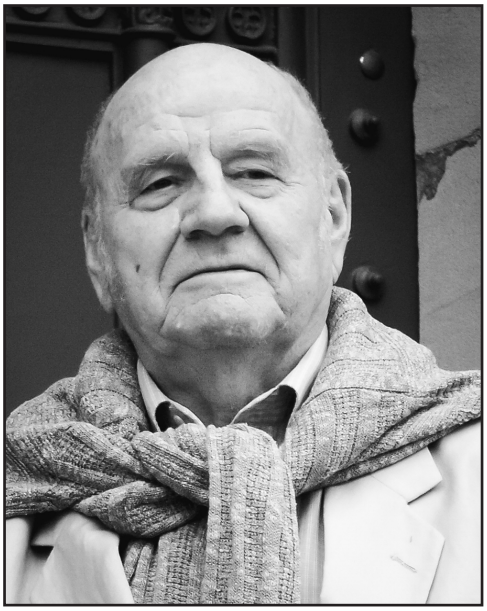
In Memoriam



Günter Lüling
(1928—2014)*

Dr. Günter Lüling, author of a number of revisionist works on the Qur'ān and the history of Islam's origins, died on 10 September 2014, in Wasserburg am Inn, Germany. He had suffered a coronary thrombosis in April, followed a few days later by a stroke, and over the next few months was moved from his home in Erlangen to various rehabilitation clinics in southern Bavaria. He was 85.

Lüling was born on 25 October 1928, in Warna, on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, to Pastor and Missionary Gerhard Lüling and his wife Ilse (née Wilms). The family returned to Germany in 1935, where Günter attended elementary school in Altbelz, near the town of Köslin in eastern Pomerania (now Poland), and then (1939-1943) the Staatliche Oberschule für Jungen in Köslin.

Günter was drafted into military service on 1 January 1944, that is, at the age of 15, an indication of the desperate need for "manpower" of the Third Reich in the final years of the war. He was at first utilized as a support worker for the Navy, and then,

* I am grateful to Friedrich Lüling, Günter Lüling's son, for providing important information about his studies, and to the Lüling family for their warm support. The detailed information on Lüling's early life and studies is taken in part from a *Lebenslauf* prepared by Lüling himself, dated August 1975.

(Photo: Günter Lüling ca. 2012. Photo courtesy of Friedrich Lüling.)

starting on 15 March 1945 (still only 16), as an infantryman.

At the conclusion of the war, Günter became an Allied prisoner-of-war, and from October 1945, was entered into training near Braunschweig and Salzgitter (Lower Saxony) to be a mason or bricklayer. He was, however, able to return to formal schooling in spring 1947, attending the Große Schule in Wolfenbüttel, near Braunschweig, where he passed the Reifeprüfung in March 1949.

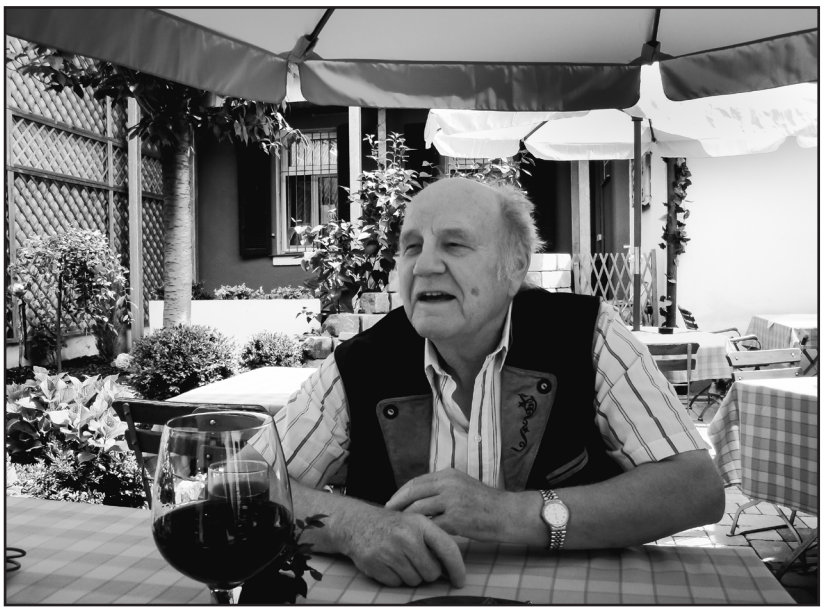
In early 1950, he embarked on university study, which he pursued continuously until 1961, mainly in Erlangen, but with stretches also in Göttingen and Bern, Switzerland. From 1950-1954, he studied Protestant theology, with secondary studies in Classical philology, History of Religions, Germanic languages and literatures, and Arabic studies. In the course of these studies, he worked with some of the foremost scholars in these fields, including Hans Wehr (Arabic studies), Walther Zimmerli (Old Testament), Ernst Käsemann and Joachim Jeremias (New Testament and systematic theology), and Hans Joachim Schoeps (History of Religions), among others. He was also deeply influenced by the work of Martin Werner of Bern (History of Religions), especially Werner's theory of an "angel Christology," although he never formally studied with him.[1] Lüling passed the First Exam in Theology in Göttingen in February 1954.

From 1954 to 1957, he undertook further studies in Erlangen, combining the fields of Sociology, History of Religions, and Semitic Philology; Hans Wehr and Hans-Joachim Schoeps again numbered among his teachers. He passed the civil examination for political economy (Diplomvolkswirt) in Erlangen in November 1957. In early 1958, he resumed his studies with a focus on Semitic Philology and Islamic studies, with Sociology and History of Religions as subordinate fields. Under the direction of Prof. Dr. Jörg Kraemer, he started work on an edition of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de pomo* as his dissertation. In September 1961, however, his progress was halted by a double shock: first, the news that another scholar was about to release an edition of the *Liber de pomo*, which made Lüling's work superfluous; and second, the tragic early death of his *Doktorvater*, Jörg Kraemer.[2]

Lüling had little choice but to break off his studies, and starting in January 1962, he worked for several months as an instructor in German for the Goethe-Institut in several towns in Germany. In August, 1962, he assumed the position of Director of the Goethe-Institut in Aleppo, Syria. It was there that his two children, Friedrich and Lieselotte, were born to him and his wife Hannelore (née Wolfrum), whom he had married in June 1960. Günter remained Director of the Goethe-Institut Aleppo until August 1965. The family then returned to Erlangen, where Lüling was able to work at the University, first as assistant in the Seminar for the History of Medicine, and eventually as assistant in the Seminar for Oriental Studies, where he taught courses in modern Arabic while working on a new dissertation, under the

1. A helpful summary of Werner's views is John Reumann, "Martin Werner and 'Angel Christology'," *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (1956), 349-58.

2. Lüling informed me that Kraemer committed suicide. (Personal communication, Erlangen, 1970 or 1971).



Günter Lüling in July 2008. Photo courtesy of Fred M. Donner.

direction of Prof. Wolfdietrich Fischer, another former student of Hans Wehr. Lüling completed his dissertation, entitled "Kritisch-exegetische Untersuchungen des Qur'ān-Textes," in February 1970 and was awarded the doctorate in Islamic studies and Semitic philology, with history of religions as a secondary field. I had the good fortune to study with him in Erlangen in 1970-71.

Lüling's dissertation presented revolutionary views on the Qur'ān, advancing ideas that he continued to elaborate in subsequent publications, notably his *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Stropenlieder im Qur'ān* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974) and *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad. Eine Kritik am "christlichen" Abendland* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1981). *Über den Ur-Qurʾān* was later translated by Lüling himself and issued in an expanded English version as *A challenge to Islam for Reformation. The rediscovery and reliable reconstruction of a comprehensive pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal hidden in the Koran under earliest Islamic reinterpretations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003).

It is difficult to summarize Lüling's arguments concisely, because they are complex and wide-ranging. His basic argument in these works is that the Qur'ān text, as we have it today, represents a reworking by Muḥammad of earlier Christian texts that had served as liturgy in a hitherto unknown pre-Islamic Christian community in Mecca. In developing these ideas, in which he was influenced by the work of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Werner, and Hans-Joachim Schoeps, he argued that Muḥammad's original message was a continuation of concepts found in Jewish Christianity that considered Jesus to be an angel (from Greek *angelos*, "messenger"). Hellenistic Christianity, including the Christian community of Mecca, had rejected this view and saw Jesus as divine; but Muḥammad, in Lüling's view, clung to the older Arabian "religion of Abraham"

and its concepts. Muḥammad, in his clash with the Meccan Christians, took strophic hymns that had been used in the Christian liturgy and emended them, changing individual words and phrases in order to bring their theology in line with his own views, particularly the idea of Jesus not as God, but as a divine messenger (*rasūl*) in accord with the notion of his status as an angel. Lüling attempted to recover the earlier Christian teachings of these buried Christian hymns by making relatively minor adjustments to the received Qurʾan text—in effect, reversing the very emendations to these texts that, in Lüling's view, Muḥammad himself had made.

Several observations can be made about Lüling's work. First, his manner of making emendations to the Qur'ān text can be criticized as capricious or, perhaps, circular—Lüling's emendations did not prove the existence of an earlier theological outlook in the text, but rather were made by him precisely in order to bring a passage of text in line with the theological arguments he thought "must be there," even though there was little or no external grounds for suspecting the passage had been subjected to prior manipulation. Second, Lüling's hypotheses represented a bold challenge to the traditional view of the Qur'ān and its environment held not only by Muslims, but also by Western scholars at the time, for which reason it was received with great hostility by most of the academic establishment in Germany (on which more shall be said below). Third, Lüling's impressive erudition in Old Testament and New Testament theology, Islamic studies, and Arabic studies, combined with his keen intellect, meant that his hypotheses are often intriguing but difficult to evaluate confidently, as few people have similarly wide-ranging training in all these areas; reading his work, one often feels that one is "over one's head" in unfamiliar technical material.

The revolutionary nature of Lüling's hypotheses on the Qur'ān and Islam's origins led fairly quickly to his being forced out of the German academic establishment, even though his dissertation had originally been supported enthusiastically by his *Doktorvater* and was accepted by his department with the mark of *eximium opus*, "extraordinary work." Lüling's ideas were just too threatening to certain established scholars whose work would have been overturned by it. His effort to submit a *Habilitationsschrift* or "second dissertation," necessary to qualify for a permanent teaching position in Germany, was thwarted; a number of senior Orientalists, led apparently by the influential Prof. Anton Spitaler of Munich, blocked his efforts to find a position, and organized a virtual conspiracy of silence against him so that his work was hardly reviewed in Germany[3]—and, since it was written in German, few foreign scholars were able readily to follow Lüling's complex argumentation or bothered to do so. It must be said that regardless of how uncomfortable or threatening a

3. Lüling describes these machinations in some detail in the Preface to his *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*. Spitaler was, of course, the same scholar who, for over fifty years, concealed the archive of photographs of early Qurʾan manuscripts amassed early in the century by Gotthelf Bergsträsser and Otto Pretzl, claiming it had been destroyed by allied bombing during the war—and who thus single-handedly delayed critical scholarship on the Qurʾan for a generation or more. See Andrew Higgins, "The Lost Archive," *The Wall Street Journal* Jan. 12, 2008 (www.wsj.com/articles/SB120008793352784631).

scholar's ideas may seem, they deserve to be openly debated, and judged on their merits. The ideas of Lüling's hero, Martin Werner, were rejected by many German theologians, but Werner, as an already established scholar, was able to publish them, and his opponents were forced to write their own formal rebuttals in learned academic works. Günter Lüling, by comparison, was never shown the decency of straightforward critical engagement. The way Lüling was treated by those who should have been his colleagues can only be deemed shabby, and stands as a dark stain on the record of the German academic establishment of his time.

Deprived of a university career, Lüling nonetheless continued to pursue scholarship for the remainder of his life, working essentially in isolation. He and his wife lived frugally on her salary, and his scholarship was self-published. He was, naturally, embittered and considered himself a martyr to the causes of true scholarship and proper theology, and sometimes had choice things to say about the German academic establishment; but in his later years, he worked without much overt complaint, ever confident that his ideas would, in the end, be vindicated. When my wife and I last visited him in Erlangen in the summer of 2008 (he would have been just short of 80 at the time), he was cheerful, eager to discuss scholarly matters, and vigorous enough to lead us on a memorable bicycle tour of Erlangen, carefully pointing out apartments where he had lodged as a student and noteworthy architectural monuments of the town, including a church whose tower we climbed to enjoy a fine view of the city. He was even then deeply engaged in research for a new book, of which I think he had already written several hundred pages, on the early history of the Hebrews, in which he presented a characteristically radical new vision of their history and impact in the world—in short, it was, like everything he wrote, filled with revolutionary implications.[4]

Regardless of one's ultimate judgment on Lüling's work, he was in many ways a pioneer. That he was original, highly intelligent, thoughtful, independent of judgment, and possessed of an impressive range of knowledge can hardly be denied; this means that his work often contains intriguing insights and observations, even if his critical judgment, or the system underlying his approach, may be questioned. He was an early voice challenging the traditional Islamic origins narrative that represented the dominant consensus until the 1970s—a challenge later raised, albeit in different ways and with different arguments, by such scholars as John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, and others. His sense that the origins of Islam had, in some way, an intimate connection with Christianity is one that has been advanced more recently by numerous other scholars, notably those associated with the so-called "Inarah school" based in Saarbrücken. His bold attempt to "correct" the text of the Qur'ān to restore what he considered to be its presumed original meaning anticipated by a quarter-century the similar efforts of Christoph Luxenberg (who, however, never bothered even to mention Lüling's work—or, for that matter, anyone else's) in his

4. I do not know what the state of this manuscript was at the time of his death—largely completed? Mostly only sketched out?—nor where it may be today.

Die syrisch-aramäische Lesart des Korans (Berlin, 2000). Lüling's works contain many fertile ideas, particularly in the realm of the underlying theology that the Qur'ān text attempts to articulate, that deserve more sustained and detailed examination.

— Fred M. Donner
University of Chicago
(f-donner@uchicago.edu)