

## **The Theories and Methodologies of Orientalists in The Study of Islam: A case of William Muir and His Application**

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### **Abstract**

Orientalism refers to the study of the Eastern world. This movement explores the multiple interpretations of the term in relation to Eastern languages, literatures, civilizations and religions. Most of Orientalists have constantly distorted the image of Islam. Since the beginning of Islam, they have made no effort to shed light on the various aspects and facts of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) as well as the life of Islam in general. As a result, they were unable to understand the basic message of Islam. Prominent in this effort stands William Muir (1819-1905). William Muir was a Scottish modern Christian scholar and orientalist who wrote a large number of books on Islamic studies. To fully understand a researcher's intellectual contributions, it is necessary to properly examine his theories and methodologies he applied. The theories and methodologies of William Muir in studying Islam played an important role in the Muslim-Christian relation. Muslims and Christian generally believed that the expertise and contributions of Muir in the field of Islamic studies cannot be overestimated. However, William Muir applied so many ways to gain the opportunity to acquire Islamic knowledge and to utilize that knowledge to criticize and condemn the Glorious Qur'an and the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw). The main objective of this paper is to provide the researcher with some essential information regarding Muir's methodologies that may enable him to objectively analyse William Muir's different opinions and ideas towards the Glorious Qur'an and the prophethood of Muhammad (saw). The finding shows that Muir applied five different methodologies in order to study Islam,

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namely Skepticism Method, Historico-critical Method, Epileptic Theory, The Theory of Judeo-Christian Origin of the Glorious Qur'an, and Subjective Approach. It has been shown that Muir's theories and Methodology were greatly influenced by famous orientalists, such as Goldziher, Noldeke, Springer, and others. His choice of language has also been noted, as it has been shown that he used obscene and harsh words towards the Prophet (saw).

**Keywords:** William Muir, Theory, Methodology, Islam

### الملخص:

يشير مصطلح الاستشراق إلى دراسة العالم الشرقي. وتتكشف هذه الحركة التفسيرات المتعددة للمصطلح فيما يتعلق باللغات والآداب والحضارات والأديان الشرقية. وقد شوه معظم المستشرقين صورة الإسلام باستمرار. فمنذ بداية الإسلام، لم يبذلوا أي جهد لإلقاء الضوء على الجوانب والحقائق المختلفة لحياة النبي محمد (صلى الله عليه وسلم) وكذلك حياة الإسلام بشكل عام. ونتيجة لذلك، فقد عجزوا عن فهم الرسالة الأساسية للإسلام. وبرز في هذا الجهد ويليام موير (1819-1905). كان ويليام موير عالماً ومستشرقاً مسيحياً حديثاً اسكتلندياً كتب عددًا كبيراً من الكتب في الدراسات الإسلامية. لفهم المساهمات الفكرية للعالم بشكل كامل، من الضروري فحص نظرياته ومنهجيته التي طبقها بشكل صحيح. لعبت نظريات ومنهجيات ويليام موير في دراسة الإسلام دوراً مهماً في العلاقة بين المسلمين والمسيحيين. يعتقد المسلمون والمسيحيون بشكل عام أن خبرة موير ومساهماته في مجال الدراسات الإسلامية لا يمكن المبالغة فيها. ولكن ولیم مویر طبق العديد من الأساليب للحصول على فرصة اكتساب المعرفة الإسلامية والاستفادة من تلك المعرفة لنقد وإدانة القرآن الكريم ونبوة محمد (صلى الله عليه وسلم). والهدف الرئيسي من هذه الورقة هو تزويد الباحث ببعض المعلومات الأساسية حول منهجيات موير التي قد تمكنه من تحليل آراء وأفكار ولیم موير المختلفة تجاه القرآن الكريم ونبوة محمد (صلى الله عليه وسلم) بشكل موضوعي. وتبين النتيجة أن موير طبق خمس مناهج مختلفة لدراسة الإسلام، وهي

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منهج الشك، والمنهج التاريخي النقدي، ونظرية الصرع، ونظرية الأصل اليهودي المسيحي للقرآن الكريم، والمنهج الذاتي.

#### **Introduction:**

In the field of works related to Muslim societies and Islam, there are two main trends: Orientalist and non-Orientalist. The Orientalist perspective is strongly influenced by Western discourse about Islam and its Messenger, which is full of preconceptions and ideological distortions. However, it is wrong to define them all as one entity, which contradicts Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw). As a result, they were divided into three basic groups. The first category includes Orientalists who actively contribute to Islamic studies and literature with the clear intention of discrediting Islam. They deny Islam, its prophets, and the Holy Qur'an. The second group comprises of Orientalists who do not belong directly to the missionaries of the Church. They study Islam in order to compare it with other Semitic religions or to verify the validity of its doctrines. They engage in criticism of Islam as a whole, but mostly focus on intellectual criticism, with a few exceptions. The last category includes a modern group of orientalists. It focuses on academic institutions. Their position on Islam seems moderate, and their main goal is academic excellence. Non-Orientalist research is objective, based on sound research methods, and committed to academic integrity.

William Muir was an accomplished Oriental scholar who specialized in the history of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). His *Life of Muhammad from the Original Sources* was published posthumously in 1923, and revised and edited by the Arabic philologist, Thomas Hunter Weir (d. 1928). During his time in India, Muir developed a strong bond with the missionary community. He was an ardent orientalist who enthusiastically supported their goals. (Daniel: 1966). Muir was a specialist in several fields, but he seems to have been particularly drawn to Arabic and Islamic studies, to which he made significant contributions. He has written numerous publications in this field. Because of his writings, some experts have confirmed that he is more knowledgeable about Islamic studies than the majority of Muslim scholars. By reading Muir's publications, it will reveal that he is a staunch opponent of Islam. Although he was well versed in the history of Islam, but he preferred a negative opinion on it and its

Prophet. It is crucial to note that Muir's books, along with those of other colonial intellectuals, served as standard reference materials for Orientalist studies in general, and missionary circles in particular.

### **Problem Statement**

The religion of Islam and its Prophet (saw) were among the central theme in Muslim-Christian relations. Non-Muslim scholars, especially Orientalists, have written books and articles that address these issues. William Muir's works are among the most controversial treatises due to his harsh depiction on Islam and its Prophet (saw). He tried to spread false beliefs about the religion of Islam and cast many doubts about the life of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) using this reductionist methodology. However, Muir applied hostile theories and methodologies in order to criticize Islam and Prophet Muhammad on the basis of Christian prejudice and bias. Although later Christian scholars have described Muir's views as innovative and a new way of studying Islam in Western academic circles. 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 in-depth research on Islam. However, the researcher concludes that no one has critically analyzed Muir's theories and methodology to studying Islam in the broadest and truest sense. The research aims to bridge the intellectual gap and contribute to increasing new knowledge about Muslim-Christian dialogue on Islam in the medieval and modern times.

### **Research Questions**

How does Muir apply his theories and methodologies in the study of Islam?

### **Research Objectives**

To investigate and analyse Muir's theories and methodologies in the study of Islam.

### **Literature Review**

William Muir was among the most intellectual Christian writers who focus on the discuss of Glorious Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad (saw), and Islam. Despite his many writings and talks about Islam, his methodologies have not been well investigated. It turns out that the majority

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of authors who analysed and evaluated his discuss also ignored him. Even the existing material about him is complex and ambiguous.

The article written by Ghulam Husaini Babar “*Orientalist’s methodology in the study of sirah: A critical analysis*” examines the modern Christian methodologies in the study of sirah. The author has examined the methodology of John Wansbrough, Andrew Rippon, Michael Cook, Uri Rubin, and Patricia Crone. But he did not highlight Muir’s theory and methodology in particular. This article will provide insight into Orientalists methodology in the study of Islam. (Ghulam H. B Vol.7:7)

Jabal Muhammad Buaben in his book “*The Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the West*”, discusses main subject of Western scholarship on the life and achievements of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). He analyses derogatory images of the Prophet (saw) in polemical writing from the medieval until the 20th century, focusing on the three most significant English authors: William Muir, David Samuel Margoliouth, and William Montgomery Watt. Although his analysis is essential and covers a wide range of topics related to Prophet Muhammad’s (saw) prophetic position, his work appears to be more descriptive than critical. As a result, there is still an absence of the theories and methodologies of Muir. (Buaben: 1996)

The article of Nusairah Binti Ramli “*Misconception against the Prophet and Qur’an in the Orientalist literature*”. The author highlights the opinions of a number of Orientalists who misinterpreted beliefs against the Prophet (saw) including Richard Bell, David S. Margoliouth, and William Montgomery Watt. This work contributes significantly to our understanding of Orientalists methodology. As a result, no theories and methodologies of Muir on the study of Islam. (Nusairah:2016).

In the article entitled “*Attentive Muslim reflections on Orientalists’ conception of Sirah*” written by Ghulam Hussain Babar and Muhammad Feroz-ud-din Shah Khagga. The authors demonstrate how, following Muir's work in the late nineteenth century, Muslim historians became interested in Orientalist approaches to the life of the Prophet (saw). The book highlighted Syed Ahmad Khan's views and refutations in William Muir's book. However, the article does not provide the theories and methodologies of William Muir in studying Islam. (Ghulam H. B and M. Feroz-ud-Din, Vol.7:7).

The article “The Misrepresented Claims of David Samuel Margoliouth on Prophet Muhammad’s Miracles: A Critical Evaluation” by Akilu Muhammad Aliyu and Adibah Abdul Rahim. The authors evaluate Margoliouth’s claims on miracles. However, they fail to draw attention to Muir’s theories and methodology. But the article will help us understand the Orientalist view on the prophetic status of Muhammad (saw). (Akilu and Adibah Vol.24: 2018).

In the article “Imaging Prophet Mohammed and The Orient Prototype in English Biographies” written by Hadeer Abu al-Naja highlights the basic principles of Orientalists, stating that some Orientalists claim objectivity, while others do not hide their biased and hostile views against Islam and Prophet (saw). The uniqueness of the article prompted the writer to explore the development of the image of the Prophet Muhammad (saw) in English biographies. Through the light of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, specifically W. Montgomery Watt’s book “Muhammad in Mecca” and Karen Armstrong’s book “Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time,”. However, the author describes William Muir’s hostile view of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), but no analysis of his theories and methodology have been found. The article will be useful in understanding Muir’s views on the Prophet Muhammad (saw) and modern Christian trends in dealing with Islam. (Hadeer: 2015).

After conducting a comprehensive examination of the body of research on William Muir and related topics to his methodology, the researcher found that a large percentage of the books and articles give precedence to the analysis of Muir’s views and other Christian scholars rather than Muir’s methodologies and theories.

### **Methodology**

The research will be a qualitative study in nature. To understand and analyze William Muir’s theories and methodologies in the study of Islam, multiple major approaches are needed, including descriptive and

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historical approaches. Therefore, the historical and descriptive approaches were used to trace Muir's methodological approach.

The study will be divided into two parts. The first part will deliberate Muir's theories and methodological approaches. The second part will contain his application on that theories and methodologies.

### **Muir's theories and Methodologies in the Study of Islam**

To properly understand the scholar's contribution, it is necessary to analyze his theories, methodologies and his application. If his methodology becomes clear, his contributions will be understood correctly and accurately.

#### **The Theory of Judeo-Christian Origin of the Glorious Qur'an**

The majority of Orientalists use this theory as one of their means to challenge and refute the authorship of the Qur'an. Their central claim is that since the Prophet Muhammad (saw) was a forger, the source and the truth found in the Qur'an must stem from the Jewish and Christian traditions, not from God.

#### **Muir's Application to this theory**

Muir applied this theory in his book "the life of Muhammad from the original sources" throughout his analysis on the content of the Holy Qur'an indicates that many Qur'anic verses are taken from Christian and Jewish traditions, with some uncertain origins. However, Muir believes that the Prophet (saw) was the author of the Qur'an and should not deny the pleasure of expression, some exuberance of passions, and even some poetic sublimity that he (the Prophet) puts in his Qur'an. He asserted that by carefully analyzing the similarities, any biblical scholar could determine the Qur'anic origins. (Muir: xxvii)

#### **Epileptic Theory**

Many Christian scholars, especially Orientalists, have applied and continue to use pathological or epileptic ideas to evaluate the Prophet's physical experiences during the revelation. This idea indicates that the Prophet Muhammad (saw) suffered from epileptic seizures and mental disorders. Whenever something happened to him, he claimed it was a divine revelation. Muir is one of the scholars who applied this approach to

analyzing the Prophet Muhammad (saw) and the Holy Quran. He confirmed that the Prophet (saw) was suffering from epilepsy. Muir is one of the scholars who applied this approach to study and evaluate the Prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (saw) and the Holy Quran. He confirmed that the Prophet (saw) suffered from epilepsy. However, before embarking on exploration and identification on this theory, is important to shed light on the concept of epilepsy and its meaning.

### **The Meaning and Concept of Epilepsy**

Epilepsy is defined as “sudden and recurrent disturbances of mental function, state of consciousness, sensory activity, or body movements resulting from paroxysmal dysfunction of cerebral nerve cells.” Epilepsy is often accompanied by a convulsive seizure that causes a sudden loss of consciousness and a limb-shaking fall. Other symptoms include strange and unusual behaviors, nostalgic fantasies, hallucinatory visions, and changes in attitude. (Encyclopedia Britannic, epilepsy: 525). It is considered one of the most terrible neurological diseases, as it spreads greatly in childhood and old age. A person with epilepsy usually bites his or her tongue, feels tired, and becomes confused and unconscious during seizures. However, complications of epilepsy and seizure problems include not only physical damage, but also mental health problems such as depression. (Schmitz: 201).

### **Muir’s Application to this theory**

Muir applied this strategy in his writings on the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). According to Muir, who supported this theory, claimed that the Prophet (saw) suffered from epilepsy from a young age. He cited an incident from the Prophet Muhammad's early childhood when he lived with Halima Saadia as evidence of his epilepsy, which was used to deny his prophethood. He said that since the Prophet (saw) suffered from epilepsy, his claim of revelation cannot be trusted due to hallucinations and fantasies, which are often associated with epileptic seizures. This claim was mentioned several times in his treatises. (Muir: 42)

### **Historico-critical Method**

In the nineteenth century, Orientalists conducted a critical study of Islam using original sources. However, their approach to these sources is

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based on historical criticism, which stems from biblical studies. Even though it sparked disagreement among Christian scholars, but the Orientalists still chose to use this approach in their research on Islam and the life of the Prophet (saw). Muir was among the Orientalists who used this approach while working with Islamic materials. To appreciate the impact of his methodology on his interaction with Islamic texts, including the Holy Qur'an, it is important to first understand its context, concept, and general meaning.

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

The historico-critical method is simply known as historical criticism. (Barton: 1998). The main goal of this approach is to consider the historical background of the text and its origins. It studies and traces the original meaning of the text as seen by the first readers, not the current readers. It makes an argument that our current understanding of the term may not match that of early readers. Thus, the main argument put forward by proponents of this approach was to evaluate the works in light of their historical context and to assert that it is incorrect to interpret them in a way different from that of their first readers. (Barton: 1998).

The historical-critical method investigates not only the historical meaning of a text, but also what happened to such texts in the past. This technique also raises questions about the stages during which these sources appeared. (Barton: 1998). Its aim may include recreating the circumstances of the author and recipients, as well as reconstructing the true nature of the events described in the book. As a result, questions arise such as when, how and by whom wrote these sources. To gain a comprehensive understanding of religious origins and access to the "world beyond the text," a critical investigation of the text's historical meaning and historical framework is required. To analyze and evaluate a text critically, the sacredness associated with it must be overlooked. (Soulén: 2001).

However, as mentioned earlier, this method was initially used in biblical studies or in the search for the historical Jesus. The previous method inherited from medieval writers and their sources regarding Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw) ceased with the arrival of the Orientalists in the nineteenth century. The historical-critical method was used to analyze Islamic sources and research related to the historical Muhammad. Orientalists emphasize that before any information taken from Islam is considered valuable or acceptable, its source must be carefully examined. (Yusuf: 2014). Orientalists first tried to find the original Islamic sources,

then examined and critically examined these texts using methods of historical criticism. As a result, many reliable Islamic sources were banished. (Yusuf: 2014). This is understandable because the Orientalists were the ones who established the criteria that they used and continue to use in their historical criticism.

### **Muir's Application to this Method**

Muir applied a historical-critical method when dealing with Islamic sources. When reading Muir's criticism of Islamic texts, one can conclude that he preferred to apply ideas put forward by Western scholars who did not agree with the customs of the Prophet (saw). It is not surprising that he used this method to fabricate authentic sources of Islam and authenticate the fake sources. A clear example of this is his claim that The Satanic Verses are true. Muir confirmed that the Prophet (saw) agreed to the Quraysh agreement and made some acceptable concessions to Al-Lat and Al-Uzza. According to him, Muhammad was dissatisfied and longed for peace, especially with the Qurayshi authorities. (Muir: 514). One could argue that Muir may have absorbed some information suggesting that the story was fabricated by Islamic authorities, but decided to accept it because it validated his hostility to Islam. This method was also applied by Muir in the incident of Banu Qurayza, carried out by Nu'aim ibn Mas'ud. Muir questioned the veracity of the story, considering that the actions of the Prophet (saw) were an act of heinous cruelty rather than justice. (Muir: 514).

### **Skepticism Method**

One of the methods used by Western academics in their countless investigations into Arabic and Islamic studies is to cast doubt on Islamic sources which known as the "suspicion method or skepticism." Using this method, an attempt is made to separate Muslims from the main sources of Islamic teachings or seriously question their authenticity, thus casting doubt on their practices and beliefs and on the Sirah of the Prophet (saw). As such, most of them believe that the Qur'an was modified during the compilation and has several defects and errors. It has also been asserted that later Muslim scholars invented the tradition of the Prophet because the Prophet was unable to utter them all.

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### **Muir's Application to this Method**

Through Muir's various theses on Islam, you can easily understand the skepticism and to question the authenticity of Islamic writings. Because he expressed several times his doubts about Islamic sources. This is what prompted him to reject some of the hadiths of the Prophet (saw) as his role model Pfander did. However, Muir was a pioneer in modern Western scholarship, developing a comprehensive criticism of hadith and a new system for judging authentic material in the Prophet's hadith. He built on the works of Gustav Weil and Aloy Sprenger. (Guenther: 1997). At the same time, it should be noted that even the Holy Qur'an was not exempt from Skepticism and contempt. In an attempt to question its authenticity, he said that the Qur'an is a collection of Muhammad's sayings taken during his life and expanded upon throughout his public persona, presenting his views on religion, public life and domestic life. (Muir: xxviii). Moreover, it is clear that he challenges not only the hadith of the Prophet (saw) and the Holy Quran, but also challenges other sources that Muslims consider reliable in confirming the authenticity of the Quran. A prominent example of this is his skepticism about the authenticity of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, which he asserted that was composed by later Muslim intellectuals in an attempt to glorify the Holy Qur'an. (Muir: lxxv-lxxix).

### **Subjective Method**

If we look closely at the orientalist's views on Islam in general, we can conclude that they all relied in their writings on a subjective approach. Even though they claim to be unbiased and free of prejudice, but a deeper look into their numerous writings will show otherwise. If we looked at the Prophethood of Muhammad (saw) and the Glorious Qur'an, their enmity would intensify. Their hostility and animosity increase as they reflect on the Glorious Qur'an and Prophethood of Muhammad (saw). According to A. L. Tibawi, the community of believers not only considered Muhammad as the Messenger of God, but he was also the last of the messengers sent to confirm and seal their messages. According to this community, the Qur'an is the eternal, uncreated message of Allah. (Tibawi: 1964). Tibawi concluded with the following statement: "Any writer, even if he is not a devout Muslim, who ignores the vital necessity of taking these beliefs into account in what he writes about Islam, exposes himself to the charge of lack of objectivity." (Tibawi: 1964).

### **Muir's Application to this Method**

Despite the fact that many academics in the West believe that Muir is knowledgeable about Arabic and Islamic studies, but his approaches seem more subjective than scientific. The reader may think that his opinions and methodology will differ from the opinions of other Orientalists. However, it depended entirely on how they interpreted the Holy Quran and the Prophet Muhammad. No one can deny Muir's expertise in Arabic and Islamic studies because Muir is widely known for his knowledge in Arabic and Islamic studies. His extensive knowledge may have enabled him to deal with Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (saw) perfectly, but his Christian beliefs hindered him from seeing the truth in the available Islamic texts and discouraged him from taking an objective approach. A clear example of this is his assessment of the Prophet (saw) as a forgery, and the Qur'an as a stolen copy of the Jewish and Christian traditions. (Muir:16). Muir, as a writer on Islam, has been accused of bias and injustice against Islam and the Prophet (saw) and neither he nor anyone else has been able to exonerate him of this charge.

### **Conclusion**

Within the framework of Muir's theories and methodologies in studying Islam, he applied numerous approaches to get access to Islamic knowledge. Therefore, using this reductionist approaches, he attempted to promote incorrect views about the religion of Islam and cast doubt on the Prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (saw). However, Muir used a variety of antagonistic theories and methodologies, such as skepticism, critical historical method, epileptic theory, and the theory of the Judeo-Christian origin of the Glorious Qur'an, in order to criticize Islam and Prophet Muhammad (saw) based on Christian prejudice and bias. This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of each of these approaches, and after a thorough examination of these methods, it was clear that Muir's theories and methodologies only served to spread misinformation about Islam and raise many questions regarding the Prophetic status of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). Moreover, despite numerous attempts to analyze Muir's theories and methodologies in the study of Islam, there is a dire need for a comprehensive and in-depth research of his views on the Islamic Caliphate, his discussion of Islam and Christianity in the modern world, and the influence of Islam, all are areas that deserve more focus and further research.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests, financial or personal, in connection with the writing of this article.

### **Authors' Contribution**

After completing a comprehensive review of the literature and reading books on the topic. The researcher confirms that Muir's theories and methodology in studying Islam have not been subjected to careful analysis. The study aims to bridge the knowledge gap and contribute to understanding Orientalists methodologies in studying Islam.

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