The Print Revolution in Egypt and the Rise of Professional Editors: the Arabic-Islamic Manuscript Tradition in Print

By Dr. Islam Dayeh
Frei University Berlin

In the nineteenth century, the advent of the printing machine and under the influence of orientalist, and reformist attitudes in the Arab East gave rise to a new type of professional scholar: the editor of manuscripts. These scholars—whose training may have been in traditional Qur’anic and hadith philology and text criticism or in the methods of biblical and classical text criticism brought to them by European scholars teaching at Arab universities—came to play a pivotal role in the intellectual debates over what constituted Arabic/Islamic ‘tradition’ (al-turath), how it should be read and its relevance to contemporary questions. Influential scholarly editors were given the title al-muhattaqiqun, a mode of critical investigation or reading, which acquired the new meaning of preparing and printing a correct version of a manuscript.

I will present examples of the editorial choices and textual practices of this generation of scholars. What text critical methods did they draw upon, and what was their assessment of the editorial efforts and methods of their European counterparts? I will show how these editors incorporated and developed new forms of textuality through their encounter with European orientalists. In short, the talk will explore how 19th and 20th century European philology was grafted on Arabic-Islamic philology, by assuming and refashioning the latter’s terms, concepts, practices and objectives.

Dr. Islam Dayeh is the academic director of the research program “Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship” at the Freie Universitaet and the Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin. Dayeh has studied at the University of Jordan (BA in Islamic studies), University of Leiden (MA in Religious Studies) and University of Oxford (MSt in Jewish studies). He completed his PhD in Arabic and Semitic studies at Freie Universität Berlin in 2012.

He is currently completing two monographs. The first is a study of the intellectual cosmos of the Cairene-Damascene exegete, philologist, geometrician, logician and historian Burhan al-Din al-Biqai (1406-1480). The second is a study of the impact of the messianic movement of Sabbatai Zewi on the Jews of Yemen. The study is based on a critical edition of several manuscripts documenting exchanges between Yemeni Muslim jurists over the legal status of contemporaneous Jews in the wake of the Sabbatian messianic disturbances in Yemen (17th-19th century).

Date: Monday 30th March
Place: 4 Bancroft Avenue (Dept. of NMC), room 200B
Time: 4:00-5:30 pm.