divine truth from which I and other Occidentals have much to learn.[32]

One of Watt's greatest merits is that he presents key questions clearly and then attempts to find adequate answers for them. The question he presented in the above mentioned quotation is whether he identifies himself more strongly with the Western portion of his public or with the Muslim portion. It is important to note that most Orientalists write exclusively for the first portion. Yet even while writing for two essentially different types of readers, Watt tries to minimize the contradictions between them. On the one hand, he states, "I am not a Muslim," and on the other he states, ". . .but I believe that embedded

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[31] Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-worship* (London, 1890), p. 40; cited by M.W. Watt in *What Is Islam?, IBID*, p. 2.

[32] Watt, *What Is Islam?, ibid.*, p. 21.

in the Qur'ān and other expressions of the Islamic vision are vast stories of divine truth from which I and other occidentals have much to learn." For most people, these two positions are contradictory, but they are not so in the context of the ecumenical approach to which Watt subscribes. The problem should be presented as follows. From the strictly theological perspective, Watt should state either that he is a Muslim or that he is not, for he can not be partly Muslim. Yet this problem does not present itself, because it is not a secret that he is a Reverend and consequently not a Muslim.

As a Christian, however, he could have approached Islam and the Prophet Muḥammad (ṢAAS) in different ways. The most common position is to consider the Prophet as a heathen and to denigrate his image. Watt describes this development as follows:

> From about the eighth century, A.D., Christian Europe began to be conscious of Islam as her great enemy, threatening her in both the military and the spiritual sphere. In deadly fear, Christendom had to bolster confidence by placing the enemy in the most unfavourable light possible, consistent with some genuine basis in fact. The image created in the twenfth and thirteenth centureis continued to dominate European thinking about Islam, and even in the second half of the twentieth century has some vestigial influence. According to this image, Islam was a perversion of Christian truth, even an idolatrous religion; it was a religion without asceticism gaining adherents by pandering to their sexual appetities both in this world and in the world to come. Muḥammad was a deliberate propagator of false doctrines, thinking only of increasing his own power. In 1697 an English ecclesiastic in a scholarly work referred to him as "a wicked imposter" and "the old lecher." Nearly a century later Edward Gibbon in the *Decline and Fall* summed up his opinion of Muḥammad's character in the words that he "indulged the appetites of a man and abused the claims of a prophet."[33]

Yet even though W.M. Watt is a Christian, he is also a respectable scholar, who considers it unworthy of himself to pursue an approach to the Prophet's *Sīra* that is essentially defamatory and slanderous in character. His position may be explained as follows. Without having converted to Islam, Watt approaches this religion and its Prophet with admiration and respect, while criticizing those aspects that he disagrees with. In other words, he has tried to approach Islamic history more honestly. It is more difficult for Occidental scholars to criticize him, because he is essentially and fundamentally an Oc-

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[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

cidental scholar. On the other hand, he is less vulnerable to attack from Muslim scholars, because he considers them as part of his public and writes for them too. For example, the Muslim scholar can only welcome Watt's consideration of ". . .the Islamic vision as a fresh irruption from beyond human consciousness into the intellectual world of man."[34] Watt's version of the Prophet's *Sīra* is far from representing the Islamic standpoint in its totality, and a comparison of his work with Muḥammad Ḥamidullah's works on the *Sīra* will reflect sharp contrasts. In other words, the question is not whether Watt's version is identical to the Islamic version of the *Sīra*, but that he has honestly tried to approach Islam and the *Sīra* objectively, even while admitting the inevitable influence of a series of inherited preconceptions. It is also important that he disagrees respectfully, thus giving others the possibility of rejecting his own ideas with equal respect. He expresses his ideas without attacking those with which he disagrees and consequently does not expect everyone to accept his ideas and criticism unconditionally.

Watt seeks dialogue rather than confrontation. He tries to avoid imposing his ecumenical approach through verbal violence, while he attempts to share his own views with others. He is consequently respected by many Muslim scholars, who, without sharing his views in their totality, are convinced of his sincerity and credibility. This is what upsets a large number of Occidental scholars and Orientalists who are the latter day representatives of the anti-Islamic intellectual crusade that Watt and other Orientalists have found so repulsive.

Finally, the question of credibility lies at the heart of the attitudes that Orientalists have adopted towards the *Prophet* in general and his Revelation in particular. Nineteenth and twentieth century Western biographers of the Prophet have in general gone through great pains in order to convince their readers of their credibility. W.M. Watt has tried to achieve this goal by adopting a more critical attitude toward other European biographers of the Prophet.

M. Rodinson has also made a great effort to convince his readers of the credibility of his interpretations of the *Sīra*. He has attempted to achieve this objective by convincing his readers of his unconditional adherence to the pursuit of scientific truth. His method of appearing credible consists in presenting a series of criticisms that others might use to attack him with, discussing these criticisms, and refuting them. In other words, he has defended many of the criticisms that have been forwarded against previous Western biographers of the Prophet and whose lines of thought he has followed in substance if not in form. He has associated his work with well established Orientalists e.g. Goldziher, Schacht, Von Grunebaum, Levi Della Vida and Marcel Cohen,

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[34] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

and has taken the stand that any criticism from his readers with an Islamic cultural background can only be based on their lack of critical spirit and their ignorance of the European methods of critical analysis. Hence Muhammad Hamidullah is considered as "un Musulman d'une tres grande science, mais absolument denue d'esprit critique" and as "le pieux et savant apologete. . ." Paradoxically, Rodinson has presented and defended a series of his own ideas by the very argument he uses against Hamidullah. In other words, Hamidullah is, in Rodinson's view, an apologist because the ideology he adheres to is rejected by the French Marxist. Yet objectively, Hamidullah has contributed in a number of ways to the study of the Prophet's *Sīra* not only by unearthing and analysing a number of prophetic letters, but also by approaching the battlefields of the Prophet on the basis of detailed maps.

Rodinson is also sensitive to any accusations that could be forwarded against his position as an atheist, so he defends himself against any possible attacks of this kind.

Rodinson's reaffirmation of his credibility as a biographer of the Prophet is really an apology for the credibility of the European tradition in the biography of the Prophet. This need to reassert his credibility is important to note, because it expresses the fear among many Orientalists that despite the vast literature on the *Sīra* that has developed in Europe, Muḥammad may some day be approached in Europe in a manner that resembles the way he is seen by Muslims. The necessity to maintain that barrier between East and West has constituted an important preoccupation in Rodinson's work on the Prophet. Rodinson therefore states rather explicitly that his *Mahomet* is directed to the European reader. His credibility is based on his association with the classical views of the nineteenth century European biographers of the Prophet and his work is indeed a concise synthesis of a large number of old ideas, hypotheses, interpretations, and judgements related to the Prophet's *Sīra* which are presented in a new, rational, and one might even say, convincing manner.

Specialists may be able to place Rodinson's work in the context of Orientalism, but the majority of general readers will be confused by the numerous interpretations and run the risk of being unable to distinguish what is true from what is false, except in the light of the author's interpretations, without relying on their own judgement. This need to confuse is perhaps one of the most dangerous latent objectives behind the work of Rodinson and his mentors on the Prophet. This negative attitude of many Orientalists, however, does not discredit the opposite trend within the movement of Orientalism, namely the effort of those who believe that they should be honest scholars and hold that "the lies, which well-meaning zeal heaped round his man, are disgraceful to ourselves only."