Routledge Handbook on Early Islam, edited by Herbert Berg. Routledge, 2018. 392pp., Hb. £165.00. ISBN-13: 9781138821187.

Reviewed by Johanne Louise Christiansen, University of Copenhagen, jch@teol.ku.dk

The *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam* treats the historical-critical study of the formative period of Islam and how this period is negotiated, re-negotiated, or revisioned by “Believers,” Muslims, and scholars through history. As a handbook, it falls in line with other recent introductory publications on this period, such as *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān* (2006), *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad* (2010), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (2016), and many more. The handbook-companion genre is difficult to review as it contains diverse contributions of varying quality without an overall argument or thesis. Herbert Berg’s edition, however, presents some recurrent theoretical points, such as to avoid what he terms the “genetic fallacy” in selecting “early Islam” (instead of the crypto-theological “origins of Islam”) as designation for the period in question (pp. 4–6), or the invocation of early Islam’s context as “Late Antiquity” (a term that is unfortunately never defined or discussed, nor is it consistently spelt through the handbook, cf. e.g. p. 44 versus p. 111). The overall aim of the book is to demonstrate that the study of early Islam is essential for understanding modern and contemporary Islamic manifestations through their articulations of this “golden age.” This is without doubt a useful focus for both students and scholars of Islamic studies, perhaps even for the general public, and it is the handbook’s main contribution to the existing literature on the period at hand.

The handbook consists of four parts, “I The Qur’ān and Muḥammad” (chapters 1–7), “II Identities and communities in early Islam” (chapters 8–13), “III Modern and contemporary reinterpretation of early Islam” (chapters 14–17), and “IV Revisioning early Islam” (chapters 18–22). The four parts comprise 22 contributions by scholars within the fields of Qur’ānic and Islamic studies. All contributions are short, varying from nine to 14 pages, with some exceptions, exemplified by the chapter on exegesis by Michael E. Pregill with its 22 pages (not including the notes and bibliography; chapter 7, pp. 98–125). The first part outlines the sources and

Keywords: Early Islam, historical-critical study of early Islam, Qur’ān, modern and contemporary interpretations of early Islam, revisionist approaches to early Islam

characters of early Islam through a focus on the central scholarly debates surrounding these. In his introductory chapter on the Qur'ān, Nicolai Sinai, for example, spends four pages discussing the contested questions of when the text was finalized and the nature of the milieu it emerged in (pp. 17–20). These questions and the text's relationship to other scriptures are revisited in more depth by David Cook (chapter 2), Herbert Berg (chapter 3), and Fred M. Donner (chapter 10 in part II). Besides the Qur'ān, the first part also includes articles on the literary traditions of the *sīra* (Pavel Pavlovitch, chapter 5), *ḥadīth* (Jens Scheiner, chapter 6), and *tafsīr* (Michael E. Pregill, chapter 7), as well as on the character of Muḥammad (Stephen J. Shoemaker, chapter 4). One cannot help missing a chapter on Islamic theology, even though this topic is mentioned in some of the handbook's other chapters (e.g. on p. 91–92, 109, 214ff). In the second part, the authors address various communities surrounding the emergence of Islam and their identity formation. These involve the pre-Islamic Arabian communities (Illka Lindstedt, chapter 9), the Qur'ānic community itself, which Fred M. Donner argues should not be called Muslims, but instead 'Believers' (*mu'minūn*) as a result of their relationship with the Peoples of the Book (chapter 10), as well as post-Qur'ānic communities, including what is later known as Sunnī/Shī'a (Najam Haider, chapter 12) and Ṣūfī (Sara Sviri, chapter 13). The latter two contributions convincingly nuance the too often stated assumptions that distinct Sunnī/Shī'a identities were present from the very beginning of Islam and that Islamic mysticism only emerged with the much later term and movement, Sufism. The second part is initiated with a more theoretical based treatment of social group formation and ethnogenesis ("the process by which ethnic identities form and evolve over time," p. 131) in early Islam (Peter Webb, chapter 8). By applying a theoretical frame from anthropology and memory studies, this contribution reminds us that the incorporation of theory from other academic fields can be fruitful for analyses within Islamic studies. In a similar manner, Fanny Bessard's chapter on political and economic aspects in the early Islamic caliphate brings the importance of studying geopolitical, economic, and material dynamics to the table (chapter 11). The handbook's third part turns to the modern period and how early Islam is constructed in various religious and political manifestations. Here, early Islam becomes an ahistorical ideal, a "golden age," from which—sometimes opposing or even conflicting—agendas are legitimized. The contributions of the third part deal with such reinterpretations by "modernists" like Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad 'Abduh

(d. 1905), and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) (Simon Wood, chapter 14), by the Muslim Brotherhood through the works of founder Ḥasan al-Bannā' (d. 1949) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) (Rachel M. Scott, chapter 15), and by modern Muslim feminists such as Dahlia Eissa (Aisha Geissinger, chapter 17). In chapter 16, the problematic and disputed terms *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* "pious forefathers" and Salafī are discussed in relation to other designations such as "neofundamentalism," "modernism," "Wahhabism," and "Islamism" (Jeffrey T. Kenney). Part three therefore has a necessary typological focus and the recurrent question is how to classify these diverse modern intellectuals, groups, and tendencies. The last part, part IV, delineates two contemporary Islamic expressions that radically revision early Islam to construct their own identity, namely the so-called "Qur'ānists," applying the Qur'ān as their only authority (Daniel W. Brown, chapter 19) and the Black American movement, Nation of Islam (Herbert Berg, chapter 21). In chapters 20 and 22, Sara Omar and Justine Howe treat the controversial topic of homosexuality in Islam and the evocation of early Islam in debates on religious pluralism in the US. These two chapters are of particular use for teaching as students continue to be (perhaps influenced by the international media) interested in such questions.

Martin Gross's chapter on the contemporary "revisionist" trend of Qur'ānic studies (chapter 18) seems to be isolated from the rest of the book. The piece is controversial, but not because of its alternative though very relevant content, but, in my view, its un-academic tone (Gross himself calls his chapter "irritating," p. 321). The whole chapter comes out as a campaign against what Gross terms "the traditional scholars of Islamic Studies," exemplified in his diatribe against Angelika Neuwirth on p. 317, a recurrent feature of "revisionist" works and conferences. The style does not help the overall purpose of the article: to raise attention to new alternative studies on early Islam, its emergence, and its influences. Through an outline of, for example, the works of Volker Popp, Johannes Thomas, Raymond Dequin, and himself (all members of the Inārah academic society), Gross remarks on fundamental questions for the study of early Islam, such as the lack of "hard evidence" from the earliest Islamic period and the historical probability of the Islamic conquests. Moreover, he introduces an alternative genealogy of the 'Abbāsids and questions the traditional history of transmission and authorship of the Qur'ān. His own thesis, that early Islam indicates an (formal) influence from Buddhism, is also summarized in this chapter (pp. 320–321). According to Gross, this influence is particularly evident in the *ḥajj* which includes the ritual of

circumambulation (*ṭawāf*, a term that *does* occur in the Qur'ān with this meaning, e.g. Q 2:125, 158). Gross' argues that since circumambulation is unknown to Islam, it can only have emerged through an inspiration from Buddhism. It is beyond the scope here to engage with Gross' work in detail, but I will provide two reflections from the perspective of history of religion. First, considering the so-called Axial Age theories (the aim of the term "Axial Age" is to designate some striking similarities in a number of Eurasian cultures, including China, India, Israel, and Greece, taking place around the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE), is it really sensational that Buddhism and Islam share ritual phenomena or "superficial elements or formalities" as Gross terms it (p. 320)? Even though Buddhism is, according to Gross, "a religion without the concept of a personal god," it can still be defined as an (post-)Axial religion, advocating a universal and all-encompassing ethics comparable to the monotheistic God. Second, as for the circumambulation, this processional ritual could also exemplify the basic human tendency to walk in line, something that in one way or another occur in all religions (as well as other cultural manifestations that certainly have not been in historical contact). The Islamic formulation of the ritual does not necessitate a direct inspiration from an external religious outlook, but may just be a common religious phenomenon emerging where people are gathered in social groups. My final appeal against Gross' chapter concerns the following statement:

The first generation of them [the revisionists] appeared in the 1970s—people like Günter Lüling, John Wansbrough, and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, but their opinions and research results have mostly been left out of standard works in Islamic Studies. At best, in some specialized articles they are mentioned as outsiders. But up to now they can hardly be found in introductory books, scholarly overviews, or encyclopedia articles. (p. 311)

This is simply incorrect. Actually, these scholars seem to be mentioned more frequently than others in the genres Gross refers to. See for example the articles "Post-Enlightenment Academic Study of the Qur'ān" in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (2001–2006) by Marco Schöller or "al-Ḳur'ān" in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*² by A.T. Welch (1960–2007). Also in this introductory *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, 'revisionists' are mentioned in 11 out of 22 chapters.

Even though *The Routledge Handbook on Early Islam* is generally lacking inter-references, which could have created more coherence between the chapters, the book is a useful and inclusive work, touching on the most central questions and scholarly debates on early Islam. Awareness and

discussion of these questions are fundamental for the future of the fields of Qur'ānic and Islamic studies.