



Boldly applying historical ways of knowing to the study of nascent Islam in RE

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Abstract

An examination of Religious Education (RE) textbooks reveals that when pupils are taught about the history of Makkah, the life of Muhammad, the Quran, and the emergence of Islam, the content is often presented as a straightforward narrative based on Islamic tradition. This approach typically lacks critical engagement and overlooks alternative scholarly perspectives. Notably, historians such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in the 1970s, and more recently Tom Holland, have raised significant questions about the historical reliability of these traditional accounts. Their work suggests that the origins of Islam are more complex and contested than commonly portrayed. This paper argues that a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE should encourage the use of *historical ways of knowing*—including critical historical methods, tools of analysis, and engagement with diverse scholarly viewpoints. It contends that pupils should be equipped to interrogate sources, assess evidence, and understand the nature of historical inquiry as applied to religious narratives. Through an analysis of current RE textbooks and a review of critical scholarship, this paper highlights the lack of criticality in existing materials. It proposes that educators can and should boldly introduce pupils to these historical methods, fostering a more informed, nuanced, and academically rigorous understanding of the early development of Islam.

Keywords Religious Education · Islam · Teaching · Disciplinary RE · History

1 Introduction

In recent times in England, much Religious Education has taken a pedagogical turn¹ with the Religion and Worldviews approach advocated by the REC (2023) and Pett (2024). Pedagogically this often involves a multi-disciplinary approach to the subject. However current resources, and by implication teaching, of nascent Islam simply rehearses the faith

¹ Some scholars, most notably Barnes (2021) and the contributors to Barnes' (2023) edited collection, debate that a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE is not a new approach at all. Cooling (2021) has responded to this. For a more thorough examination of the language of this debate, see Smalley (2022).

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based traditional narrative, untroubled by historical contestation and lacking in criticality. By including historical ways of knowing, analytical methods central to the discipline of history, teachers can introduce pupils to some of the complexities and plural interpretations which contemporary historians are debating.

This paper begins with a discussion of what it might mean to use historical ways of knowing in RE and the rationale for such an approach, attending to its epistemic significance in cultivating intellectually rigorous and critically literate learners. Then, focussing on two fundamental historical beliefs of Islam, the birth of Muhammad and the creation of the Qur'an, it will demonstrate that current textbooks used in English secondary schools lack any indication of the contested nature of these historical claims. It will briefly survey some divergent academic interpretations of these events, the aim here not being to fully investigate these areas of criticality, but to highlight for the reader the sorts of debates which are taking place within the discipline of history concerning Islam. There are other contentious areas too, but space only allows for the consideration of two areas as exemplars. Finally, the paper will conclude, that in order to fulfil its aims, a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE must utilise historical ways of knowing so that pupils can understand the difference between religious truth claims and historical validity as part of their journey of understanding.

2 History as a way of knowing in RE

The Ofsted (2021) *Research Review: Religious Education* suggests that in RE pupils should be taught substantive knowledge alongside disciplinary knowledge (or ways of knowing) and personal knowledge. Ways of knowing is dually defined as.

- “Knowledge of well-established methods and processes and other tools of scholarship that are used to study and make sense of global and historical religion/non-religion
- Knowledge of the types of conversation (or ‘modes of enquiry’ or ‘scholarly discourses’) that academic communities have about religion/non-religion” (Ofsted, 2021, NP)

Historical enquiry provides both tools of scholarship and types of conversation, that pupils of religious education can make use of in order to develop their understanding of the complexity of religion. The discipline of history enables pupils “to shape their understandings of what historical knowledge claims are and of how they are made and can be evaluated” (Magnoff, 2016, 105) Pupils in RE do this so that they can be intellectually challenged, and personally enriched as they make sense of their own place in the world as wise interpreters of that world.

The *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools*. (OSCE, 2007) have as one of the ten principles the need for the study of religions and beliefs to give proper attention to key historical and contemporary developments involved in that study. This would necessitate the use of historical–critical tools, an understanding of sources giving rise to differing interpretations of the past, within RE teaching.

In its *National Content Standard*, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) has as one of the purposes of an education in religion and worldviews, that such teaching should “develop pupils’ awareness that learning about worldviews involves interpreting the significance and meaning of information they study”, “induct pupils into the processes and

scholarly methods by which we can study religion, religious and non-religious worldviews” and “enable pupils, by the end of their studies, to identify positions and presuppositions of different academic disciplines and their implications for understanding” (REC, 2023, 4). This appears to be directly relevant to the need for RE (or Religion and Worldviews) to utilise and develop those historical–critical skills of source analysis, interpretation, and propositional understanding, from the academic discipline of history.

In some curricula RE is viewed as multi-disciplinary. For example, in the Norfolk (2019) syllabus RE is defined as being rooted in three disciplines: Theology, Philosophy and Human /Social Sciences. In this understanding historical enquiry appears to be subsumed into Theology (see Georgiou & Wright, 2018), whereas others count history as a social science (Eller, 2017). Kueh (2020), in his chapter on disciplinary RE has historical as a fourth fundamental discipline in RE, noting that history has well established criteria for establishing what is reliable when creating re-constructions of the past. Pett (2024) suggests that a religion and worldviews approach recognises how beliefs are shaped and reshaped by their contexts—including historical, geographical, social, cultural, political, and theological.

Ofsted continues that in RE pupils should “build up a mental model which reflects the historical complexity of religion” (Ofsted, 2021, NP). This may require knowledge from other subjects such as history, including knowledge of methods in historical reconstruction. In Key Stage 3 History, the National Curriculum (DfE 2013, NP) expects that pupils “should understand how different types of historical sources are used rigorously to make historical claims and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed.” Sources are the artefacts that historians use to construct meaning about the past. Sources can be direct or indirect, primary or secondary and the form of a literary source can add or detract from its inherent reliability (Howell & Prevenier, 2015). Even at the primary school level pupils should recognize that sources have different statuses (although history educators debate the usefulness of distinctions such as primary/secondary, since for one thing it can perpetuate the misconception that primary sources are always of higher value than secondary, see Percival, 2020) and be skilled enough to make inferences to develop hypotheses dependent on the reliability and validity of the given sources. Pupils should be able to understand the difference between reliability and truth and that they as historians are making (differing) interpretations of the past based upon those sources. (Cooper, 2018) but at Key Stage 2 this may require careful source selection and modelling by the teacher (Percival, 2020).

Pett (2024: 86) suggests that an advantage of a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE is that “It draws on developments in, for example, academic theology, philosophy, history, education, and the study of religion.” Thus, it would seem that when teachers of RE are considering the past, it would be prudent to utilise historical ways of knowing and include source material in their study. When attempting to create reconstructions of the past, such as the origins of Islam, this would include a recognition of the issues around sources’ reliability and a modelling of questions of validity such as who the author was, when the source was written and what their purpose was when creating the sources being used. The question of how we know (disciplinary knowledge) is as important as what we know (substantive knowledge).

3 Text book analysis

Egan’s (2002) Key Stage 3 textbook on Islam, though a little dated, is still used by a number of secondary schools. It does not have very much detail about Muhammad, but what it does have is the traditional Islamic faith narrative retold as if it were undebated. For example:

By the time he was eight, his parents and grandparents were dead. He went into the care of his uncle, Abu Talib, a man who was kind and generous. (Egan, 2002, 4)

At no point is a source (other than the Qur'an, which of course is not a source of historical details about Muhammad) mentioned, any indication of how this information is known, or an acknowledgement that there might be different interpretations of the life of Muhammad.

The GCSE text book for Islam by Fleming et al. (2016, 24) also simply recounts the traditional Islamic narrative of the Prophet's birth, as if it were uncontested fact. The listed objective is to know the important events in Muhammad's life, with no suggestion that these might be contested, or any comment on the reliability or validity of the sources. The next section on the Qur'an has some more nuance with the word 'believed' attached to a number of statements about the book.

Muslims **believe** that the Qur'an is the word of God, which was revealed to Muhammad via the angel Jibril over a period of around 22 years. It contains the foundation of every believer's faith, and is the most sacred text of Islam. It is **believed** to be an infallible source of authority for all matters of doctrine, practice and law. Islamic scholars **regard** the Qur'an as a literary work that is beautifully written in perfect Arabic. The original Qur'an is **believed** to be in heaven, so when Muslims read the Qur'an they **believe** that God's words are speaking directly to them. (Fleming, *et al* 2016, 26, emphasis added)

This appears to suggest that there is some historical uncertainty about the Qur'an, but on closer inspection it seems to be the understanding of contemporary Muslims which is subjective, rather than any subjective historicity: Muslims believe it is the word of God, which speaks to them; its revelation to Muhammad over 22 years still is presented as uncontroversial fact. Indeed, further down the page, the traditional account of Muhammad's recitation being memorised by his first followers, written down and Uthman's official compilation being completed in 650, is again described as apparent uncontested historical reality.

This is the same approach that is taken by Parry, et al. (2016) GCSE Religious Studies textbook. The 'facts' of Muhammad's life, calling and reception of the Qur'an are given without question. The following section about the Hadith gives no detail about how (or when) they were compiled. There is some detail about the compilation of the Qur'an, but these nuances, such as the idea that Ali had a fully compiled version within six months of the Prophet's death, which others claimed had inauthentic verses and thus rejected, seem to replay intra-tradition arguments, rather than engaging in historical analysis.

Lewis and Orme (2017) in their detailed Key Stage 3 textbook on Judaism, Christianity and Islam do acknowledge the contested historical nature of claims about Muhammad:

Did Muhammad really live?

Most historians agree that Muhammad was a real person. However, when considering events from hundreds or thousands of years ago, it can be difficult to separate fact and legend. Sometimes writers want to influence the way people are remembered, so they may change or exaggerate events. This applies to all of history, not just Islamic history. (Lewis & Orme, 2017, 95)

However, the following six pages which detail the foundation of Islam, Muhammad's life and the reception of the Qur'an again simply rehearse the traditional Islamic narrative, with no indication of which elements of the story might be contested, no hint as to what might be 'fact' or 'legend' and no indication of where the information is derived from.

4 Critical perspectives on Muhammad

Perhaps this ignorance of the contestation of the origins of Islam in secondary school RE texts is understandable: in the preface to his *New Introduction to Islam*, Brown (2017, xv) notes that “Any serious introduction to a field of study should take into account the most significant ideas being debated in that field. This has not been the norm in the field of Islamic Studies”. It is not that there is an absence of critical debates, but on the whole, these have often been considered deeply controversial and have been overwhelmed in the mainstream texts by the traditional Islamic account. Wansbrough (1987) asserts that we know only what we are told about the beginnings of Islam, since all we have are the uncorroborated literary creations of the Islamic tradition. The narrative is certainly ‘true’ for believers, but whether they describe events that happened in the way they are told is impossible to know.

Therefore, when it comes to the history of Muhammad, many of the seminal introductions to Islam (eg Armstrong (2000), Lings (1991), Rodinson (1971)) simply retell the traditional Islamic version of the narrative, without criticality. Holland (2012) notes the irony of Armstrong, as one who champions hermeneutic criticality, ignoring the contested nature of the sources of Muhammad’s biography. These derive from the *sirat* (biography) of Muhammad attributed to Ibn Ishaq (writing c.750 but only extant in the edited version of Ibn Hisham of the 9th Century).

The *sirat* of Ibn Hisham states this about the birth of Muhammad:

The Prophet (pbuh) was born on Monday 12th Rabi ul-Awwal in the Year of the Elephant. Qays ibn Makhramah said, “I and the Prophet (pbuh) were born in the Year of the Elephant.” Hassan ibn Thabit said, “By Allah, I was a well-grown boy of seven or eight, understanding all that I heard, when I heard a Jew yelling out raising his voice as much as he could from the top of a fort in Yathrib, “O Jews” until they all gathered and said, “Woe to you, What has happened?” He replied, “Tonight has shined a star with which Ahmad is to be born.” (Hisham, 2000, 21).

Traditional Islamic narratives equate the ‘Year of the Elephant’ to 570, largely due to the idea that Muhammad was 40 when his revelations began in 610, but historians contest this. The ‘Year of the Elephant’ relates to an incursion of Abraha (an Abyssinian Christian Ruler) into the Hijaz. Conrad (2000) shows that this is attested outside the Islamic tradition but is likely to have been much earlier than 570, probably 552. Others would go further and suggest that Muhammad was never born but was created as a legendary character in the seventh century (Nevo & Koren, 2003). However, Conrad suggests that both individuals ages, and the concept of chronology in general, were not important for Arabs of the period.

The first appearance in any source of the name of Muhammad the Prophet is on a coin struck while Abd al-Malik was caliph in 690, and in 691 was included in the inscription on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Nevo & Koren, 2003). Nevo & Koren use this as evidence that the character of Muhammad was created by al-Malik to satisfy the need for the Arabs to have a founding religious figure (in the mould of Moses or Jesus) and a sense of a divine place in history as a people to which allegiance could be pledged. They suggest that Muhammad is better understood, originally, as an epithet, and cite Quranic evidence for this:

no personal information accompanies the four occurrences of the word muhammad: [in the Qur’an] no mention of his family, his pedigree, or even his deeds,

so that it makes as much sense to read the word as an epithet, "the one chosen/ desired (by God)," as to read it as a name. (Nevo & Koren, 2003, 265)

Crone and Cook (1977) begin their deliberately provocative analysis of the origins of the religion now known as Islam by provocatively asserting that there are no external grounds for accepting the Islamic tradition. They suggest that a crucial history of Islamic origins should begin with the earliest extant sources on Muhammad. One such text that they refer to is the *Doctrina Iacobi* (*The Teaching of Jacob*). This is a Christian polemical treaty, written in Greek as *Διδασκαλία Ἰακώβου* in Palestine. It is a dialogue set in Carthage in the year 634 and given that the unknown author is unaware of the occupation of Carthage, scholars such as Anthony (2014) conclude it must be earlier than that occurrence at the end of the 7th Century. It is commonly thought to be written before 640, and certainly by 660. Although the narrative of a Judeo-Christian conflict in Carthage, is a fiction, the historical details are accurate. Near the end of the work, one of the main characters receives a letter from his brother Abraham, a Jew in Palestine. Abraham describes hearing about an attack (the defeat of the Byzantines led by Sergius in 633) by the Saracens, led by a false prophet. This prophet, comes with a chariot and a sword, is proclaiming the advent of the Messiah, and holds the keys to Paradise. Historians generally understand this prophet to be Muhammad, although he is not named, and Nevo and Koren (2003) deny this association. Crone and Cook (1977) use this as a key source upon which they base their thesis that the religion of Islam, was originally a messianic sect of Judaism, which they term Hagarism.

Other primary sources suggest a Messianic Muhammad: Theophanes the Confessor wrote his chronology of the period from 284 to 813 in the 9th Century. Whilst noting that "At the beginning of his advent the misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah who is awaited by them, so that some of their leaders joined him and accepted his religion" (Mango & Scott, 1997 p. 465) (until they realised that he ate camel meat), and claiming that Muhammad was murdered, Theophanes narrates a history more closely aligned with Islamic Tradition, with a date of the Prophet's death as 632, but clearly draws upon the Islamic hadiths and *sira* that were extant by the 9th Century (Mayerson, 1964).

John Moschus wrote a collection of about 300 stories gathered on his travels called *Λειμών* (*Pratum Spirituale, The Spiritual Meadow*) in the early 7th Century. In this the Saracens are portrayed as dangerous, nomadic robbers, invaders and bandits, but there is no mention of a Prophet, nor a divine mission. These Saracens are pagan. A student of Moschus, Sophronius, became Bishop of Jerusalem in 634 until his death at the hands of 'Umar in 638/9, having surrendered the city to the invaders. In his *Synodical letter* of 634, we again have a description of Saracens who are vengeful, barbaric pagan people, who Sophronius believed God had sent to punish Christians and bring them to repentance. Again, there is no mention of the Prophet, nor the divine message (Brzozowska et al., 2020). This argument from absentia is strong, as Holland (2012) notes, it is perplexing that ill-educated Northumbrians could have preserved the writings of Bede whilst contemporaneous Arabs maintained no record of the final prophet.

5 Critical perspectives on the Qur'an

The traditional Islamic account of the formation of the Qur'an is that it was revealed in Arabic to Muhammad, in Makkah and Madina, by the Angel Jibra'il from 610 to his death in 632. Muhammad recited the revelations to his followers, and they wrote down his

recitations; Uthman collated these versions and commissioned an official standard version (without vowels or pointing) to be made in c650 and all other earlier copies were destroyed (Brown, 2017). However, the version read today by Muslims is a version with vowels and pointing that was standardised in 1924 in Egypt. Some have suggested that the Qur'an was originally composed in Syriac (the word Qur'an is derived from a Syriac word meaning 'to read') (Brown, 2017). There is insufficient evidence of Jewish and Christian influences in the Hijaz to account for the similarities between Qur'anic narratives and Talmudic and extra-canonical gospel accounts, nor the highly developed Christology of Jesus. Wansbrough (1977) suggests that it makes sense that the standardisation of the Quranic text occurred in the ninth century in present day Iraq, where previously unrelated texts were brought together, but Donner (2018) is clear that it was fixed by the end of the 7th Century.

Crone and Cook (1977, 3) state that "There is no hard evidence for the existence of the Koran in any form before the last decade of the seventh century". However, this has been refuted by the discovery of the Birmingham Qur'an manuscript which contains parts of surahs 18–20 written on parchment in an early form of Arabic script known as *Ḥijāzī*. The parchment has been radiocarbon dated to between 568 and 645 with 95.4% probability. (University of Birmingham, n.d.). It is thought that the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris holds a further 16 pages from the same Qur'an manuscript, catalogued as BnF Arabe 328c. That section has a provenance linked to the Mosque of 'Amr ibn al-'As in Fustāt, the ancient Islamic capital of Egypt, which was built in 642 as the first mosque in Egypt. There are further very old manuscript fragments (including Tübingen) in differing scripts. Whilst these do suggest that the Qur'an is close to or contemporary with the alleged lifetime of Muhammad, they do seem at odds with the traditional narrative of the singular Uthman version of 650. Holland (2012) shows that various *ayats* of the Qur'an can be shown to have been derived from events that happened in the early 7th Century and no later. Bishop (1958) has suggested that the similarities to the Qumran material may indicate that (at least some of) the Quranic material may be even earlier, but more recent scholarship does not appear to have built upon this.

Holland (2012) suggests that Makkah and Madinah do not fit well with the Quranic texts as sites for the composition. I give two of his examples here: the *Mushrikun* are cattle herders and agriculturalists, yet no such activity could have been carried out in the barren desert of the Hijaz, a place ill-suited to agriculture (Donner, 1981). In Surah As-Saffat (37) the text notes that the hearers pass by the pillars of Lot in the morning and the evening. This suggests that they were far from Makkah, but in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, where according to Surah Ar-Rum (30): "The Romans have been defeated in a nearby land. But they, after their defeat, will be victorious within a few years".

Holland (2012) also critically assesses the traditional understanding that Bakkah in the Qur'an is the same place as Makkah. He suggests that it is more likely to have been Mamre where Abraham established the first place (*makam*) of prayer. According to Arab tradition, the tomb of Muhammad's great-grandfather or great-uncle was located in Gaza, (Le Strange, 1890) which would fit with such a location. A Palestinian composition would more coherently explain the close parallels with much of the Judeo-Christian stories retold in the Qur'an. One primary source which unequivocally links Muhammad to the Hijaz is the 'Constitution of Madinah' which even the most sceptical of scholars accepts is a very early authentic document (Donner, 2018).

People tend to, in a somewhat anachronistic way, think of Arabs as being the people who live in modern day Arabia. However, the rulers of Palmyra thought of themselves as Lords of the Arabs (Azmah, 2017), and Al-safa (in modern day Syria) was considered Arab. The Lakhmid dynasty, centred on al-Hira (in present day Iraq), was thought

of as Arab. By the 4th Century, Azmah notes that there was a network of Arab peoples and alliances “along lines running from southern Syria/Jordan to southern Iraq, and then along a line leading from there through central Arabia to Himyar. Another line followed the Euphrates northwards along the edge of the steppe, and yet another connected Syria, with extensions along the western edge of the steppe, with northern Hijaz.” (Azmah, 2017, 114–5). Thus, it is perfectly possible for Muhammad and his community to have been Arab and lived in the region of the Dead Sea or the West Bank, perhaps until the *hijra* to Madinah. Donner (2018) however, problematises the notion that the movement should properly be called Arab at all.

What this section has demonstrated is that there is academic debate on the issues discussed: the life (even the existence) of the Prophet, and the creation of the Qur'an. Some of these views are considered mainstream and some are deliberately provocative. There is a difference in the task of the historian and the theologian: The historians' task is to try to establish what can reliably be shown to have occurred in the past. In a sense all history is interpretation, but “an important purpose of history education is to make it clear to pupils that interpretation is open to rational discussion and evaluation” (Chapman, 2010). Working within the discipline of history, the historian cares little about the spiritual truths or theologies that sources lead believers to. Equally a theologian is more interested in the way that stories of that past have shaped the believers' understanding of the divine, and been shaped themselves through the faith communities' retellings.

6 Call to apply historical ways of knowing in secondary school Islam

In an educational system dominated by performativity in relation to GCSE results, it is perhaps unsurprising that such little historical critical attention is considered necessary for pupils. The specification for Eduqas GCSE Religious Studies mentions Muhammad only twice: pupils must know about “Muhammad as seal of the Prophets” and “the significance of Jibril's revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad”. Although it states that “Learners must know, understand and express common and divergent views and the basis for beliefs, teachings and practices”, the examination questions do not assume that pupils understand divergent views about the historicity of the traditional Islamic narratives. (Eduqas, 2020). Another examination board, AQA are clear that only divergent views *within* Islam, are necessary (AQA, n.d.).

It is clear that there is a divergence between the aims of a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE and the GCSE specifications. REC members have recently called for the GCSE assessment objectives to be updated (REC, 2025) and NATRE (2025) has advocated updating the specifications to reflect modern religious and non-religious perspectives, although it is unclear whether this includes reflecting historical ways of knowing.

It is also likely that some of this reticence for teachers to critically examine the history of Islam may be down to a lack of subject knowledge, or a fear of upsetting Muslim communities. England has seen that Muslim communities can respond when they perceive that schools are showing disrespect towards religion (Marshall, 2024). This is one advantage of the Locally Agreed Syllabus process, that religious communities are involved in the construction of the curriculum (Smalley, 2025). It also highlights the need for a clear understanding of the purpose of Religious Education in schools: it is not to propagate faith narratives, but to (in part) “induct pupils into the processes and scholarly methods by which we can study religion, religious and non-religious worldviews” (REC, 2023).

A Religion and Worldviews approach, whilst focussing on contemporary lived experience needs to utilise the tools of scholarship inherent in historical criticism to enable pupils to become wise interpreters of their own positionality and those of others. Pett claims the subject is moving “away from a focus on gathering information about the ‘world religions’ towards ... an academically rigorous, scholarly approach to the study of religion and worldviews”, something that is “more than simply mastering knowledge or retaining information”, but “an interpretive experience” (Pett, 2024, 12). In this case, the need for students of RE to become skilled at using historical ways of knowing is best summed up by Mark Sheehan (2016) in his chapter on History’s distinctive contribution to critical citizenship.

“Rather than simply learning a number of historical narratives (whatever the time-scale on which they are constructed), young people need learn how to think historically so that they can make their own informed, analytical judgments about the past and adjudicate between competing claims to historical ‘truth’, thus equipping them to participate confidently in society as critical citizens” (Sheehan, 2016, 219)

Learning how to think historically in RE, involves an understanding that there is a difference between religious truth and historical validity and an acknowledgement at least that what religious people may believe might not be historically verifiable. Pupils must therefore be equipped to interrogate sources, assess evidence, and understand the nature of historical inquiry as applied to ancient religious narratives. Whilst this paper has focussed on the religion of Islam, it is equally true for all organised worldviews founded in the past.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares there is no conflict of interest. The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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