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MAJALAH ILMU PENGETAHUAN DAN PEMIKIRAN KEAGAMAAN TAJDID

Mun'im Sirry's Position in Early Islamic Studies: Between Traditionalists and Revisionists

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Abstract: *Early Islamic research was often divided. Traditionalists use Muslim writings to build early Islamic tales. Revisionists reject conventional sources, noting limitations, and employ archeological data. Some believe traditionalists are Muslims, and revisionists are unbelievers. This study examines Mun'im Sirry's stance on early Islamic studies. This qualitative research employs literature study to gather, classify, and evaluate data from Sirry's publications, journals, periodicals, and online and offline media. This research helps explain Sirry's approach to researching early Islam and his role in the traditionalist-revisionist debate. This research demonstrates that Mun'im Sirry only partly validates or negates descriptive traditionalist and radical skeptical revisionist methods in researching early Islamic history. Here, he is in the center. Sirry says both methods have pros and cons. For this reason, Sirry puts out the "source/tradition criticism" approach as a medium path that is not extreme and may reconcile the two approaches. The source/tradition critical method utilized by Sirry illustrates his perspective as a moderate revisionist. Sirry acknowledges Muslim texts as references in recreating early Islamic history but can be skeptical. Sirry does not accept Muslim sources uncritically, but neither rejects them. This divides Sirry from extreme revisionists who reject traditional sources completely.*
Keywords : Sirry ; Approach; Islam; History; Traditionalist; Revisionist

INTRODUCTION

The term early Islamic studies is used to indicate discussions related to early Islamic history, which not only discusses the codification of the Qur'an but also includes the history of the prophethood and territorial conquest (Koren & Nevo, 2000). Several researchers use this term, such as Mun'im Sirry, J. Korean, Y.D. Nevo, and others. So far, early Islamic studies have always been divided into two opposing camps. This camp is reflected in the approach taken in examining actual events in historical events. On the one hand, some accept sources written by Muslims as the primary reference in constructing early Islamic narratives without caring that these sources were written later. This approach is called the traditionalist approach. Generally, this approach is accepted and believed by Muslims, especially Indonesian Muslims. Meanwhile, a rival approach rejects all these traditional sources by stating that the conventional sources written by

Muslim historians are subject to various problems. As this group assumes, traditional sources depict more of what the author wants than the actual reality. They use material evidence, such as archaeological data, to narrate early Islam's emergence (Minhaji, 2010).

These two approaches are very contradictory as if anyone who uses the first approach is a Muslim and anyone who uses the second approach is an infidel. This can be seen from the polemic between Adnin Armas (Director of INSISTS) and Mun'im Sirry, which is related to Mustafa Azami's work entitled The History of the Qur'anic Text. This event was documented in the national newspaper Republika in 2005, who described it as coming to Indonesia to launch his book as a response to orientalist criticism of the Al-Quran. However, Sirry considered Azami to have failed in his work because he referred to Western figures sympathetic to the Qur'an. Then Armas responded that the work of these figures was not an expert in studying the Qur'an. According to Sirry, Armas's statement was ambiguous, so he wrote his opinion entitled Between *Fakar* and *Kafar* in Al-Qur'an Studies. Sirry wanted to state that Armas's rejection of the works of Western figures was based on the fact that they were infidels (Rahman, 2015).

Even though the polemic above has passed, this attitude, like Armas's, is still often found in the work of researchers in Indonesia, especially regarding the study of the emergence of Islam. There are few faith-shaking works in Indonesia, so researchers and society generally focus on Western figures' works ("Kemunculan Islam Awal" Mun'im Sirry Dan Rekontsruksi Hipotetikal Seorang Teolog Progresif, n.d.). This attitude should not exist in the scientific realm because it is very theological. A researcher should be able to be objective and not based on subjective religious beliefs. If Western figures are studied scientifically, the response must be answered scientifically, not using personal attacks.

Mun'im Sirry is a description of one of the figures in Indonesia who is concerned about this problem. His identity as a Muslim does not necessarily mean that he accepts traditional Muslim sources for granted, as with his critical attitude towards the works of revisionist figures. Based on his educational background, he is used to criticizing the works of Western figures, who are often negatively stigmatized by mainstream Muslim researchers (Karim & Fuqohak, 2023). Apart from that, he also has religious knowledge typical of Islamic boarding schools. The author sees him as someone who can stand amid the long debate between these two approaches.

In the discussions of several researchers, unfortunately, the study regarding the position of Mun'im Sirry in early Islamic studies still needs to be expanded. Several studies that discuss Sirry include Anam's research on *the Concept of Religious Tolerance in the Reconstruction and the interpretation of Surah Al Kafirun. According to Mun'im Sirry*, (Anam & Ghozali, 2022) Firdausiyah's writing on *Modern Tafsir Perspective Mun'im Sirry*, Rafiki's study, which discusses his revisionist concept of Islam (Rafii, 2015) and most recently research from Abidin et al. examines the Controversy on *Sirry's Bible Polemic Book*, (Abidin & Ashadi, 2023) as well as many other writings reviewing Sirry's works (Azhar, 2016; Firdausiyah, 2020; Hidayat & Rizky, 2019). In contrast to previous research, which

dealt with issues of interpretation, revisionist Islam, and reviews of Sirry's work, this research discusses the figure of Mun'im in more depth. Sirry, in his position, studies early Islam. From this article, we will see what position and approach Sirry uses to examine the emergence of Islam.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research relies on document study as the primary reference in obtaining data. Data sources were obtained directly from the works of the figures discussed, such as Sirry's book entitled *Kontroversi Islam Awal Antara Mazhab Tradisionalis Dan Revisionis, Tradisi Intelektual Islam Rekonfigurasi Sumber Otoritas Agama, Islam Revisionis Kontestasi Agama Zaman Radikal, Kemunculan Islam Dalam Kesarjanaan Revisionis* and equipped with references such as journals, magazines, and articles in online and offline media. Data analysis uses inventory, classification, and interpretation techniques (Adlini et al., 2022; Kaelan, 2005). This stage starts from collecting data in the sense of listing all references related to material objects and then grouping relevant discussions until finally understanding them in the context of this paper. So, this research uses a qualitative approach based on a literature study.

RESEARCH RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Mun'im Sirry's Biography

Mun'im Sirry is a fascinating example of how one's dreams can be a powerful driver in achieving success, even if they seem far out of reach. Born as the son of a farmer in West Bataal Village, Ganding District, Sumenep, he grew up with his father's big dream that he could continue his education to a high level. Even though it may sound unusual in farming circles, Ahmad Sirri's noble ideals instilled a burning enthusiasm in Sirry. Amid simplicity and challenges, Sirry embarked on a long journey (Basri, n.d.). Starting from boarding school to crossing national borders, his determination to achieve education never faded.

Sirry's formal religious studies began at the TMI al-Amien Islamic Boarding School Prenduan Sumenep Madura (1983-1990) under the guidance of KH. Moh. Idris Jaari (Rafii, 2015). This boarding school is one of the leading modern Islamic boarding schools in Madura, which is known for several unique characteristics: Al-Amien appears as a modern Islamic boarding school, equipping students with Arabic and English language competencies, curriculum autonomy and independence from all groups, and delegating outstanding students to study abroad further (Zudhia, 2022).

Sirry's undergraduate and master's education was at the Faculty of Saria'a and Law International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan (1990-1996), a leading institution for studying Islam, theology, comparative religion, and Islamic religious knowledge. This university was founded in 1980 and reconstituted as the International Islamic University by the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1985. This university is one of the premier higher education institutions and one of the largest universities in Pakistan. The university offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs in various fields, including science, engineering,

humanities, arts, religious studies, social sciences, and natural sciences (Mukti, 2018).

After completing his studies at IIUI (International Islamic University Islamabad), Mun'im A. Sirry received a Fulbright scholarship to continue his studies in the United States. He continued his doctoral education at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), a public research university in Westwood, Los Angeles, California. UCLA is one of ten campuses in the University of California system and is considered one of the major. The university offers more than 300 undergraduate and graduate programs in various disciplines. With an enrollment of approximately 26,000 undergraduate and 13,000 graduate students from the United States and worldwide, UCLA is the largest university in California and very popular in the United States (Anggauin, 2023).

In the United States, Islamic studies generally focus on Islamic history, languages other than Arabic, literature, and the social sciences. Islamic studies at UCLA are divided into four main components: Islamic doctrine and history, Arabic, social sciences, history, and sociology. In London, Islamic studies are integrated into the School of Oriental and African Studies, which offers courses in the languages and cultures of Asia and Africa. Western study methods in Islamic studies emphasize analyzing an object's background using a historical approach, so Islamic research and studies in the West are more developed than in other regions. An object can be studied thoroughly through an in-depth and critical historical approach, and history is considered an essential research method. Mun'im A. Sirry himself has been an assistant in the field of Theology in the Theology and Research department at the Korc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, United States. The University of Notre Dame is one of the leading Roman Catholic colleges in Notre Dame, Indiana (Dame, n.d.). The university was founded in 1842 and vigorously participated in the Congregation of the Holy Cross. The University of Notre Dame has several colleges and schools, including the School of Architecture, School of Law, and Graduate School.

The University of Notre Dame also studies Islam with a Western-centric approach, where the study of Islam is carried out critically and eliminates the element of the sacredness of the object being studied, namely Islam. In the study of Islam by Western scholars, Islam is treated as the same object of study as other objects of study, such as Christianity or other objects of study. This brings the study of Islam into the academic realm with a more humanistic, communicative, and emancipatory mindset. This approach allows for dialogue and equality in understanding Islam and multiple interpretations by involving various related scientific disciplines. This approach indirectly shapes the perspective of Mun'im A. Sirry, who tends to be radical and critical of Islamic sources with a modern approach (HS, 2021).

Apart from that, Mun'im A. Sirry is also a researcher at the Paramadina Waqf Foundation. He realized that integrating Islam and Indonesianness embodies universal Islamic values with local Indonesian traditions (Tempo, 2018). Paramadina is designed as a center for creative, constructive, and joyous religious

activities that promote the progress of society without defensive and reactive attitudes. The main program of activities is directed at increasing the ability to respond to the challenges of the times and contribute to the intellectual tradition that continues to rise in society, which means betting on high scientific quality and authority.

Mun'im, as a scholar with a solid academic background and experience spanning Indonesian, Pakistani, and American cultures and a mastery of literacy from both sides, has developed a fascinating and scientific view of Islam. This view looks very innovative and different from the general view. He was very impressed with critical thinkers, especially the British scholar John Wansbrough and his students who shared similar ideologies, such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (Anggauin, 2023). In his controversial book, "Revisionist Islam Contests the Religion of a Radical Age" (2018), Sirry firmly calls Wansbrough a "prophet" of the revisionists (M. Sirry, 2018b). Sirry himself considered him a "mujtahid" who continued Wansbrough's ideas. However, Sirry should have consciously paid attention to the contribution of classical scholars in this field, such as Ignaz Goldziher, in his work " Muhammadanische Studien. " Like Goldziher's writings, Wansbrough's major works, "Quranic Studies" (1977) (Angelika Neuwirth et al., 1977) and "The Sectarian Milieu" (1978), (J. Wansbrough et al., 2006) have also shaken conservative Muslim scholars. This is because his books are considered "haram" and violate the doctrine that Islam is considered final, even though there has been dogmatization from different points of view.

Revisionist thinkers, according to Sirry, actually invite people to question views about Islam and reconstruct human understanding using scientific sources and frameworks. The revisionists' focus is primarily on the emergence of Islam and the history of the Qur'an and whether this can be proven historically. The majority of Muslims accept this without questioning the origins and accuracy of the historical data, simply following it unthinkingly. Joining a revisionist group has instilled an attitude of skepticism and suspicion toward Islam. This is quite reasonable because what Muslims accept about Islam as a religion is the result of a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The historical approach outright rejects this fact. Sirry complains that revisionist studies still need a solid and firm footing. This can open up new space for scholars of Islamic studies in the future (M. Sirry, 2017). It seems that he continues to propagate this view, as can be seen from his controversial books, such as "*Early Islamic Controversy: Between Traditionalist and Revisionist Schools" (2015), "The Emergence of Islam in Revisionist Scholarship" (2017),* and *"Revisionist Islam Religious Contestations The Radical Age"* (2018). In presenting these controversial ideas, Sirry never feared that his readers' faith would be shaken. Overall, Sirry was an essential figure in the development of modern Islamic studies. His critical, multicultural, and courageous approach contributes to understanding Islam and its relevance in the contemporary context.

Between "Traditionalist Description" And "Radical Revisionist" Approaches: Source Criticism and Tradition Approaches

The first approach is Sirry's "approach traditionalist description" because it fully accepts the traditional explanation presented by Muslim sources. This approach does not at all question the fact that information about the formative period of Islam was recorded later by Muslim scholars. Thus, traditional sources can be used as the primary source in reconstructing the history of the emergence of Islam. Modern scholars of this approach do not doubt the authenticity of Muslim sources. Even though they do not believe in the theological bases that Muslims believe, they understand the narrative of the emergence of Islam as described by most Muslim historians (Azhar, 2016). The basic assumptions of the traditional approach are as follows: First, the text of the Qur'an records historical events in various phases of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the teachings he brought both in Mecca and Medina. Here, the Qur'an is positioned as a historical source from which to view early Islam's development.

Alford Welch, for example, wrote clearly that the Qur'an is a historical document that reflects Muhammad's prophetic career and responds to specific needs and problems related to the birth of the Muslim community (Minhaji, 2010). The second assumption is that historical books by Muslims can explain all the events of early Islam. Rather than being the result of a later author's depiction, the information in the book represents actual reality. This is based on the fact that Muslim books are available in abundance. So extraordinary efforts are needed to deny or reject the information in traditional Muslim books, such as the use of conspiracy theories. In this theory, many books were created based on an agreement to lie. However, this theory is impossible to apply because it is poorly founded. Everyone cannot agree to lie (M. Sirry, 2015).

The traditionalist approach is understood as limiting itself only (and only) to the Arab-Muslim literary heritage with an understanding that uses premises that developed in the traditions of Muslims. In principle, this traditionalist approach is based on the following basic assumptions and premises (Koren & Nevo, 2000):

1. Islamic literature from the eighth century onwards accurately reflects early Islamic history, including pre-Islamic society, the birth of Islam, and Islamic conquests. Thus, the reconstruction of historical facts, such as the Jahiliah society, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Islamic conquests, can be based entirely on Islamic sources.
2. Differences or contradictions in historical information are resolved by examining the *isnad*, namely the series of news transmissions from the news carrier.
3. Written data dominates historical analysis, with little attention to other evidence. Religious slogans on early Umayyad currency, for example, did not add to knowledge as written information already did
4. Valentino argument was rejected, stating that the absence of external evidence other than written data cannot negate historical events in written documents. Collaboration between literature and other empirical evidence is not considered necessary.

5. Quran analysis follows the traditions of Islamic scholars, such as the categorization of Makkiyah and Madaniyah, without involving analysis of the meaning of "revelation" outside the Islamic tradition.
6. Linguistic analysis follows classical Muslim traditions, while modern linguistic analysis is considered irrelevant.

The most dismissive one in rejecting Muslim corpora is the second approach, namely the *radical skeptical revisionist approach* (M. Sirry, 2015) Being called "skeptical" does not mean that this approach is the only one that is skeptical. Both source criticism and tradition criticism approaches show skepticism towards traditional Muslim sources for reconstructing the history of the emergence of early Islam or what is also called the formative period. However, the skepticism of this last approach is so radical that it completely rejects the existence of factual information and historical data in the Muslim corpus (Galadari, 2022) For them, the books of Sirah or history with a traditionalist approach were written with the motif of love and glorification of the Prophet Muhammad and the periods he initially considered the "golden age"(Mun'im, 2013). In other words, the sources reflect more what Muslim writers imagined about the Prophet and his early period than reality or actual events. These traditional sources cannot depict early Islam if this is the case.

Fred Donner summarises these skeptical assumptions as the basis for the following approach: 1) no sources can be used to reconstruct early Islam. The codification and recording of the Qur'an as a Mushaf occurred much later than traditional sources imagine. The canonization and stabilization process of the ex-Qur'an only happened in the second century, not the beginning of the first century (several years after the Prophet's death), as mentioned in historical books. Therefore, the Qur'an cannot be said to be contemporary with the Prophet and, thus, cannot be used as documentary evidence for the emergence of Islam. 2) The sirah and history books written by Muslims are not "history" in the true sense but "salvation history" in the sense that they present narratives or stories to idealize the personality of the Prophet and the community of his followers. The description of the ideal Prophet reflects what they believed, not what happened. Therefore, these books do not provide historical information but rather stories that emerged later. 3) Information and stories about the Prophet's life are only interpretations, not historical information, because they are not based on historical evidence. Most of the stories about the emergence of Islam are not independent evidence but are related to efforts to interpret the Qur'an. For example, the story of *abab al-nuzul or the reasons for the revelation of verses of the Qur'an, which are often mentioned in Sirah and tafsir books, according to a skeptical* approach, is not factual but part of the interpretive effort itself (M. Sirry, 2015).

This latter assumption is also justified by source criticism and traditional criticism approaches. Among the assumptions of the skeptics above, the most radical is the first, which claims that the Qur'an was codified as a holy book in the second century (M. Sirry, 2017). This view emerged quite early but only sparked widespread debate in the 1970s when the British scholar John Wansbrough published his book Quranic Studies in 1977. Wansbrough's thesis greatly

influenced radical revisionists, especially Patricia Crone. Long before Wansbrough, in 1916, the Syriac literature expert Alphonse Mingana also argued that the official collection and writing of the Qur'an only occurred during the time of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, the fifth Umayyad caliph, who ruled from 65-86 H/685—AD 705. However, Wansbrough takes it even further back, Val., that the stabilization of the text of the Qur'an only occurred at the beginning of the Abbasid rule in Iraq (M. Sirry, 2019).

In principle, an explicit explanation regarding the basics of this revisionist approach was put forward by John Wansbrough through his lecture given in 1986 in Jerusalem, which was then explained and elaborated further by subsequent scholars, including his favorite student, a pretty productive exegete (prolific) named Andrew Rippin (M. Sirry, 2017). This revisionist approach is based on the following basic assumptions and premises (Minhaji, 2010; Mukti, 2018):

1. Written sources, in all their forms, cannot fully describe the historical reality that occurred. Written sources can only describe what happened according to the author's perspective and wishes. Therefore, before understanding the historicity of an event from a written document, it is necessary first to understand the knowledge and objectives of the document's author. This is a fundamental problem in using written documents as historical sources, giving rise to literature on historical research methodology.
2. Only eyewitnesses can "know" for sure what happened. However, even eyewitness interpretations are potentially influenced by prior knowledge and experience. Sources contemporary with events can be placed on a par with or close to eyewitness works. However, every writer or reader must be confident that these contemporary sources are accurate. The best method is to cross-check with external evidence, mainly unwritten evidence from the same period. If such evidence is not available, then consensus must be made from the work of various colleagues, although this method is problematic because it needs a strong foundation.
3. The limitations of words in describing reality often result in reductions in the writing process. In such conditions, the author tries to create a sequence, correspondence, and consequences that do not exist in the events studied.
4. The Transmission of Written Documents in the Early Islamic Period Needs to be Critically Examined The history of the transmission of written documents in the early Islamic period deserves scrutiny, even doubt. This is not only because of possible errors in writing or copying but also because there are significant differences between the author's subsequent works, even though they are based on the same early documents. A writer adapts his writing to his time's dominant paradigm or understanding.
5. Written works represent the author's views, not facts. Written works do not always reveal what happened or present facts but only represent the author's view of an event. Therefore, the study of it falls into something other than historical criticism but rather literary criticism.

6. Researchers need help dealing with written and unwritten historical evidence. This evidence can change, disappear, or separate, so understanding the meaning and relationships between the pieces is essential. Unwritten evidence, such as archaeology, is considered more neutral and accessible, but interpreting complex written sources, such as understanding the author and context, can present difficulties. Written sources must be verified with external evidence, such as archaeology, to arrive at historical truth.
7. External evidence validates written proof, especially in Islamic historical works. The lack of support between written and external evidence raises doubts and is the main reason for applying the "Valentino" theory. The lack of external evidence, as in the case of Muslim literature on the Arab conquest, raises questions about the accuracy of historical events.
8. Western scholars have long critically analyzed sacred texts, such as the Old Testament, to determine their authenticity and historicity. This approach was then applied to the Qur'an, focusing on critical linguistic analysis.

The third approach is seen as a middle way between the two approaches above, namely *the source criticism approach*. This approach recognizes that Muslim sources contain historical data that can be traced using specific methods. The problem is that this history has been mixed with unreliable materials or distorted through inaccurate transmission processes. That is why many contradictory and absurd narratives exist in the corpus of Islamic history (Rahman, 2015; M. Sirry, 2019). For those who use this source-critical approach, one way to verify the historical core in traditional Muslim sources is by comparing them with non-Muslim sources or by untangling the tangled threads in the conflicting narratives (M. Sirry, 2015). Albrecht Noth is one of the proponents of this source criticism approach. By examining the origins of the conflict in the narrative of the military invasion of Persia during the time of Umar ibn Khattab, he concluded that it was a military conquest. It occurs in Nihawand City and considers historian Tabari's history inaccurate (Noth, 2017). This illustrates that an essential element in this source criticism approach is to find why there are conflicting histories and identify which of these narrations is valid (accurate).

There are two assumptions underlying the source criticism approach. First, the belief is that there are narrative layers in traditional Seasonal sources that reflect historical facts. However, that layer of factual narrative is clouded by other layers of inaccuracy. Several scholars have offered their analyses of how the distortion process occurs. For example, history is contaminated by errors in their transmission or mixed with falsified stories motivated by sectarian polemics or political interests. Second, other sources (predominantly Christian) must be collaborated to examine historical aspects. In other words, sources outside the Islamic tradition can provide evidence to confirm or weaken one of the conflicting narrations. Of course, the research methods that are valid and absurd are not unique (M. Sirry, 2015). Some Western scholars who follow this approach examine the tendencies of early Muslim historians in the centers of Islamic civilization, such as Medina, Kufa, and Syria. In 1864, MJ de Goeje compared the Sirah of Ibn Ishaq

(from Medina) and Saif ibn Umar (from Kufa), especially regarding the chronology of the conquest of Syria. He concluded that Ibn Ishaq's chronology was more accurate because it was supported by Christian sources written in Syriac and Greek (de Goeje, 1866).

The fourth approach, which includes the middle way, is *the traditional criticism approach* (M. Sirry, 2015). This approach focuses on the historical aspect and how information is transmitted from one generation to the next. If the previous approach focused more on written materials, this approach is based on oral transmission. To a certain extent, the traditional critical approach departs from narration or how information is transmitted from one generation to the next. Therefore, it is understandable that Donner traces the origins of this third approach to the works of German scholar Ignaz Goldziher (1966), who launched a sharp criticism of the narration of hadith (Seyhan, 2024). Perhaps Goldziher was the first scholar to see hadith in the context of political and religious contestation or specific social interests. Even though they are narrated using *isnad*, for Goldziher, these hadiths are nothing more than an attempt to justify various issues that emerged later and do not reflect the Prophet's statements or behavior. Goldziher's study focused on "political" hadiths contained in the hadith canon books, such as Bukhari and Muslim, and he concluded that these hadiths appeared later as the result of forgery for specific interests (M. Sirry, 2015).

Nearly fifty years later, Joseph Schacht developed Goldziher's theory into the realm of legal hadiths and came to the same conclusion: the hadiths reflect issues of concern during the reign of the Umayyad caliphate. Related to *isnad*, Schacht created a rule widely quoted by contemporary scholars: "The more robust the *isnad*, the later it is published. " This means that if the transmission of a hadith involves people who are all known to be trustworthy, then the hadith was created later by someone. Who fully understands the importance of trustworthy transmitters? However, suppose the *isnad* involves people whose testimony is not accepted. In that case, the hadith is relatively early because the compiler did not realize that there were people who were considered problematic among the transmitters. It was Schacht's dictum that, among other things, was criticized by Mustafa al-Azami in *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1996). For Azami, if the people behind them created these hadiths, they should involve all trustworthy narrators. Here, the argument Azami developed upholds the critical thesis developed by Schacht (Muòhammad Muòsòtafâa A.°òzamåi et al., 1996).

One of the significant differences between the traditional critical approach and source criticism. Suppose the source criticism approach assumes that today's sirah books and Islamic history are partly based on written materials. In that case, the traditional criticism approach argues that the texts compiled in the early times were primarily based on oral transmission. Although the latter approach cannot be said to have emerged as a reaction to the previous approach, it is clear that there have been sharp criticisms leveled by those belonging to the traditional critical approach towards the source critical approach. This criticism relates to how a tradition develops gradually and is only sometimes adopted from written materials.

Muin'im Historian Position Sirry in Early Islamic Studies

Sirry's position in his study of early Islam is necessary to explain several of his views. In determining Sirry's position, he will explain his thoughts on the scholarship of these two opposing approaches and how problems relate to researchers who believe and do not believe. This thought will draw arguments that show Sirry's position and status more clearly. In Sirry's view, the emergence of all these approaches stems from the absence, or lack, of documents or written data on at least the first fifty years of Islam's emergence. The formative era is significant. Information or what comes to human data today is generally provided in books written long after that formative period.

So, how should historians respond to these books? The four approaches discussed above can be categorized into two large groups: the "traditionalist group" and the "revisionist group." Simply put, traditionalists are those who consider historical books written by Muslims to be used as sources for reconstructing the emergence of Islam. This view is held by the majority of Muslim scholars, especially those domiciled in the Islamic world (M. Sirry, 2015a, 2021). Perhaps not many Muslim scholars are critical of these traditional Islamic sources. Many non-Muslim scholars in the West take the same stance. They explain how Islam first emerged in Mecca and Medina in the same way as Muslim scholars wrote.

Among Western scholars, they try to offer alternative views that question the description of the emergence of early Islam as reported by traditionalist groups. These scholars, who are usually called "revisionists", argue that Islamic sources are problematic to use as the sole basis for reconstructing early Islam. However, according to Sirry, although all of them think there are severe problems with Muslim sources, they differ in their opinion. The question of how large or small the sources are can be accepted (M. Sirry, 2014). The last three approaches (source criticism, traditional criticism, and skepticism) discussed above show the broad scope of differences among this revisionist group -traditional sources must be revised. However, some recognize the problems of Muslim sources but still use them. The two approaches (source criticism and tradition criticism) above are examples of this last attitude. They argue that Muslim sources cannot be thrown away just because they were written long after the events occurred and written by Muslim historians who were not neutral in the sense that they wrote the books as believers (M. Sirry, 2015).

Sirry's traditionalist and revisionist perspective scholarship? This question is not intended to judge what is right and wrong because, after all, matters of preference and interpretation cannot be judged black and white or right and wrong (M. Sirry, 2015). The task of scholarship is not to judge views and opinions as wrong or right but to examine their strengths and weaknesses. Judgment is a form of intellectual arrogance indicating an inability to dialogue constructively. Therefore, the question above will be answered in the framework of the extent to which the debate between these two camps can increase knowledge about the emergence of Islam and the complexity of Muslim sources. Sirry attempts to evaluate the premises of the growing scholarship on early Islam. The traditionalist

view is based on three essential premises. First, the pile of nomenclature written by Muslim scholars in the mid-2nd century, 3rd-century Hijriah, and onwards (or the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries AD) stores and contains historical facts (Abidin & Ashadi, 2023). Information and descriptions of pre-Islamic situations, the Prophet's biographies, the Qur'an's codification, and narratives of expansion and conquest are accurate. Although these sources were written later, they are based on a tradition of oral transmission that was already widespread among Arabs. Second, still related to the first, they emphasize that *isnad* or genealogy of narration can filter out valid and weak news so they can reconstruct early Islamic history convincingly.

This *isnad* is not only applied to hadith but also to historical narratives. Third, the fact that there were no written works in the first century does not mean that the stories and data that appeared later were lies. Premise: These three are intended to refute the so-called "*argumentum e silentio" silent* proofs." Namely, the absence of material evidence in the early period argues that the later materials were nothing more than the creations of later people. If this had not been the case, this information and materials would have already become a topic of conversation among previous generations. This *argumentum e silentio* is generally used by those who reject the authenticity of hadith but is sometimes also used to reject historical sources written by later Muslims (M. Sirry, 2015).

Revisionist scholars have disputed the three premises above. However, before discussing the revisionist response, it is better first to raise the points that are the strength of the traditionalist premise. One of the reasons why it is difficult for scholars to refrain from using it concluded Sirry. Muslim sources are, therefore, available in genuinely astonishing numbers. The works of sirah, history, hadith, and tafsir, written in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, are genuinely abundant. Later, some of these books were published, although most still needed to be in manuscript form or had been lost to time. These massive books provide very detailed information. Although the accuracy of such detailed information may be problematic if scrutinized, it can still be thrown into the trash. William Graham, a professor of Islamic studies at Harvard, once said that to claim that the volumes of the works of Muslim scholars contain fake news requires a conspiracy theory. It is difficult to understand that writers from various localities such as Medina, Mecca, Iraq, or Syria agreed to create fake news about how Islam emerged or how the Qur'an was compiled and codified (M. Sirry, 2016).

Despite the many contradictions in traditional sources, this does not mean all the confusing news is inaccurate. For traditionalist scholars, this contradiction can be resolved by verifying *the isnad*. The early Muslim scholars were aware of the lies embedded in historical narratives. Therefore, they developed their science to evaluate their validity with the science of *Jarh wa Ta'dil*. Namely, science that examines whether the narrators can be trusted or not. The scholars also compiled biographical books containing the narrators' characters for this verification need (M. Sirry, 2016). Therefore, Muslims do not need sources from outside Islam at all to reconstruct early Islam because Muslim sources themselves provide accurate information.

Likewise, supporters of the traditionalist approach question revisionist efforts to use data from outside the Islamic tradition to evaluate the historicity of information provided by Muslim sources. Many revisionists use archaeological data obtained outside the Arabian Peninsula (until now, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not allow excavations to be carried out in Mecca and Medina) to analyze what happened at the beginning of the emergence of Islam (Hidayat & Rizky, 2019; M. Sirry, 2017). For now, mention one small example by the revisionist scholar Yehuda D. Nevo in his article *Towards A Prehistory of Islam* (1994) (Nevo, 1994). Nevo was an archaeologist who researched several inscriptions found in the Negev (now in Israel) and several locations in Syria, which confirm and support Wansbrough's argument that the Qur'an was born outside the Arabian Peninsula. From his archaeological excavations, he found several logia similar to phrases from the Qur'an, especially regarding the oneness of God. For Nevo, this suggests that the logia originating from the Judeo-Christian tradition is the "raw material" of the Qur'an (Nevo, 1994).

Fred Donner flatly rejected Nevo's argument. According to the Professor of early Islamic history at the University of Chicago, Nevo's argument is circular because the logia can form the Qur'an if this Muslim holy book is assumed to have appeared in the Negev. To say it appeared outside the Arabian Peninsula, one must assume that the Qur'an consists of logia. However, it is not impossible that the writings in the inscription were inspired by the Qur'an, not the other way around. In this context, Donner believes Nevo's conclusions reflect his views and are not based on archaeological data at his research site (Donner, 2014). Many people need clarification on how it is possible for such minimal archaeological data to be used as material for reconstructing early Islam.

Besides inscriptions, revisionists also use other data, including coins, which are contemporary with the birth of Islam. This is because they consider that Muslim sources written in the second and third centuries cannot be used as a basis for explaining the origins of the Islamic religion. Even if these sources are to be used, they argue that data from the formative period, such as archaeological data excavations, must support them. Without that, according to them, Muslim sources are only literary, not historical information. The criticism of revisionist scholars generally boils down to the fact that the traditional sources were written later, so they must reflect what happened. According to them, the evidence is that there are many contradictions in the information presented by traditional sources.

There are several reasons why Muslim sources should not be discarded simply because later dogmas contaminate the information they present. First, throughout the history of the development of Islam, there have always been differences and confusion. The books that record recent events are also filled with contradictions. Thus, contradictions are not an academic reason to abandon Islamic traditions. Second, of course, the use of traditional sources needs to be accompanied by an awareness of the need for a critical attitude, not accepting things at face value as traditionalists do. Various methods developed by revisionist scholars (not extreme ones) can produce narratives closer to what happened.

Third, as shown by the source and tradition criticism approaches, Muslim sources still contain sufficient historical facts to reconstruct early Islam (M. Sirry, 2018).

Therefore, according to Sirry, what is needed is not an excessive skepticism to the point of rejecting Muslim sources altogether but also a non-critical attitude that accepts these sources *at face value*, as if there is no problem with the Islamic tradition. As discussed above, the "middle path" taken by the two approaches of source and traditional criticism is the right choice(Sirry, 2019). Sirry has tried to use this "middle way" in several articles published in international journals. For example, when discussing the meaning of the word " *hanif*" in the Qur'an, Sirry uses Muslim sources critically and comes to a different conclusion from the traditionalists and skeptics at the same time. The first group usually identifies the word *hanif* as "Muslim" who adheres to the straight religion. They trace this word to the Arabic root h-n-p, which means "'incline" or towards" (those who incline towards the straight religion; from false religion to true faith).

The second group, on the other hand, interprets the word " *hanif* " to mean idolatrous or godless or disobedient. For them, this word comes from Aramaic, which means idol worshiper or polytheist. Sirry examines the internal evidence in the Qur'an and other texts. Early Islam concluded that the meaning of *hanif* in the Qur'an is unclear, thus opening up space for various meanings, including the meaning in Aramaic. Early tafsir books support multiple interpretations of the word *hanif.* Only in the period of Ibn Kathir (seventh AH/twelfth century AD) did the meaning of hanif become stable and equated with Muslims. Thus, critical use of Muslim sources can lead to conclusions that are not entirely in line with the general beliefs of Muslims (M. Sirry, 2011).

How should Muslims respond to critical approaches to Islamic traditions? The fact that this crucial attitude appears among Western scholars does not need to give rise to excessive suspicion. It cannot be denied that some Western scholars are critical of Islamic traditions because of theological motivation. They are essential because of religious motives to discredit other religions (Islam). However, it is also permissible to generalize because, in reality, most choose to be critical for methodological reasons. They are crucial not only to Islamic traditions but also to other religious traditions, including their own. It should be quickly added that many non-Muslim Western scholars choose to acknowledge traditional explanations, just as many Muslim scholars choose a critical approach. Proponents of the descriptive approach differ from traditionalist Muslims regarding theological beliefs but follow a traditionalist framework in addressing Islamic tradition. This approach has recently become less popular (M. A. Sirry, 2012). Even some scholars who reconstruct the formative period of Islam using traditional sources are aware of severe problems in their sources, such as the case of FE Peters in *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*. Academic demands may require researchers to separate faith and the object of study.

Sirry did not reject and accepted both approaches in their entirety. Between descriptive traditionalists and radical skeptical revisionists, he does not justify the truth of one approach alone but instead looks at the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. According to Sirry, these two approaches can be reconciled with

an approach called "source/tradition criticism." The source/tradition criticism approach adopted by Sirry indirectly represents that he is in a non-radical (moderate revisionist) revisionist position. The addition of the word radical here must be underlined because Sirry is not included in the radical revisionist group. Still, he combines the two approaches to accept Muslim sources as references capable of reconstructing early Islamic history with a critical attitude towards it. Therefore, as Sirry said, this source/tradition criticism approach is the middle of these two approaches. So, it is reasonable to call Sirry a user of this approach who is in a middle position in the sense that he is neither traditional descriptive nor radical revisionist (M. Sirry, 2015).

Furthermore, Sirry's position was also seen more clearly when he discussed the issue of believers and non-believers in researching the early history of Islam on the sub-theme of faith and history. Sirry asked what significance the "insider-outsider" discussion had for research into the history of early Islam. He emphasized that the "insider vs. outsider" debate is relevant, especially about belief claims. Who can best explain the religious experiences of people who perform certain dhikr practices? And other similar questions. This is different from the domain of revisionist work. They do not involve themselves in theological matters, whether it is true or not or whether it makes sense.

Their framework is different from that of theologians. However, attention is paid to their historical claims (M. Sirry, 2015a; M. A. Sirry, 2012). Borrowing Rahman's category, they move at the "intellectual understanding" level, not religious understanding. In this context, the "outsider-insider" dichotomy becomes blurry and unclear. Whether a scholar or researcher is critical of the sources of his study is a methodological choice and not a consequence of external observation. Not all outsiders put forward a crucial approach to Muslim sources (M. Sirry, 2021). The number of those who can be categorized as traditionalists is significant. Likewise, some Muslim scholars are critical of using Muslim sources and are aware of the problems inherent in these traditional sources. Quite a few of these Muslim scholars also use sources outside the Islamic tradition.

Sirry has a different view of Islamic history from Fred Donner. Donner argued that a devout Muslim who believed that Muhammad was the Prophet and the Qur'an was God's revelation could not be a good historian of early Islam. However, according to Sirry, Donner's view is based on three assumptions. First, historical research recognizes the power of human reason and logical analysis. It is committed to using rational and scientific principles in solving intellectual problems, including reconstructing and interpreting the past. Historians explore historical evidence with logical analysis but also recognize the limitations of this analysis so that the results of their research are hypothetical and can be revised if new evidence is discovered. So, what is absolute in historical research is not the conclusion but the method. Second, past humans were human creatures like today's humans, not creatures from another planet.

Therefore, historians can understand them through human analysis. However, extraordinary things, such as miracles or statements about revelation and divine intervention, cannot be accepted as historical facts because they are

beyond the competence of historians who use rational and logical methods. Third, historians analyze the past based on universal natural laws that apply today. However, many believers' beliefs are not based on natural laws but on aspects beyond the reach of human reason, such as the miracles of the Prophet Moses, the ascension of the Prophet Isa, or the revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad. This is a problem that cannot be explained by historical methods that rely on universal natural laws (Mukti, 2018; Zudhia, 2022).

Instead of being suspicious of critical ideas that tend to revise traditional explanations to undermine the Islamic faith. Muslims should learn from the results of modern research to see more clearly the beliefs that have been accepted for generations without seriously questioning them. A critical lesson from the sharp criticism that cuts to the heart of Christian beliefs is that this religion is still alive and growing strong. Critical historical research has made them aware of the commitment to historicity in revitalizing their religion in the modern era, which demands new ethics and paradigms. Many new and brilliant thoughts emerged from this debate on questions of faith and history.

Recognizing severe problems in the sources from which faith and belief are derived, as has been the concern of revisionist scholarship, is the entry point to rethinking religion in modern times. Indeed, religious beliefs do not have to be historical; truths based on historical facts will produce stable faith. A statement attributed to Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib advises not to measure truth by people but rather to measure people by truth. Therefore, an open attitude is needed to rethink what has been accepted for generations. Everyone believes that the process of searching for truth is never finished. The best way to begin that search is to review how this religion, considered valid, began, was born, and developed into the form witnessed today (M. Sirry, 2003). Sirry also emphasized that differences in approaches to traditional Muslim sources significantly impact how the emergence of the Islamic religion has historically been reconstructed.

Sirry, as a historian, has a comprehensive and universal view of early Islam. His attitude of understanding with Rahman provided space for outsiders to study early Islam, which also contributed to its development. As he argued with Donner, he also asserted himself as an objective Muslim historian. Besides Sirry's critical attitude towards traditional Islamic sources, he also recommends that Muslims be friendly towards revisionist references to learn more deeply. This does not mean a total acceptance of revisionist sources but still being aware of their problems. Scientific attitudes such as openness and criticism are necessary to study early Islam. As for suspicions about these two sources, you should accept them in full and accept traditional sources for reasons of faith. Sirry, this position in the middle is what a Mun'in would represent.

CONCLUSION

Mun'im Sirry neither fully accepts nor rejects the descriptive traditionalist or radical skeptical revisionist approaches in studying early Islamic history. Instead, Sirry tries to find a middle ground by adopting a "source/tradition criticism" approach. This approach represents Sirry's position as a moderate revisionist who

is not radical in rejecting Muslim sources but remains critical of them. According to Sirry, both extreme approaches have their respective advantages and disadvantages. The source/tradition critical approach he offers is an attempt to reconcile the two. Sirry accepts Muslim sources as references in reconstructing early Islamic history but still applies a critical attitude. In this way, Sirry is not trapped in an excessively skeptical attitude that rejects traditional sources or a non-critical attitude that accepts these sources as taken for granted. Sirry has applied this source/tradition critical approach in several of his writings published in international journals, so his position is in the middle. He is not an entirely descriptive traditionalist but also not radical like a skeptical revisionist.

Muslims should not immediately suspect critical ideas that tend to revise traditional explanations as an attempt to undermine Islamic beliefs. Instead, they need to learn from modern research results to see the beliefs accepted for generations more clearly without seriously questioning them. The critical attitude towards Islamic traditions emerging among Western scholars is sometimes driven by theological motives that discredit Islam and methodological reasons. Many Muslim scholars choose a critical approach for reconstructing the formative period of Islam, while some non-Muslim Western scholars acknowledge traditional explanations. In this context, Sirry appears to be in a middle position, neither fully accepting the descriptive traditionalist nor the radical skeptical revisionist approach. By adopting a source/tradition critical approach, Sirry tries to reconcile these two conflicting approaches.

This approach allows Sirry to continue using Muslim sources as references, but with a critical attitude, to produce a more comprehensive and balanced reconstruction of early Islamic history. It is hoped that Sirry's efforts can be an example for Muslims in responding to the debate between traditional and critical approaches in Islamic studies without being trapped in an excessively skeptical or non-critical attitude that is taken for granted.

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