

The Influence Of George Sale's Translation Of Quran On Voltaire's Portrayals Of Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him)

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Abstract

The western writers on Muhammad (peace be upon him) demonstrate both criticism and admiration of his personality. However, it is an unpleasant fact that much of what is written about his life is biased and hostile. Voltaire, a French philosopher and playwright, experiences a paradigm shift in his perceptions of the figure of Muhammad (peace be upon him). In the beginning, Voltaire depicts Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the model of fanaticism in his play *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophete*. In the later stages of his career, however, his perspective on Islam and its prophet underwent a considerable change. He began to see Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a wonderful role model who, through scriptures and art of persuasion, changed the course of history. The following research paper attempts to prove that Voltaire changed his hostile opinion after reading George Sale's translation of the holy Quran. It delineates how Voltaire's negative portraits of Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the pre-Sale period gave way to positive portraits in the post-Sale period.

Keywords: Quran, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Polemics, Medieval, Catholics, Protestants, Oriental.

Introduction

It goes without saying that Muhammad (peace be upon him) has always occupied pivotal position in the Western discourse on Islam. According to the medieval Christian authorities, he was sacred deity and idol worshipped by the Saracens. In the later part of the Middle Ages Muhammad (peace be upon him) was portrayed as a shrewd heresiarch who deluded his simple Arab

followers with the help of his "bogus miracles." The medieval Christian leaders used these fabricated images of Muhammad (peace be upon him) to persuade their followers undertake military expeditions to snatch the holy land back from idolatrous Saracens. Unfortunately, such falsely forged portraits of Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not vanish in the Middle Ages after being used in crusades but continued to influence Western views of the prophet till seventeenth

century. Just as the crusaders used his image as a sacred idol of the Saracens in their holy wars against Muslims, the colonial powers propagated him as an “impostor” to justify their occupation and exploitation of Muslim lands. Briefly put, western imagination has never been unmindful of the personality of Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Christian missionaries deliberately portrayed Islam as a degenerate version of pagan idolatry. Twelfth century hagiographers, artists, chroniclers and poets presented him as the chief deity in the Saracen pantheon.¹ According to Gerome, the Saracens were plunderers and they were inherently hostile to civilization.² Christian chroniclers maintain that Tancred fought these enemies of civilization and broke into tiny pieces the idol of “Mahummet” seated in the Rome of the Rock. Though it is an incontrovertible truth that “Saracens” never worshipped the image of “Mahummet” nor did any such image exist but this fictitious story regurgitated by medieval Christians in their writings.³

The writer of *Chanson d’Antioche* describes the Saracens as worshippers of anti-Christian Trinity comprising “Mahumet, Apollin and Tervagant.”⁴

From thirteenth century to the middle of sixteenth century, Muhammad (peace be upon him) continues to appear as a heresiarch in the Christian discourse on Islam. In the thirteen and

fourteenth centuries, Christian missionaries travelled to Muslim lands in order learn Arabic language so that they might study the original sources of Saracen heresy and argue intellectually with the followers of the newly emerged “heresiarch”.⁵ According to Guibert, the flighty minds of the oriental often land them into heretic ideologies. They stubbornly insist on defending their heresies through logical reasoning. To Guibert, Muhammad (peace be upon him) was one such oriental who not only fell into error himself but also led many people away from the true message of Jesus (peace be upon him).⁶ Muhammad (peace be upon him), Guibert argues, persuaded his naive followers that they would be rewarded all sorts of sensual delights, if they sincerely obeyed the commands of the prophet. To him, such a heresiarch deserves a disgraceful end. Guibert narrates that Mathomus died in an epileptic fit and pigs ate his flesh.⁷

The polemical treatise, *Risalat al-Kindi*, notes that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was originally an idolater who grew rich through his matrimonial alliance with a rich lady. His riches stirred his ambition to become the ruler of Arabia and decided to announce himself as the final prophet. The writer maintains that he could not demonstrate any miracles failed to show divine support as he encountered military failures on different occasions. However, he won a large following from the nomads and Bedouins of the

¹ Tolan, John. *Faces of Muhammad: Western perceptions of the prophet of Islam from the middle ages to today*. Princeton University Press, 2019, p.21

² Jerome, *Saint Jerome’s Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, Trans Robert Hayward, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. P.49

³ Camille, Michael. *The Gothic idol: ideology and image-making in medieval art*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989, pp.142-145

⁴ Tolan, John. *Faces of Muhammad: Western perceptions of the prophet of Islam from the middle ages to today*. Princeton University Press, 2019, p.30

⁵ Di Cesare, Michelina. "The pseudo-historical image of the Prophet Muhammad in medieval Latin literature: a repertory." *The Pseudo-historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin Literature: A Repertory*. de Gruyter, 2011.

⁶ De Nogent, Guibert, Robert Levine, and Guibertus de Novigento. *The Deeds of God Through the Franks: A Translation of Guibert de Nogent’s Gesta Dei Per Francos*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1997.

⁷ Ibid. p. 36

desert by legalizing enrichment through war and plunder.⁸

In his preface, Mark of Toledo, presents Muhammad (peace be upon him) as an incredible magician who through his extensive travels in Jewish and Christians lands learnt the basic teachings and narratives of Christian and Jewish scriptures and urged the Arab polytheists to abandon idolatry and worship the One and Unique God. However, he was confused between Judaism and Christianity. He could not opt for the message of Jesus (peace be upon him) because it urged its followers to love their enemies and abandon all sensual delights; similarly, he could not adhere to Judaism because Jews were abhorred wherever they went as they were thought to be the assassins of Jesus (peace be upon him). Due to the existence of such religious and historical complications, Marks maintains, Muhammad (peace be upon him) made up his own religion in which he mixed Judeo-Christian laws with his own fancy.⁹

When Pedro Pascual saw the conversion of numerous Christians to Islam, he wrote his polemical Castilian treatise—namely *Sobre la seta Mahometana*—to stem the rapid growth of apostasy among Christians.¹⁰ Throughout his anti-Islam works, Pedro privileges weak and unreliable Christian sources over authentic Islamic chronicles. To curb the rampant apostasy, he seems to be at constant pains to cast aspersions on the impeccable character of the prophet of Islam.¹¹

Unlike the ardent advocates of crusades, Juan de Segovia wanted to encounter the threat of Islam through peaceful dialogue. He wrote letters to Jean Germain and Nicholas to persuade them into undertaking systematic debates with serious Muslim scholars to convince them of the veracity of Christian faith. Being convinced of the failure of violent ways, Juan asked his Christian fellows to shun violent methods and rationally eradicate all misconceptions lurking in the minds of Muslims with regard to the fundamental Christian doctrines.¹²

In the sixteenth century, Muhammad (peace be upon him) came to be used as a foil in the polemical debates between Catholics and Protestants. Martin Luther presents Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a man obsessed with carnal desires so much so that his heaven offers everything to satisfy men's lust. However, when he compares Muhammad (peace be upon him) with the Pope, he argues that the former is a pure saint.¹³ He maintains that the followers of Muhammad (peace be upon him) send Christian soldiers to heaven through martyrdom whereas the Pope ruins their eternal life through his sacrilegious thoughts. Their Catholic opponents responded in the same comparative vein and criticized Lutheran priests for their polygamous marriages as reminiscent of the Muhammadan tradition of polygamy. They denounced the Protestant religious authorities for allowing their followers to satisfy their lustful desires by marrying more than one wife. In Catholic scathing polemical writings, Luther is shown as worse than Muhammad (peace be upon him) for

⁸ Tolan, John V. "II European accounts of Muhammad's life." *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad* 226 (2010).pp. 113-114

⁹⁹ Pons, Nàdia Petrus. "The Glosses on Mark of Toledo's Alchoranus Latinus." *The Latin Qur'an* 21 (2015): 283.

¹⁰ Pascual, Pedro. *Sobre la se [c] ta mahometana*. Universitat de València, 2011. P.156

¹¹ Pascual, Pedro. *Sobre la se [c] ta mahometana*. Universitat de València, 2011.pp157-59

¹² Tolan, John. *Faces of Muhammad: Western perceptions of the prophet of Islam from the middle ages to today*. Princeton University Press, 2019. 85-88

¹³ Francisco, Adam. *Martin Luther and Islam: a study in sixteenth-century polemics and apologetics*. Vol. 8. Brill, 2007.

violating his oath of celibacy and marrying a cloistered nun.¹⁴

Guillaume Postel, a staunch catholic and learned scholar of Arabic, denigrates Lutheranism by identifying Martin Luther with Muhammad (peace be upon him) and associating both with anti-Christ. He maintains that both refuse to accept miracles performed by saints and reject the spiritual significance of sacred images. He denounces both for their encouragement of lecherous relationships and rejection of papal authority. Lastly, Protestants are similar to Muhammadans in their use of sword against the holy church.¹⁵

In the seventeenth century, Henry Stubbe decided to conduct a thorough reevaluation of the life of Muhammad (peace be upon him) exonerate him from all false accusations levelled against him in the early works of biased Christian polemicists. He rejected earlier hostile portrayals of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and saw in him an extraordinary man with a glorious soul. He argues that Muhammad (peace be upon him) never corrupted the Christianity but he rather endeavored to restore the message of Jesus (peace be upon him) to its pristine form. According to Stubbe, Jesus (peace be upon him) never claimed divinity; in fact, the idea of deifying great leaders come from a pagan worldview.¹⁶ He argues that neither Muhammad (peace be upon him) nor his successors tolerated idolatry. They fiercely battled idolatry to extend the realms of their

empire and never forced Christians and Jew to give up their respective creeds.¹⁷ Stubbe admires the holy Quran as a book of wise moral principles couched in exquisite style and simple language.¹⁸

In the first decade of the eighteenth century, Boulainvilliers presented Muhammad as model who liberated religion from pernicious priestcraft. Arguing against Muhammad's (peace be upon him) hostile detractors, he claims that it is untenable to consider as an irrational religion and Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a false prophet. In short, Boulainvilliers' Muhammad is a champion of pure monotheism.¹⁹

George Sale, who produced a valuable English translation of the holy Quran in 1734, describes Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a great lawgiver. Muhammad (peace be upon him), he maintains, gave Bedouins of the desert the perfect religion he could and therefore, he deserves to enjoy as much respect as the rest of the pagan lawgivers. As to the charges of sword, Sale retorts that none of the unarmed prophets have succeeded in bringing their mission to a glorious fruition.²⁰ Sale insists on the stylistic elegance of the holy Quran but rejects its divine origin and attributes its authorship to Muhammad (peace be upon him). He argues that the author of this book not was a great reformer who not only destroyed Meccan idols but also smashed new idols invented and worshipped by Christians.²¹

¹⁴ More, Saint Thomas. *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More: A dialogue concerning heresies (2 v.)* edited by TMC Lawler, G. Marc'hadour and RC Marius. Vol. 6. Yale University Press, 1981. 374-75

¹⁵ Bouwsma, William James. "Concordia Mundi: the career and thought of Guillaume Postel; 1510-1581." *Harvard historical monographs* 33 (1957).

¹⁶ Matar, Nabil, ed. *Henry Stubbe and the beginnings of Islam: The originall & progress of Mahometanism*. Columbia University Press, 2013. 69-70

¹⁷ Ibid.p. 85

¹⁸ Ibid.p. 95

¹⁹ Frigerio, Voir Fabrizio. "Une source méconnue de la Vie de Mahomed du comte de Boulainvilliers." *Studi Settecenteschi* (2001): 35-41.

²⁰ *The Koran: Commonly Called the Al Koran of Mohammed*. American Book Exchange, 1880.

²¹ George Sale, *The Koran: Commonly Called the Al Koran of Mohammed*. American Book Exchange, 1880.

When Goethe and Napoleon met in 1806, they admired the incredible accomplishments of Muhammad and decried Voltaire's unfair portrayal of the 'great man'. Napoleon harshly criticized Voltaire for 'prostituting' the impeccable character of the prophet through imputing to him 'the basest intrigues. To Napoleon, Muhammad (peace be upon him) marched like a genius and changed the course of history.

In his drama *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophete*, Voltaire has presented Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the archetype of fanaticism. However, his understanding of Islam and its prophet underwent a significant revision in the later part of his career. He came to believe that Muhammad (peace be upon him) a great role model who altered the course of history with the help of texts and persuasion. He revised his view after perusal of Sale's translation of Quran. The following section divides his portrait of Muhammad (peace be upon him) into pre-Sale and post-Sale periods.

In the pre-Sale period, Voltaire's portrait of Muhammad (peace be upon him) bears close resemblance to Prideaux's image of Muhammad (peace be upon him). He appears an ambitious imposter with great predilection for violence and satisfaction of carnal desires. However, it is important to remember that Voltaire's seems to be influenced by writers of the past but most of the episodes in his drama have developed from his imagination with no basis in history. The plot of his drama has nothing to do with medieval polemical biographies: it is a pure invention. He has denigrated Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a cynical power-hungry leader who feigned prophecy.

Voltaire seems to have discovered Sale's Translation of the holy Quran in 1738. It is evident from the letter that he wrote his friend Claude Theriot: "there is a devil of an

Englishman who has made a very beautiful translation of the Alcoran into English". Similarly, in another letter written to Frederick II of Prussia, he writes "Mr. Sale who has given us an excellent translation of Alcoran, wants us to regard Mahomet as a Numa and a Theseus." Voltaire's personal copy of Quran contains copious notes which he had written on its margins, a clear proof that he had deeply perused Sale's Translation.

His translation marks a milestone in the European view of Islam and Muhammad (peace be upon him). It can be termed as the first translation in a European language which is not history of appearance of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and its spreading out to the rest of the world. The preliminary discourse also describes the composition of the holy Quran and offers a scholarly examination of the Quranic belief. His translation shows signs of remarkable erudition and profound familiarity with modern scholarship and polemical works. His footnotes are full of references to the works of prominent scholars like Pococke, Toland, Ludvico, Jean Gagnier and others.

Sale is particularly indebted to Marraci, Catholic missionary who learnt Arabic and studied Islam with a view to converting Muslims to Catholic version of Christianity. He studied a wide range of Muslim exegeses of the holy Quran and drew upon them to develop his anti-Muslim arguments. Contrary to the earlier generation of Christian polemicists, he fought the Alcoran with Alcoran and wished to "slaughter Mahomet with his own sword in so far as I am able." Though he claims to refute the holy Quran with Quranic arguments, he critiques the holy Quran from a Catholic

perspective and finds 'shocking or irrational' ideas in the holy Quran.²²

Though Sale extensively used Marracci's translation of the Holy Quran, his perspective is considerably different. His assessment of Islam is favorably influenced by Andrian Reland and Jean Gagnier who had substantially more positive opinion about Islam.²³ The former vehemently denounced Marracci for his antagonistic and prejudiced presentation of Islam and the latter took offence at his anti-Muslim polemics. Under the influence of Reland, Sale sees Muhammad (peace be upon him) as an incredible law-giver. He writes to John Carteret: "as Muhammad gave his Arabs the best religion he could, as well as the best laws, preferable, at least to those of the ancient law-givers, I confess I cannot see why he deserves not equal respect, though not with Moses or Jesus Christ, whose laws came really from heaven, yet with Minos or Numa."²⁴

Sale does not agree to Prideaux's view that Muhammad (peace be upon him) abolished idolatry but gave Arabs a religion that was altogether as bad as idolatry itself. He asserts that Muhammad (peace be upon him) brought the knowledge of true God to the pagan Arabs. Likewise, he censures other popular Christian tropes seen in the polemical writings such as polygamy and propagation of Islam by the sword. As to the idea of polygamy, he argues that Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not introduce polygamy but it was something already in vogue in Jewish and Arab tradition. About the allegation of sword, he posits that all armed prophets have been victorious in establishing

their institutions and the unarmed ones have never succeed in their missions.²⁵

For Sale, Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a great reformer who broke not only pagan idols at Mecca but also the false idol worshiped by misguided Christians.²⁶ Sale's view of Islam had a great influence on how Voltaire perceived Muhammad (peace be upon him) Mission and accomplishments. Contrary to his former view of Muhammad (peace be upon), he came to appreciate Muhammad as a leader who raised the Bedouins of the desert to new heights. He united them under his leadership and gave them the concept of a new God and new law. Voltaire borrowed passages from Sale's preface to the translation of the holy Quran and presented Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a great law-giver like prominent lawmakers of other nations.

Voltaire writes that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was possessed of remarkable talents that made him superior to his countrymen. He was blessed with great eloquence who embellished his rhetoric with amazing stylistic features. He was characterized by strong resolution and fearlessness like Alexander.²⁷ Voltaire encapsulates the moral system of Islam in the following words: "court him who discards thee; give to him who taketh from thee; forgive who have offended thee; do good to all; and never dispute with the ignorant. Though he thinks that the holy Quran has contradictions, anachronism and absurdities, he admits that there are some passages which are truly sublime."²⁸

²² Burman, Thomas E. "Ludovico Marracci at Work: The Evolution of His Latin Translation of the Qur'ān in the Light of His Newly Discovered Manuscripts. With an Edition and a Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Sura 18." (2018): 643-645.

²³ Tolan, John. *Faces of Muhammad: Western perceptions of the prophet of Islam from the middle ages to today*. Princeton University Press, 2019.65

²⁴ George Sale, *The Koran: Commonly Called the Al Koran of Mohammed*. American Book Exchange, 1880. 30-31

²⁵ Ibid. pp 37-38

²⁶ Spellberg, Denise. *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the founders*. Vintage, 2014. 81-82

²⁷ Voltaire, François de. "Essay on Universal History, 4 vols."

²⁸ Ibid. pp.41-50

He gives an account of Hijrah and Muhammad success at brining the warring Arab tribes under the banner of Islam and defeating the Romans and Persians. After his long spell of conquests, when he fell ill at the age of sixty-three, he said: I'm ready to make reparation for injustice and violence, if I have committed any. On this a man came forward and demanded the restitution of his money. His money was returned immediately and the prophet passed away a few moments after that "with the character of a great man even in the opinion of those men who knew him to be an imposter, and revered as a prophet by all the rest."²⁹

A critical reading of Votaire's works explicitly reveal that the Muhammad of *Essai sur les moeur* is very different from the Muhammad of *Le Fanatisme , ou Mahomet le prophete*; now he is cast as a biblical figure, an epitome of enthusiasm not that of fanaticism. For Voltaire, he achieved greater things by his conquests than the Jews who refused to mingle with the conquered people. He maintains that the followers of Muhammad (peace be upon him) conducted themselves with tremendous enthusiasm, generosity and boldness in such matters.³⁰ Voltaire concludes that the adherents of Muhammad (peace be upon him) are superior to the Jews.

Voltaire asserts that Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not establish a new religion, but renewed an old one: he invited pagan Arabs to the Unitarian dogma and restored the religion of Abraham, to whom he traced back his lineage. He taught pure monotheism which he believed was disfigured in the rest of the religions. Here Voltaire quotes the following verse of the holy Quran: Allah knows and you do not know. Abraham was neither a Christian nor Jew, but he

was of the true religion. His heart was resigned to God, and was not at all an idolater.³¹

In *Essai sur les moeur*, Muhammad (peace be upon him) appears more successful than Moses; and greater than Alexander too. He presents Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a great man, a touchstone against whom others' greatness is measured.³² He is a monarch, legislator, conqueror and pontiff with remarkable accomplishments. He compares English loyalists with Muhammad (peace be upon him) and concludes that the latter has achieved infinitely greater objectives. Comparing Muhammad (peace be upon him) with the ancient lawgivers like Romulus and Theseus, he proclaims Muhammad (peace be upon him) to be light-years ahead of them.

In *Essai sur les moeur*, Muhammad (peace be upon him) is portrayed as the foil to catholic fanaticism prevalent in the medieval church. He denounces the medieval Christianity for preaching papal infallibility and disapproves of those Christian fanatics who burn heretics and motivate the followers of peace-loving Jesus to wage war against Muslims. He describes the Christian crusaders as fanatical brutes and appreciates their Muslims adversaries for their tolerance, education and refinement. According to Voltaire, Christianity and Islam moved forward on two distinct trajectories. The legislator of Islam used power and courage to establish his dogma but his religion moved towards indulgence and tolerance. Contrarily, a religion of peace and humility, preached forgiveness but got diverted to intolerance and barbarism.³³

²⁹ Ibid. pp.58-59

³⁰ Shamma, Tarek. "Ziad Elmarsafy, The Enlightenment Qur'an: the politics of translation and the construction of Islam." (2016): 98-102.

³¹ Ibid. pp. 106-107

³² Ibid. pp.16-117

³³ Shamma, Tarek. "Ziad Elmarsafy, The Enlightenment Qur'an: the politics of translation and the construction of Islam." (2016): 112

Voltaire published a fictitious dialogue between an ‘honest man’ and a Greek monk in which the monk asks the honest man about his religion. The honest man replies, ‘I worship God; I try to be fair, and I seek learning.’ On being asked about the value of the sacred Jewish scriptures, the honest man begins a diatribe against the sacred books of the Jews and gives several examples of irrational and absurd scriptural content. For instance, the splitting of the sea, the stopping of the sun for Joshua etc. He further adds that the kings have got immoral character and the narratives regarding them are nothing if not absurd. When the monk tells him he seems to have privileged the New Testament over the old one, the monk responds that he does not adore the New One either. For the honest man, the miracles produced by Jesus (peace be upon him) are very ordinary; Jesus does not elaborate the central doctrines of Christianity; God seems unable to stop Christian sectarian wrangling. The honest man laments that in Europe Christians lynch and maltreat one another. The monk agrees and thanks heaven for the fact that Christians live in peace under the Turks who persecute no one. The honest man prays that all the people in Europe may emulate the way of life that the Turks have established.³⁴

Voltaire actually directs his criticism against the irrational and repressive views and practices of the catholic church. To criticize the catholic fanaticism, he used Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a foil against catholic Christianity. In this

way he gave way to his diatribe against the policies of the church and evaded censorship at the hand of church authorities.

Ziad Elmarsafy argues that Voltaire saw a good deal of resemblance between the prophet and his own personality. He had identified several parallels: both strove for the moral reformation of their society, both were banished from their native land due to unpopularity of their ideology, both employed the persuasive power of words, both brought about a positive change in their contemporary society. In short, Voltaire saw himself as a second Muhammad (peace be upon him), struggling against his contemporary l’infame. Though he praised Confucius more, he identified more with Muhammad (peace be upon him). To him, Confucius and his teachings were suitable for the ‘polite nation’ of the Chinese; the rougher Europeans and particularly the French were in need of Muhammad (peace be upon him), or a Voltaire.³⁵

In conclusion, Voltaire actively promoted negative perceptions of Islam and vehemently satirized the personality of the prophet but when he went through Sale’s work, he realized that the hostile criticism of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was unfounded. Finally, he found much in life of Muhammad (peace be upon him) to admire and adopt in order to bring about revolutionary changes in his contemporary degenerate French society.

³⁴ Gunny, Ahmad. *Prophet Muhammad in French and English Literature: 1650 to the Present*. Kube Publishing Ltd, 2015. 136-137

³⁵ Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur’an*, pp.99-120