

# Donner's rejection of Ernest Renan's views on Islam and the judgement on the Umayyads

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May 25, 2018; Updated April 20, 2019

**M**any scholars have questioned the bonafides of Islam as a religious faith, but Fred M. Donner has questioned their judgment in his book, *Muhammad and the Believers At The Origins Of Islam* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2010). In the Preface to his book he writes:

A little over a century ago, renowned French scholar Ernest Renan (1823-1892) wrote the following summation of his findings on the origins and early history of Islam: “We arrive, then, from all parts at this singular result: that the Mussulman movement was produced almost without religious faith; that, putting aside a small number of faithful disciples, Mahomet really worked with but little conviction in Arabia, and never succeeded in overcoming the opposition represented by the Omeiyade party.

While Renan's statement admittedly represents an extreme and harsh formulation of the ideas he advances, for many years Western scholars who were studying Islam's beginnings continued to hold many of those ideas. The notions that the prophet Muhammad (died 632 C.E.) and his followers were motivated mainly by factors other than religion, and that the Umayyad family, which ruled from 661 to 750, were fundamentally hostile to the essence of Muhammad's movement, is even today widespread in Western scholarship. Renan's most cynical comment that the movement that grew into what we know as Islam “was produced almost without religious faith” – has, in subtler guise, been embraced by many subsequent scholars, usually through a process of reductionism whereby the driving force of the movement begun by Muhammad is identified as having been “really” something other than religious conviction. At the end of the nineteenth century, Hubert Grimme sought to prove that Muhammad's preaching was first and foremost that of a social, not a religious reformer; W. Montgomery Watt, reflecting the regnant position of the social sciences in the middle of the

twentieth century, argued that the movement was engendered by social and economic stresses in the society in which Muhammad lived; and numerous others, including L. Caetani, C.H. Becker, B. Lewis, P. Crone, G. Bowersock, I. Lapidus and S. Fashear, have argued that the movement was really a kind of nationalist or "nativist" political adventure, in which religion was secondary (and, by implication, merely a pretext for the real objectives).

However, Donner tries to present almost the exact opposite of Renan's views. He believes that Islam began as a religious movement—not as a social, economic or "national" one; in particular, it embodied an intense concern for attaining a personal salvation through righteous behavior. The early Believers were concerned with social and political issues but only insofar as they related to concepts of piety and proper behavior needed to ensure salvation.

Moreover, he regards the Umayyads (660-750) "not as cynical manipulators of the outward trappings of the religious movement begun by Muhammad but as rulers who sought practical ways to realize the most important goals of the movement a who perhaps more than anyone else helped the Believers attain a clear sense of their own distinct identity and of their legitimacy as a religious community. Without the contributions of the Umayyads, it seems doubtful whether Islam, as we recognize it today, would even exist." While I am not competent to intervene in this matter, my main interest being the after-effects of the Arab conquest of Iran, I often wonder whether the Arab conquest of Iran, if not of other nations, was primarily driven not by religious motives or persuasive proselytizing efforts to convert Iran to Islam but was primarily driven by the lure of looting and enslaving women, oppressing the conquered in various ways for purely personal gain, not granting equal status to non-Arab converts, claiming the right to do all these as the victor in the battle and not on religious grounds (since, as already noted, most Arab fighters could not quote even a line or two from the Quran and later refused to serve in the army as they wanted an easy life with the conquered slaves and slave labor), burning the temples of the conquered and turning them into mosques, treating non-Arabs abusively, derisively and oppressively, etc. Moreover, almost all historians agree that at first the Arab conquerors were too busy seeking their fortune and enjoying the newly found wealth to care enough to spread their faith or continue fighting for it; as Kaveh Farrokh notes they even lost the battle of Uhud to the Persians because they were too busy picking up their booties (The Armies of

Ancient Persia, 20, p.317). Bertold Spuler also notes that the Muslims lost the battle of Uhud because “their archers, who were defending the left flank, abandoned their position to take part in plundering the enemy's (Makkens') camp” and “the Prophet later lay wounded there.” (*The Age of the Caliphs*, Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 1995, p. 12).

There is plenty of evidence of later Umayyads flagrantly disregarding the main tenets of Islam, including abstaining from alcohol, inviting strong condemnation from the Kharijites. The ultimate overthrow of the Umayyads itself could serve as evidence for their un-Islamic, corrupt behavior. Above all, as I have stated earlier on the basis of Michael Moran's research finding that the prophet Mohammad himself had advised the Arab conquerors of Bahrain which had a large population of Zoroastrians then to treat them as “People of the Book,” thereby granting them freedom of worship, prohibiting their enslavement, etc, but, as noted earlier, the Umayyad army enslaved Iranian women and took them to Arabia and returned to Iran with the sons they had sired with them when they turned sixteen to battle the Iranians. Thus, in their greed and lust the Umayyads indulged in a flagrant defiance of the prophet's own injunction, which has unfortunately become a set pattern throughout the history of Islamic Iran. While Donner may be perhaps right in his other observations, he seems to ignore the judgement of so many scholars against the Umayyads. Even at the origin of the Shi'a sect may lie a deep sense of overt or covert dissatisfaction with or hostility to the Umayyads. As the illustrated Bertold Spuler notes, the later Umayyads were “worldly and devoted only to their own amusement; they surrounded themselves with arts and aesthetes, singing-girls and boon-companions and valued only hunting, gambling and frivolous disputations. Their total lack of the manifold statesmanlike qualities befitting the special needs of a theocracy, as represented in the state of the Caliphs, brought to pass within a few years the total collapse of the Umayyad empire of Damascus.” (*op. cit.*, p. 44). Albeit, there are many more historians voicing the same sentiment, too numerous to be included here.