

Book Review

John Tolan, *The Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today*, Princeton University Press (2019).

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Following the outbreak of Crusades, “Islam” and “the West” have become increasingly hostile to each other that on the part of the West, a new discipline, Orientalism consequently emerged portraying Islam in a bad light as manifested in various cultural and intellectual products such as paintings, books, movies, and documentaries. The antagonism intensified further after the 9/11 attacks and with the widespread of Islamophobia, acts of terrorism committed by some so-called Muslim fundamentalists, and the emergence of groups like ISIS and Talibans, the image of Islam suffered even more that today it tends to be viewed as a religion of terror by many non-Muslims throughout the world.

Controversial polemics regarding Islam in the West, particularly in Europe, have existed for a long time and this continues until today. In the Western narratives, attempts have often been made to find flaws in Islam which were then presented in media and academia in a misleading and distorted manner. Of these narratives, Orientalist and modern Islamophobic approaches stand out in depicting the negative image of Islam. However, in the 21st century, the narratives gradually changed as the concept of religious unity gained attention leading to a new approach in the West hinting on the importance of peace and interreligious dialogues, and the need for better understanding and respect for other religions.

Prof. Tolan’s book addresses the political rivalry between two major religions, Islam and Christianity with some significant historical events

such as the occupation of Jerusalem, the rise of the Ottoman Empire and the advent of colonialism being highlighted as contributory factors for the changed image of the Prophet Muhammad from an imposter to a notable hero. This book is one of the alternative writings that fulfil the gap in European scholarship regarding Western perceptions of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, who was known in the West as either Machomet, Mahomet, Mathome, Mafometus, Mouamed or Mahoma throughout the course of Christian-Muslim relations right from the Middle Ages until modern times. In this work, the author, who specialises in the European and Muslim world histories, deals with the Orientalists' perceptions of the Prophet Muhammad, discussing some historical contexts in Europe that shaped the formulations of such images.

The beginning of the book provides us with illustrations of the various early negative European perceptions of the Prophet Muhammad such as an imposter and trickster. Conflicts within the corrupted clergy system, intense friction between Catholics and Protestants coupled with political upheavals in Europe however, led to the change in the image of the Prophet Muhammad that he was depicted as a religious reformer, a lawmaker as well as an inspirational leader even for the Europeans. The change took effect as the Christians wanted to uphold the simplicity of Christianity and purify their own religious views by making use of the reformed image of Islam and the Prophet which promoted the essence of monotheism. In the book, various issues are also discussed which include religious denominations, political conflicts between the Muslims and Christians since the beginning of the crusades, colonialism and the emergence of the idea of religious toleration.

The author analyses how the Prophet Muhammad and Islam are depicted in Christian epics, debates and books as the Europeans justified their colonial endeavors along with their political propaganda. Tolan maintains that instead of scrutinising the Prophet Muhammad from the lens of Muslims, he is interested in the evolution of the image of the Prophet propagated by Europeans throughout the Christian-Muslim relations. He noted that while Europeans of the earlier period sought to find errors in the Prophet and his religion, later scholars however envisaged the Prophet Muhammad as a true reformer instead

of an imposter, hence signifies the transformation of the Western image of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in Europe.

The transformation of knowledge with the democratisation of reading and writing in the European continent, especially in Britain and in France, during the 17th and 18th centuries compelled the Europeans to look at the role of the Prophet differently. This led to the production of several volumes of books and translations of the Quran analysing the origins of Islam and the mission of the Prophet Muhammad based on their understanding through time and space. As Western scholars came into contact with Muslims, it familiarised them with the Islamic perspective and this in turn helped them to understand the Prophet differently resulting in more positive images being portrayed through books, pictures and drama plays.

The Faces of Muhammad consists of nine chapters. The first chapter introduces an image of the Prophet as an idol. It discusses the origins of Islam as a religion of Saracens, a group of pagan idolaters who worshiped the idol called 'Mohamet'. The Christians opposed the imaginary idol-worshiping religion of Saracens as this teaching was contrary to the principles of Christianity.

Chapter 2 confers the image drawn by the Europeans of the Prophet Muhammad as an imposter and trickster. In this chapter, the author describes how Europeans in the 12th century until the 16th century, based on their own understanding, viewed the revelation transmitted to the Prophet.

Chapter 3 discusses the change in the image of the Prophet in Europe due to the coming of Muslims to Spain. While the Europeans actively wrote condemnatory remarks on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in preventing people from embracing Islam as they had a political agenda in uniting Christianity under one kingdom, at the same time, the works of Moriscos were studied and Muslim sources caught their attention for a more objective or balanced analysis of the Prophet Muhammad.

As highlighted in chapter 4, with the expansion of the Turks to European lands, Europeans began feeling insecure and thus started to blame themselves having been imbued by the idea that they must have committed a sin and the Turkish invasion was their punishment sent by God. Indeed, in their views, the emergence of the Turks was one of God's

punishments for the Christian schism into different sects, the Catholics and the Protestants. The two sects had involved in severe conflicts that spread across Europe, breaking apart the European religious unity. At the same time, Islam continuously became the subject of debate along with the Catholic and Protestant arguments.

Moving to chapter 5, Tolan highlights the change of the image of the Prophet Muhammad in the 17th century. A British author, Henry Stubbe, was the first to suggest the Prophet as an influential religious reformer, whose teachings curbed corrupted monotheism emanating from for instance, the Christian clergy system. He believed that the Prophet promoted pure monotheism through the principle that a human being should be responsible for his own relationship with God and no one else.

The appraisal of the Prophet Muhammad as the champion of true monotheism in Islam started in France as explained in chapter 6. Napoleon Bonaparte learnt about Islam and saw the “beauty” in the religion. He even drew inspiration from the Prophet as he saw him as a great statesman and hero. Some scholars in the meantime, were amazed by other aspects of the Prophet’s personality, particularly his modest lifestyle and generosity, as discussed in chapter 7.

Chapter 8 deals with how European Jews started to realise that their teachings were quite close to Islam, that certain Islamic teachings were similar to their own Talmud causing some to admit that the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad led to a pure monotheism. Starting in the 19th century during which modernisation was at its final stage, several Orientalists such as Montgomery Watt and Hans Kung set an initiative to understand Islam and in doing so, had criticised the Christians for being too exclusive without recognising the existence of other religious beliefs and practices.

Tolan concludes that all religions deserve respect, and no religion should be degraded by other beliefs. The world would then become a peaceful place if religious peace existed, as explained in the last chapter of the book.

Few solutions and guidelines are drawn for the public to accept and interact with the followers of other religions. Overall, the author successfully described how the European perceptions of the Prophet

Muhammad slowly changed through time due to the impacts of political and religious turmoil taking place in Europe.

In an unbiased manner, this book reveals the less known historical contexts of European views and debates for the various images of the Prophet Muhammad as an idol, a trickster, a great lawmaker and a reformer. These narratives reflect the Orientalists' viewpoints and their interpretations of the image of the Prophet based on some historical events and their impacts on the internal dynamics, thoughts and politics in/of Europe. The availability of sources, literacy rate, political and religious developments have been the main reasons for why the image of the Prophet Muhammad kept evolving over time. Apart from the contrasting images i.e., negative and positive, there is also a neutral image of the Prophet projected by a few prominent figures in the Western academia.

Not focusing on the dark side and the negative views only makes this book quite different and unique compared to other writings. The discussions on Islam and the Prophet seem to remain relevant and fascinating to European scholars until today. Even though the friction between Islam and the West will likely continue, this book could ease the effort towards an improved relation between them.

Furthermore, in my opinion, this book is as much of value for non-Muslims as it is for Muslims. It provides a much-needed understanding of how the perceptions of Islam in Europe have evolved through time and they are not totally monolithic. It is also of interest to Muslim readers as it explains in depth how the perceptions of Islam, the Prophet and the Muslims in general are very much connected to European issues and fears.