Foreword

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Religious founders are the wellsprings of tradition. They engender cultures, peoples, movements, values. They are metaphorically Abrahamic—ancestors, fathers and mothers, of their descendants and devotees. They are the one before and behind the many.

But religious founders are also the products of human expression and creativity; they are, in image and form, cultural creations—and they are thus as variable, changeable, and dynamic as culture itself. Their singularity is as illusory as the singularity of religion. Just as there are many Christianities, Buddhisms, and Islams, so too there are many Jesuses, Buddhas, and Muhammads.

So, like religions, religious founders are contested. They are many things to many people.

One of the greatest differences between adherents and scholars of religion—between insiders and outsiders—is the very notion of the founder. New Testament scholars concluded their search for the historical Jesus in times and places far deeper and wider than the context of the historical figure himself. Scholars of Taoism saw the figure of Laozi disappear before their eyes and concluded (through philological study of the text he purportedly authored, the *Daodejing*) that the name actually referred to a community of wise elders. And in the second millennium of the Buddhist tradition—one of the only traditions in which adherents themselves discovered the multiplicity of the founder—the Buddha became many Buddhas. But for Christians, there can be only one Jesus; for at least some Buddhists, only one Buddha; and for Muslims, only one Muhammad. Where the religion scholar sees multiplicity, the devotee sees only the one object of worship.

So it is no surprise, though still a cause of shock and anguish, that adherents may kill in the name of the One. The events in Paris in January 2015, whatever their underlying social and political contexts, were profoundly religious in one important respect: the killers acted in defense of the Prophet. To insist otherwise is to ignore what was, for them, a primary motivation for their horrific acts. We must not assume that the killers represented Islam, or even radical Islam, but we cannot deny that their devotion to the sanctity of the prophetic One inspired them to avenge *Charlie Hebdo*'s heresy and the mocking denigration of the sacred image. *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoonists were themselves engaged in a war of the pen, with the basic presupposition that the Prophet is many things to many people, including an object of derision. It is this basic presupposition that the killers aimed to destroy.

Horrific acts in the name of the founder are thankfully rare. But we can find many other instances of intolerance toward those who challenge—whether through academic inquiry, ridicule, or conviction—the authority of the sacred image.

- Reactions to academic work by Paul Courtwright, Jeffrey Kripal, Wendy Doniger, and other Western scholars deconstructing the Hindu tradition have elicited book bans and threats of violence in India and abroad. The authors' offense was not ridicule, but scholarly interpretation—demonstrating the historical, psychological, and social contexts of Hindu devotionism.
- In a 2011 conference held at Sichuan University on the history of Taoism, the most pronounced difference between Chinese and foreign scholars was in the depiction of the founder Laozi. The foreign scholars claimed that Laozi is a myth, a mosaic of images assembled over many generations. The local scholars' insistence on Laozi's historicity—from his date and place of birth to his remarkable biography and lifespan—was an expression of cultural orthodoxy and nationalist pride.
- In October 2014 an Australian pub owner in Rangoon was arrested and jailed for a seemingly innocuous though undoubtedly ribald depiction of the Buddha sporting a set of Beats by Dre headphones. Charges brought against him included heresy and insult to the faith. Unlike the defiant cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo*, the pub owner immediately issued an abject apology on the pub's Facebook page.
- Scurrilous depictions of Jesus—such as those by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, with his infamous photorealistic images of the

crucified Christ in a pool of urine or blood—evoke condemnations that go beyond simple critique: art exhibitions have been closed and funding revoked, and the culture wars intensified in the name of the One.

These examples could be multiplied, and each is subject to contention. No matter how severe or how mild the reactions may be, religious devotees often feel called to defend the image of the founder.

The collection of essays presented in this book could not be more timely, or timeless: the image of the Prophet is and will always be a source of contestation. Some of the essays began as talks given at Trinity University of San Antonio, Texas, in spring 2010 as part of a Lennox Lecture Series titled “Muhammad in History, Politics, and Memory,” organized by Ruqayya Khan. I was privileged to serve as chair of the Department of Religion at Trinity at the time and to receive some credit for the success of the series—credit that was totally undeserved because every aspect of the series was inspired and realized by Dr. Khan as its sole organizer.

She further organized a panel—on extraordinarily short notice—for the 2010 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion on controversies surrounding the siting of an Islamic center in New York City. The AAR panel was attended by an overflow crowd of several hundred scholars as well as local, national, and international press. This panel resulted in the online publication of a special issue of *Religions* (“Islam in America: Zeroing in on the Park51 Controversy”) within six months of the conference. Finally, Dr. Khan has in this volume brought together a stellar array of scholars spanning religious studies, cultural studies, aesthetics, philology, history, and Middle Eastern studies to produce a work that, in its totality, weaves a rich tapestry of the many images of the Prophet.

Though each is one in the religious eye, prophets are many and changing in image and representation. It is our mission as historians of Islam to record and investigate the many interpretations and contested meanings of the Prophet.

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