

The Image of Prophet Muhammad - PBUH - as seen by the West

Through research in many websites, I came out with the following findings I wish to share with every male and female Muslim so that they become aware of some truths and conspiracies about Islam

The Image of the Prophet as seen by the West

There is no such justice-pursuing religion as Islam; and there has never been a person who enjoyed such highest character and moral standards as the Prophet did. Yet the religion mostly targeted from all directions and even from within is no other than Islam, and the person who is unjustly subjected to endless slanderous campaigns is no other than the Prophet (peace and blessing be upon him). Examples of this smear campaign against Islam and the Prophet abound: Pope Benedict's citing of a quotation linking Islam to violence, during a lecture in September 2006; the Danish cartoons; the Dutch film, "Fitna"; the cartoons soon to be released by an Iranian based in the West about the Prophet and his wives; the statements made by Priest Jerry Fallwell, the televangelist Pat Robertson, Priest Franklin Graham, Priest Jerry Fienz, etc. These and other disgraceful attitudes towards the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) can be ascribed to the West's cultural heritage and religious and civilizational mindset.

To understand the cultural and religious background of the West's stand with regard to Islam and the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), it is necessary to learn about the Western perceptions about the Prophet, how they were like in the past, their motives, their sources, how they evolved, who framed them and why?

Western Perceptions about the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him)

The birth of Islam came as a deep shock, which has shaken the West upside down, cast doubt on its capabilities, confused its calculations and caused it to revisit itself and the other.

For the West, Islam represented two Threats:

First Threat:

The first threat was a religious one, for the West viewed Islam as “the greatest religious threat”, which requires response and resistance. Orientalist Montgomery Watt considers that, for Judaism and Christianity, the emergence of Islam presented a sort of religious and historical challenge, and that Islam destroyed the structural, theological system of Europe.

Second Threat:

This one is worldly and cultural. It consisted in Islam’s strong influence in Medieval Ages, which covered the various walks of life in the West: livelihood, trade, economy, politics, literature, science, philosophy. After its awakening from the first shock, the West decided to take the “appropriate” attitude towards this new religion. Europe’s attitude may be summed up in two things:

First: the need to learn from Islam being more powerful and more knowledgeable.

Second: the need to confront it as an alien and hostile religion. Orientalist Alexy Jurafsky considered that the attitude of Christians towards Islam was emotional and spiritually intolerant, because they saw in Islam a “challenge” that requires response, resistance and even special attention. They believed that to achieve a successful management of conflict with the faith of this dangerous, strong rival religion (Islam), there was need to study it.

This attitude resulted in the following:

The principle of conflict between the West and East emerged;

Translations of the Quran appeared essentially to know about the “the new religion” and deconstruct its intellectual mechanisms;

Spread of missionary works among Muslims. Among the leading figures of missionary works was Spanish Franciscan Priest Ramon Lull, who devised a comprehensive plan for training of professional missionary staff.

Planning to wage global wars (crusades) on the Islamic lands to subjugate them by force.

Birth of what has become known as “Islamology” (study of Islam), as part of the strategic colonialist plans to divide up the Islamic world.

Formation stage of Western Perceptions about Islam

The emergence of Islam per se was seen as a challenge to the West. Phobia of Islam grew further with the collapse of the Roman Empire in Sham (modern day Syria and Lebanon) and North Africa, and the Byzantine Empire in South Turkey. Yet the worst disaster began, according to Westerns, with the liberation of Cyprus and Andalusia, and when Islamic knowledge spread across neighbouring quarters and its influence brought to bear on the European mind. History also records that Paul Alvarus of Cordoba complained that “young Christians read and study with enthusiasm Arab books, they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise Christian literature as unworthy of attention.”

These factors combined led the West to study Islam for many reasons, including:

- To benefit from Islam’s strengths;
- To deconstruct it from within;
- To tarnish the image of Islam within Western societies.
- To shake Muslims’ faith in their religion.

Why do we study the old Western perceptions about the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him?

Do not be surprised, Dear Reader, to learn that present-day Western perceptions about Islam and the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, are nothing but a continuation of the past. In his book entitled "Islam: Europe and Empire", British Orientalist Norman Daniel considers that contemporary Europeans inherited from their Medieval ancestors a broad range of wrong ideas about Islam, which was to change gradually and only in its external aspects.

What are the structural components which contributed to forming these stereotypes?

First: (Myths)

Myths and fairytales constitute the major sources that form the image of Islam in the eyes of the West.

Second: Theological Studies igniting Hatred and Animosity

Westerns admit that most of the writings on Islam were put by the clergy out of hatred and ignorance. They rely on mythological sources which were profuse in Europe, such as the accounts of Hajjis (pilgrims), heroes, and the clergy who happened to visit the Islamic land. Monks and priests of Byzantium, like Theophan the Confessor, played a key role in cultivating falsehoods and ideological perceptions about Islam. Alexy Jurafsky believes that most of the knowledge about Islam was reported by those clergy.

Third: Rational Studies (Fear, Anxiety and Confusion)

These studies attempted to benefit from and often plagiarize Islamic knowledge. Far from portraying the true image of Islam, these studies yielded to the writings of the clergy.

Fourth: Writings by Oriental (Arab) Christians about Islam

The writings of Oriental Christians, like John of Damascus, who harboured hatred of Islam and the Prophet, provided an important substance for Westerns as they consider them to be very authoritative. In this regard, Alexy Jurafsky writes that in many of their aspects and guidelines, these perceptions were derived from the Oriental Christian interpretation of the Islamic faith.

The Image of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) as seen by the West in Medieval Times

The image of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) in the West is the product of a hybrid historical substance consisting of myths, superstition, ideologically-motivated writings by a clergy filled with hatred, and the profuse works of vengeful Oriental Christians. To their dismay, the resulting image they attempted to portray about Islam and the Prophet proved to be grotesque and incongruous as admitted by leading Orientalists.

Here we shall review the images which prevailed in the West during Medieval Times, and which mostly contributed to the making of the core contemporary Western perceptions about the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him).

First Image: the Prophet of Islam was Christian![]

Christians tried to find a Christian background for the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). They claimed that the Prophet had been a Christian priest before he became a "heretic". Alexy Jurafsky states that the Prophet was seen by Christians as a "heretic" or a "fake prophet". A legend widely circulated among Christians about the Prophet is that he was a disciple of monk Sergius Bahira and that as soon as he got as much knowledge as he needed he quitted him and declared himself a prophet. Orientalist Alexy Jurafsky observes that this legend was transmitted from Oriental Christians to Byzantine Christians then to European Christians. In his book "L'Islam, Religion et communauté", L. Gardet writes that one of the widely circulated legends about Muhammad in Medieval Europe had it that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was an Italian Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church whose name was Mohamet,

and who fled to the Arab Peninsula and founded his new religion to spite the Pope and the Rome Church after he had been denied accession to the Papacy. The fresco, which is a mural painting painted in 1415 in San Petronio Basilica (Italy), depicts the prostrate, naked body of Muhammad being dragged into hell and devoured by demons. Unfortunately, this painting done out of hatred and racism is still conserved to date. It stands as a souvenir of hatred and ignorance. (I refrain from publishing this painting as this would contribute to the offence).

Second image: Accusing the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) of sorcery

Another image that was entrenched in the Western mindset had it that the Prophet was an anti-Christ sorcerer. In his book *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, R.W. Southern observes that among the widely spread legends in Medieval Europe about the Prophet was that he was a great sorcerer who managed through sorcery and deception to destroy the Church. Such view was confirmed by Alexy Jurafsky who states in his book *Islam and Christianity* that the West associated the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) with a giant devil power which gave him a fabulous capacity to invent miraculous wonders.

Third Image: Accusing the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) of being Satan or Antichrist

Another idea that blossomed in the mind of Medieval Westerns was to accuse the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) to be the Devil in person, and Islam to be a new brand of heresy, paganism and sensuality. Ph. Hitti, in his book *Islam and the West*, refers to an infamous story of the Dominican monk who visited Baghdad and invented the legend that as Satan failed to reverse the spread of Christianity, he invented a new book, "the Quran", and chose Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) to perform the role of Antichrist. There is a wooden sculpture in the Church of Our Dear Lady in Dendermonde, Belgium, which depicts Muhammad on the ground, clutching the Koran and being trampled on by angels. It represents the triumph of Christianity over Islam. This sculpture still displayed until today bears witness to the extent of hatred and racism against the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). (I refrain from publishing a picture of this sculpture as this would contribute to the offence).

Fourth Image: Accusing the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) of being an Advocate of Sensuality

In his *Divina Commedia-Inferno*, Dante Alighieri, an Italian poet who lived in the 13th century, described the Prophet (Peace and blessings be upon him) as one of “disseminators of scandal and schism”, and went on depicting the Prophet in hell as being cut in half vertically by the Devil, for dissemination of disgusting sensuality. Jurafsky states that the claim that Muslims were pervert or even that the Quran itself showed complacency and laxity with sodomy were widely circulated in the books written by Europeans about Islam in the Middle Ages.

Fifth image: accusing the Prophet (peace and blessing be upon him) of being an Imposter

One of the most circulated accusations about the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) during Medieval Times was that he was an imposter capable of producing some magic and misleading tricks. In his book *Islam and the West*, Ph.Hiiti reports that one of the most popular legendary stories narrated about Muhammad was that the Prophet had trained pigeons to pick out peas from his ears, so that he could by this trick bluff his people that the Holy Ghost in the shape of a dove was revealing God's Revelation to him. This legend did not fool only the laymen in Europe, but was also circulated even among the greatest intellectuals and men of letters. During the 15th century, it was quoted by English poet John Lydgate, historian Walter Roly and even Shakespeare!

Did this Image change in the 18th onwards?

Regrettably, this stereotypical image of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) did not change. The same image that prevailed during Medieval Times was replicated in subsequent centuries. Voltaire, the well-known Enlightenment philosopher wrote a play which he entitled *Fanaticism, or Mahomet*. He depicts the Prophet as being “a fanatic, violent deceiver and a shame on human race who has become hailed as a king... he embodies the threat of fanaticism”.

In his book *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, the leading Orientalist Montgomery Watt observes that Medieval Europeans portrayed Islam as a faith invented by Muhammad, one which is marked by lies and deliberate distortion of truths, a religion of coercion, moral decadence, and leniency with lust and sensual pleasures, a religion of violence and cruelty. British researcher Karen Armstrong remarks that hostility towards Islam in the West is part of the West value system.

And the last question is: did this image change in our current times?

As a last word, I should say that Islam glorifies Jesus and his mother (peace be upon them). The Quran has a Surat "Chapter" named after Maryam, in recognition and respect of her status and her son's. The Quran did not come with a Surat bearing the name of Prophet Muhammad's mother, "Amina". Islam prohibited swearing at fake goddess so that Allah will not be sworn at. Islam also prohibited insulting the leaders of disbelief so that their kinship will not be harmed. Islam came to pardon and forgive the staunchest of its enemies. How come then that the civilized West of modern times is no different in its perceptions and judgments about Islam from what has been in Medieval Times?

O Allah you are All-Sufficient for Your beloved Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, true to Your Word "Truly! We will suffice you against the scoffers". All we can say is "We are to Allah and to whom we shall return, and there is no power or strength save by Allah".