

# Muhammad in the Seminary: Protestant Teaching about Islam in the Nineteenth Century

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David Grafton's *Muhammad in the Seminary* focuses on the nineteenth century as a pivotal period for the formation of American Protestant conceptions about Islam. Grafton identifies theological seminaries as the earliest institutions in North America to provide students with sustained instruction on Islam, and he argues that the impact of such education was considerable. The book offers a detailed historical investigation of the ways that seven Protestant seminaries in the northeastern United States presented Islam to thousands of students who would go on to shape American public discourses as clergy and missionaries. While unearthing information about the curricula on Islam in these institutions, the book's six chapters engage broadly with issues of nineteenth century education, theological studies, and American cultural history.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of early American theological education and the eventual professionalization of seminaries in the

post-Civil War period. It places the seven seminaries of focus—Andover, New Brunswick, General, Princeton, Gettysburg, Hartford, and Union—within the broader American educational landscape of the nineteenth century. Grafton charts noteworthy developments within these and other Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican seminaries while also documenting the slower emergence of Methodist and Baptist theological institutions for training clergy. Although biblical studies and theology remained the two dominant disciplines, as the numbers and specializations of seminary faculty increased, Islam became a persistent component of the curricula and a subject increasingly present on the shelves of seminary libraries.

The second chapter draws on extensive research in library catalogues, circulation records, and faculty lecture notes to review the kinds of texts on Islam that these theological libraries acquired as resources for faculty and students. As American seminary libraries expanded and faculty members built their own personal collections, a growing body of English and German Orientalist works and Latin translations of Arabic texts broadened American professors' and pastors' understandings of Islam. In describing the texts that seminary professors used in their lectures, including biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, the chapter provides insight into the growth of European scholarship on Islam and the Near East from the early modern period onward. By the end of the nineteenth century, the variety of such available resources ranged from anti-Muslim polemics to more appreciative approaches to Islam. Notably, aside from translations of the Qur'an, seminary faculty during this period did not teach from Islamic sources but rather from Christian texts about Islam.

The book turns next to Church History courses and textbooks as common vehicles through which seminarians were introduced to Islam (Chapter 3). American seminary professors, many of whom sought further education in Germany, often relied on German studies of ecclesiastical history. Examining professors' lecture notes and lists of required readings, Grafton traces the genealogy of textual sources used in Church History classes. For example, at New Brunswick Seminary in the 1820s, John DeWitt's references to Islam came from the Latin Reformation

record of Flacius Illyricus, *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559), which drew from the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor (760–818), which in turn relied on a Greek translation of a Syriac history by Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785). The chapter concludes with the contributions of the German-educated Swiss scholar Philip Schaff, whose multi-volume *History of the Christian Church* (1858–1890) became the standard text on ecclesiastical history for most seminaries. Schaff introduced students to recent Orientalist scholarship and, despite remaining critical of Islam, offered a more sympathetic view of the Prophet Muhammad than did most of his predecessors. Like the books available in seminary libraries, the content of Church History courses on Islam ultimately mixed factual information and well-worn tropes.

Chapter 4 addresses how Islam appeared in nineteenth century Biblical Studies as scholars sought to learn Arabic as a cognate language to Hebrew. Grafton documents the rising philological interest in Arabic in early modern Europe and the developing view of Arabic as a purer, more static Semitic language that was a key both for translating obscure terminology in the Hebrew Bible and for understanding the historical context of the Ancient Near East. The chapter then traces the rise and fall of Arabic language study at American seminaries. By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, it had become common for Old Testament professors to assign passages of the Qur'an for students to translate as part of their Arabic learning. Although such practices survived into the twentieth century only at Hartford Seminary, where Arabic was a part of its missionary training program, this legacy is still present in the Arabic references included in the widely-used Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon of the Old Testament (first published in 1906).

Next, the book considers the information transmitted about Islam as nineteenth-century American seminaries engaged with the developing field of Comparative Religion. In giving an overview of this field's origins in Europe, chapter 5 examines the contributions of the German-born professor at Oxford Max Müller, who identified Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Semitic religions. Whereas Müller critiqued "religious Darwinism" and racial determinism, most American scholars of Comparative Religion – including Hannah Adams, Samuel Schmucker,

and James Freeman Clarke – embraced the concept of world religions evolving toward the pinnacle of Protestant Christianity. American Protestants also mapped onto Islam the negative racial characteristics they attributed to the tribes of Arabia. These ideas appeared in formal curricula and in the growing number of public lectures on Comparative Religion that American seminaries hosted.

The sixth and final chapter moves into the twentieth century, concluding with the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh as the “high-water mark” for Protestant missions. It considers missionary associations like the Student Volunteer Movement, seminary efforts to train students for missions in the so-called “Mohammedan World,” and the contributions that missionaries themselves made to seminary curricula on Islam through their publications and guest lectures and in their work as professors. Grafton features a variety of missionary-scholars who focused on Islam. Some, like Samuel Zwemer, painted Muslims as adversaries, while others, like William Shedd were more generous. Duncan Black Macdonald, a pioneering Arabist and Islamicist at Hartford Seminary, stands out as the one non-missionary who taught seminarians about Islam and as one of few Protestant scholars who engaged deeply with Arabic and Islamic sources.

What can contemporary readers learn from this historical study? While American Protestants in the nineteenth century typically relied on Christian sources and treated Islam as a foreign entity, Grafton concludes that Islam ought to be studied from within the tradition itself, using Islamic sources, and that Muslims are today part of the American experience and cannot be dismissed as “other.” He also emphasizes the absence of Arabic study in the curricula of present-day theological institutions as a loss to our understanding of the worlds of both Islam and Middle Eastern Christianity. In addition to these insights, the book makes clear that American Protestant teachings about Islam have never been uniform. The legacy of the American seminary includes biased polemic, serious academic inquiry, and expressions of admiration for the Islamic tradition. Grafton’s research thus invites readers to build upon the bright spots of this history.

For scholars and instructors in theological institutions today, *Muhammad in the Seminary* demonstrates how relevant the subject of Islam is to the history of the American Protestant seminary. For Islamicists, in turn, the book not only reveals that in the US it was seminaries that initially pioneered the research and teaching about Islam. Through its examination of nineteenth century libraries, textbook lists, and lecture notes, the book also places the contributions (and limitations) of these seminaries within a much longer genealogy of Islamic Studies in Europe and North America. The multiple lenses through which Grafton approaches the question of Islam's presence in the American seminary makes this book relevant for scholars of Islam and American Protestant history and for anyone interested in theological education, the evolution of libraries, Church History, Biblical Studies, Comparative Religion, and modern missions.

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