

## II European accounts of Muḥammad's life

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For centuries, Muḥammad has been at the center of European discourse on Islam. For medieval Crusades chroniclers, he was either a golden idol that the so-called Saracens adored or a shrewd heresiarch who had worked false miracles to seduce the Arabs away from Christianity; both these descriptions made him the root of Saracen error and implicitly justified the Crusade to wrest the Holy Land from Saracen control. Such polemical images, forged in the Middle Ages, proved tenacious; in slightly modified forms, they provided the dominant European discourse on the Prophet through the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, variants of the image of Muḥammad as an impostor have been used to justify European colonialism in Muslim lands and to encourage the work of Christian missionaries. Yet beginning in the eighteenth century, some European authors present the Prophet in a favorable light: as an inspired religious reformer and great legislator. These authors often have had polemical agendas, for example, lambasting Christian intolerance by contrasting it with the tolerance of Muḥammad and his followers. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some scholars have tried to seek out the historical Muḥammad (just as contemporary scholars sought the historical Jesus) behind the hagiographical sources. In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, various European and American Christians have recognized that Muḥammad has played a positive role in spiritual history; some have called for their churches to recognize his status as a prophet. At the same time, the Prophet remains an object of polemical discourse, as the affair of the Danish caricatures has so clearly shown. Muḥammad occupies an important and ambivalent place in the European imagination: he figures as the embodiment of Islam, alternatively inspiring fear, loathing, fascination, and admiration but rarely indifference.

MAHOMET THE TRICKSTER IN TWELFTH-CENTURY  
LATIN LIVES

When northern Europeans first wrote about Muḥammad, they imagined him as an idol worshipped by pagan Saracens. The eleventh-century nun Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, for example, portrays 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, 'Umayyad Caliph of Córdoba, as worshipping golden idols. In the *Chanson de Roland*, a French epic poem of the early twelfth century, Saracens worship a trio of idols: Apollin, Tervagant, and Mahomet. Many of the chroniclers of the First Crusade (1095–1099) imagine that their Saracen enemies are idolaters who have erected a statue of their god Mahomet in the "temple of the lord" (i.e., the Dome of the Rock).

Somewhat more accurate information about the Prophet of Islam was available in some European monastic libraries, notably in the ninth-century Latin translations of Theophanes' *Chronographia*, written in Constantinople around 815.<sup>1</sup> Theophanes claims that the Jews had first flocked to Muḥammad, thinking that he was their long-awaited Messiah; when they saw him eating camel (a forbidden food), they realized their error, yet some of them stayed with him out of fear "and taught him illicit things directed against us Christians."<sup>2</sup> Theophanes describes Muḥammad's marriage to Khadija and his travels in Palestine, where he sought out the writings of Jews and Christians. Muḥammad had an epileptic seizure, and at this Khadija became distressed; he soothed her by telling her: "I keep seeing a vision of a certain angel called Gabriel, and being unable to bear his sight, I faint and fall down." Khadija sought the advice of "a certain monk living there, a friend of hers (who had been exiled for his depraved doctrine)"; this heretical monk seems to be based on the Christian figures Baḥīrā and Waraqa of Muslim tradition. The monk told Khadija that Muḥammad was indeed a prophet to whom the angel Gabriel came in visions. Theophanes recounts that Muḥammad promised to all who fell fighting the enemy a paradise full of sensual delights: eating, drinking, and sex. He said "many other things full of profligacy and stupidity." Theophanes' *Chronographia*, which Anastasius the Librarian translated into Latin in the 870s, was to become one of

<sup>1</sup> Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 464–5; Anne Proudfoot, "The Sources of Theophanes for the Heraclian Period," *Byzantion* 44 (1974): 386; John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 64–6.

<sup>2</sup> Theophanes, *Chronicle*, 464.

the few widely available sources about Muḥammad in Western Europe before the twelfth century, supplying information, for example, in the monastic chronicles of Sigebert of Gembloux and Hugh of Fleury.<sup>3</sup>

Several twelfth-century Latin poets created more elaborate and more colorful portraits of Muḥammad as a wily pseudoprophet, founder of a heretical sect. Gautier de Compiègne composed his *Otia de Machometi*, a poem in 1,090 Latin verses, in the first half of the twelfth century; in 1258, Alexandre du Pont adapted Gautier's poem into French verse, as *Le roman de Mahomet*.<sup>4</sup> Gautier no doubt was familiar with Anastasius's text; it is also possible that he had read the brief biography of Muḥammad that Guibert of Nogent had inserted into his chronicle of the First Crusade.<sup>5</sup>

Gautier seeks to denigrate Islam for readers who have little chance of ever meeting a Muslim. This gives him great liberty to make Muḥammad conform to the stereotype of the scheming heresiarch and to paint him as a colorful scoundrel. Muḥammad (or Machomes, as he calls him) was a young man full of talent, expert in all the malefic arts. The servant of a rich widow, he longed to marry her to make himself rich. Here Gautier, like Theophanes, alludes to Muḥammad's marriage with Khadija; their union is presented as scandalous because the couple is mismatched in age and in social standing. Machomes manipulated the widow, proffering dire predictions to dissuade her from marrying a young nobleman; he tried to convince her to marry him, speaking like "a second Cicero"; she feared lest their marriage become the butt of lewd jokes: people might say, "She who used to be on top is now lying underneath."<sup>6</sup> But Machomes succeeded in bribing local notables, who persuaded the widow to marry her servant.

Shortly after the wedding, the bride discovered that her new husband suffered from epileptic attacks: he fell at her feet, writhing and salivating. She fled into her bedroom, wept, and ripped her clothing. When Machomes came to, she heaped insults on him, expressing her shame at the marriage she had made. In Medieval Europe, epilepsy was often considered a symptom of demonic possession. Yet Machomes

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 33–5, 86–9.

<sup>4</sup> Gautier de Compiègne, *Otia de Machomete*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens published by Y. G. Lepage along with Lepage's critical edition of Alexandre du Pont's *Roman de Mahomet*, (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977). Reginald Hyatte, trans., *The Prophet of Islam in Old French: The Romance of Muhammad (1258) and The Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997). References are to line numbers of Gautier's Latin text.

<sup>5</sup> See Tolan, *Saracens*, chap. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Gautier, *Otia de Machomete*, ll. 170 and 246.

cleverly tricked his wife, claiming that he, in fact, had been visited by the archangel Gabriel, who had revealed a new law to him. Skeptical, she declares that she will go ask the advice of a holy hermit who lives nearby. Machomes gets to the hermit before his wife and threatens him with death if he does not comply with his orders. The terrified hermit thus proclaims that Machomes is a great prophet. Machomes' wife, thrilled, humbly begs her husband's pardon. She brags to her friends about her husband's prophetic gifts; in this way, Machomes gains unequaled fame.

To convert the people to his cause, a heresiarch must accomplish miracles – false ones of course but plausible enough to dupe the naive women and men of his entourage. Machomes hides milk and honey in holes that he had dug at the summit of a mountain. Then he bids the assembled people to climb the mountain with him, where he prays that God “[d]eign to give the world an unaccustomed sign.”<sup>7</sup> He then “finds” the milk and honey, which all accept as true signs of divine favor. Emboldened by this miracle, Machomes again prays to God:

We pray that, just as high on a mountain  
Christ gave laws to his disciples  
And as Moses received the Law on a mountain,  
Written by the finger of God,  
Just so may God deign to certify in writing  
The law by which he wishes humanity to live.<sup>8</sup>

Machomes compares himself to Moses, a lawgiver to his people. This provides him with the occasion for another trick miracle. He had raised a bull, training it to come kneel down before him as soon as he heard his master's voice. He wrote a book of laws and attached it to the horns of the bull, which he then hid in a cave at the summit of the mountain. When the young bull heard Machomes raise his voice in prayer, he emerged from his cave and kneeled before his master; the people, astonished at this new sign of divine favor, removed the book from the bull's horns and accepted it as their new, God-given law. This law abolished baptism, reinstated circumcision, and authorized each man to marry up to ten wives.

Gautier does not deny that Muḥammad produced miracles: on the contrary, his miracles are more numerous and more diverse than those attributed by the Ḥadīth (the Qur'ān, of course, attributes none to the Prophet). But for Gautier, they are false miracles, the result of tricks

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., l. 809.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ll. 831–6.



Figure 6. Muḥammad preaching with a dove on his shoulder, revealing the Qur'ān on the horns of a bull. From a French translation of Boccaccio, *De casibus*; manuscript from the early fifteenth century (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. 226, fol. 243).

and magic; they explain how a vile heresiarch recruited numerous disciples. The fraud practiced by the founder of the so-called law of the Saracens shows readers the diabolical nature of this law and explains its formidable successes. The readers are omniscient: they clearly see that the miracles are false, yet they can see how they have duped a multitude of credulous Saracens.

Machomes was so admired by his followers that they considered him a God. But he eventually died and, Gautier affirms, received the punishment he deserved in hell. The false prophet was given an unusual funeral:

And his people, believing that his spirit to the stars  
Had passed, dared not submit his body to the earth.  
They established therefore an ark of admirable workmanship:  
In this they placed him as best they could.  
For, as is told, [the ark] seems to hang  
With Machomes' members lying inside  
So that without any support it hangs in the air,  
And without any chains holding it from above.  
And if you ask them by what artifice it does not fall,  
They erroneously repute it to Machomes' powers.  
But in fact it is covered in iron,  
Placed in the center of a square building  
Made out of magnetic rock, on all four sides  
The measurements are the same inside and out.  
By nature it attracts the iron to itself equally  
So that it is unable to fall in any direction.<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to a final, posthumous, bogus miracle, Machomes causes the naive Saracens to venerate him. Gautier places his tomb in Mecha – an appropriately named place, because the false prophet was an adulterer (*mechus*); others, he says, place his tomb in Babel, an equally appropriate place, as his effrontery was matched only by those who built the tower of Babel.<sup>10</sup> This imaginary cultic center of the Saracen world – Muḥammad's floating coffin in Babel-Mecca – is a sort of deformed mirror image of Crusader Jerusalem, an anti-Jerusalem as it were: just as Christian pilgrims honor Christ's tomb in Jerusalem, Saracen pilgrims

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ll. 1059–74.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., ll. 1077–86.

flock to the floating coffin of their false god and prophet.<sup>11</sup> This helps explain to readers the force of attraction that Islam worked on the hoards of Saracens.

For Gautier, Machomes' aim was to moderate the law to permit sexual debauchery. Just like previous Christian authors, Gautier sees Islam as an illegitimate offshoot of Christianity, a heresy, rather than a distinct religion. The law of the Saracens is part of a panoply of errors inspired by the devil, which threaten the souls of Christians and the hierarchy of the church. Other twelfth-century authors wrote similar biographical sketches of the false prophet of the Saracen, a trickster and worker of bogus miracles: Adelphus, Embrico of Mainz, Guibert of Nogent.<sup>12</sup> Confronted by the threat represented by these Saracens (and also by Waldensians, Cathars, Jews, and others), many twelfth-century authors responded with hateful calumny, choosing not to refute their adversaries but to insult and denigrate them, so that their readers would not take their ideas seriously. There were, however, other European Christians in the twelfth century who tried to compose more serious refutations of Islamic doctrines.

#### THE LEARNED ASSAULT ON A FALSE PROPHET AND HERESIARCH (TWELFTH–FIFTEENTH CENTURIES)

Beginning in the twelfth century, a handful of Christian European theologians began to study and attack Islam. Instead of painting Muḥammad as a colorful scoundrel with trained animals, they sought to study and refute the fundamental texts of Islam, in particular the Qur'ān. These writers, too, were dependent on the earlier work of Oriental Christian polemicists. The most influential of these texts was no doubt the anonymous text known as the *Risālat al-Kindī* (*Letter of al-Kindī*), a purported exchange of letters between two friends in ninth-century Baghdad: a Muslim (not named in the text but whom later tradition identified as 'Abd Allāh al-Hāshimī) writes to explain Islam to his Christian friend (traditionally known as 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī) and invites him to convert. In response, al-Kindī presents a long and detailed refutation of Islam and invites his Muslim friend to convert to Christianity. In fact, both "letters" were probably written by an anonymous Iraqi Christian in the tenth century. The Christian's letter is both polemical and apologetical: it attacks Muslim doctrine and practice, and it presents a defense of the

<sup>11</sup> On the various versions of this legend, see John Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), chap. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Tolan, *Saracens*, chap. 6.

fundamental Christian doctrines that offended Muslims (in particular, the Incarnation and the Trinity).<sup>13</sup>

A central part of his attack on Islam is an assault on the Prophet. He recounts Muḥammad's biography in an acerbic and derogatory fashion, showing all the while a good knowledge of the Qur'an and early Muslim historiography. He notes that Muḥammad had first been an idolater and had enriched himself through trade and through his marriage with Khadija. Wishing to rule over his tribe, he decided to pretend to be a prophet; his companions, gullible nomads who knew nothing of the signs of prophecy, believed him. He and his followers enriched themselves through war and pillaging. These acts, for the Christian writer, are enough to prove that Muḥammad was not a prophet, and the failures of some of the expeditions (especially the Battle of Uḥud) even more so: a true prophet would have foreseen (and avoided) defeat.

This Christian polemicist, who may well have been a monk, is particularly shocked by Muḥammad's sexual life, which he attacks with gusto. Muḥammad himself, he says, claimed to have the sexual powers of forty men. He presents a catalogue of the Prophet's fifteen wives, dwelling on the scandals surrounding Zaynab and 'Ā'isha. Did not the apostle Paul proclaim that "he that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:32–3)? Is this not even truer of a man with fifteen wives, a man, moreover, constantly involved in planning war? "How could he, with this continual and permanent preoccupation, find the time to fast, pray, worship God, meditate and contemplate eternal things and those things appropriate to prophets? I am certain that no prophet was as attached to the pleasures of this world as was your master."<sup>14</sup>

The Christian monk then explains "the signs of prophecy which oblige one to recognize the title of prophet and of apostle to him who shows them."<sup>15</sup> The two signs of prophecy are revelation of things unknown (past and future) and performance of miracles. Muḥammad

<sup>13</sup> There is no good modern edition and no English translation of this text. The text is available as *Risālat 'Abd Allāh Ibn Ismā'il al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīh Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī wa-Risālat al-Kindī ilā al-Hāshimī* (*The Apology of El-Kindi: A Work of the Ninth Century, Written in Defence of Christianity by an Arab*), ed. Anton Tien (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1885). A passable French translation, with a poor introduction, is Georges Tartar, trans., *Risālat al-Kindī* (*Dialogue islamo-chrétien sous le Calife al-Ma'mūn (813–834): Les épîtres d'al-Hashimī et d'al-Kindī*) (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1985). On this text, see Tolan, *Saracens*, 60–4.

<sup>14</sup> Tartar, *Risālat al-Kindī*, 152–3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

foretold nothing, whereas the Hebrew prophets, Christ, and the apostles did. Muḥammad produced no miracles, as the Qurʾān expressly states; the miracles attributed to him are false. In much of this, the Christian author compares (explicitly or implicitly) Muḥammad with Jesus: Christ shunning sex and worldly power, Muḥammad eagerly pursuing both; Christ prophesying true things, Muḥammad failing to foresee his defeats in battle; Christ producing miracles, Muḥammad none. He carries this contrast into his description of the Prophet's death. Muḥammad, he says, ordered that his companions not bury him after his death, for angels would come within three days to carry his body up to heaven. At his death, his disciples did as he had ordered: "after they had waited for three days, his odor changed and their hopes of his being taken up to heaven disappeared. Disappointed by his illusory promises and realizing that he had lied, they buried him."<sup>16</sup>

The Arabic text of the *Risālat al-Kindī* circulated in Arab Christian milieus in Spain, and it was to have a significant impact on Latin European views of Islam through the work of two men, Petrus Alfonsi and Peter of Cluny. Petrus Alfonsi, an Andalusian Jew who converted to Christianity and traveled and taught in Aragon, England and France, in 1110 wrote his *Dialogi contra Iudeos* (*Dialogues against the Jews*), a polemic against his former religion in which he included a chapter against Islam, derived almost entirely from the *Risālat al-Kindī*. Thirty-two years later, Peter, the abbot of Cluny, commissioned Robert of Ketton to make the first Latin translation of the Qurʾān and had other Arabic texts about Islam translated – including the *Risālat al-Kindī*.<sup>17</sup>

In the thirteenth century, Dominican missionaries undertook the evangelization of Jews and Muslims in Christian Europe, in particular in the Crown of Aragon. They founded language schools where they learned Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic; some of them studied the Talmud, the Qurʾān, and the Ḥadīth to attack these texts from a Christian point of view.

One of the fundamental Dominican texts on Islam was Ramon Martí's *De seta machometi* (written before 1257), meant to be a practical guide for Christians in theological disputes.<sup>18</sup> *De seta* is a brief text in two parts: an attack on the life and deeds of Muḥammad followed by a

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>17</sup> F. González Muñoz, *Exposición y refutación del islam. La versión latina de las epístolas de Hasimi y al-Kindi* (La Coruña: Universidade da Coruña, 2005); Tolan, *Saracens*, 148–65.

<sup>18</sup> Ramón Martí, "De seta machometi o De origine, progressu, et fine Machometi et quadruplici reprobatione prophetiae eius," ed. and Spanish trans. Josep Hernando i Delgado, *Acta Historica et Archaeologica Medievalia* 4 (1983): 9–51. On this text, see Tolan, *Saracens*, 236–9.

defense of Christianity from the charge of falsification of the Scriptures. This sequence is calculated: the attack on Muḥammad must prove that Islam is false, whereas the defense of Christian scriptures – based on the Qurʾān – is meant to prove to the Muslim that Christianity is the true religion. Muḥammad is not a true prophet, Martí claims; rather, he is one of the false prophets that Jesus announced in Matthew 7:15–16: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits.” Martí organizes his tract around this central premise. The fruits mentioned in Matthew, Martí expounds, are the signs of prophethood, which are four: truthfulness, holiness, miracles, and a true law. Martí means to show that Muḥammad meets none of these four tests.

The brunt of Martí’s attack is against the sexual foibles of Muḥammad and his followers; here he attacks Ḥadīth and especially the Qurʾān. Martí presents the Muslim paradise, full of the pleasures of eating and lovemaking, and contrasts it with the pure and austere heaven of Paul and the Gospels.<sup>19</sup> A recitation of the wives and concubines of Muḥammad is enough, for Martí, to prove that he did not lead a holy life; because holiness is the second “fruit of prophecy,” this helps prove that Muḥammad was not a true prophet but a false one.<sup>20</sup> Martí’s fourth fruit of prophecy is a good and holy law. He tries to show that the law brought by Muḥammad goes against both divine law (as mandated by Scripture) and natural law (as mandated by reason). Of the eleven Muslim laws that Martí here assails, seven involve sex and marriage: he derides polygamy as “manifestly against divine law, against natural law and against reason.”<sup>21</sup> He similarly condemns what he presents as Muslim law regarding divorce, nonvaginal intercourse, concubinage, coitus interruptus, and homosexuality.<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging that homosexuality is, in fact, illegal in Islam, he nonetheless claims that, because four witnesses are needed to convict homosexuals, Muḥammad thus “gave cause and occasion to his followers to perpetrate this crime almost without shame and fear.”<sup>23</sup> For Ramón Martí, a missionary friar under a vow of celibacy, the most false and shocking thing about Muḥammad and his followers is their sex life: polygamy, homosexuality, even sex in heaven! This obsession flavors Martí’s description of Muḥammad’s death. Martí, unlike other polemicists, eschews the horrendous tales of murder and dismemberment in favor of the Muslim story of his death, which shows the

<sup>19</sup> Martí, “*De seta*,” 30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Prophet surrounded by his loved ones, peacefully dying with his head in the lap of his beloved wife ‘Ā’isha. For Muslims, this touching scene emphasizes the Prophet’s human frailty and the love that his family and followers held for him. Yet Martí is unable to see anything but filth in this scene: “When he died he had his head between ‘Ā’isha’s breast and her chin, and she mixed her saliva with that of Muḥammad. In this way the death or end of Muḥammad was vile, unclean, and abominable. And such a death is in no way appropriate for a prophet or a messenger of God.”<sup>24</sup> In a standard Christian deathbed scene, an attentive priest would hear confession and administer communion and extreme unction, and the dying man would prepare his soul to meet its Maker. Instead of the Body of Christ, Martí seems to be implying, that Muḥammad’s last solace was the saliva of profane kisses; instead of the anointing hand of a priest, he is caressed by the breasts of a woman; instead of confessing and turning away from sin, he is clinging desperately to it.

Martí, unlike most earlier Latin polemicists, has sketched a biography of Muḥammad that Muslims would recognize as true in most of its details, gleaned as they are from Arab (and principally Muslim) sources. Yet the selection and presentation of these sources show an unshakable hostility: from the wide range of material in the Qur’ān and the works of Ibn Ishāq, al-Bukhārī, and Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, Martí focuses on what will shock a Christian clerical audience: the sex life of the Muslim prophet and Muslim laws regarding sex and marriage.

This vision of Muḥammad as a false prophet who forged a bogus revelation dominates European learned discourse on Islam well into the eighteenth century. We find it in learned polemics against the Qur’ān, such as Dominican Riccolds da Montecroce’s *Contra legem Saracenorum* or Nicholas of Cusa’s *Cribratio Alcorani*.<sup>25</sup> Fifteenth-century Renaissance humanists echo traditional polemics: Andrea Biglia paints Muḥammad as “a horrible beast of hell”; Favio Biondo describes how the Arabs were “seduced by Muḥammad’s tricks.”<sup>26</sup> Many writers mixed elements from the poetic and the learned polemical traditions: this is the case, for example, of Vincent de Beauvais and Jacques de Voragine in the thirteenth century, Giovanni Villani in the fourteenth century, or Giovanni Mario Filelfo in the fifteenth century.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>25</sup> Riccolds da Montecroce, *Libellus contra legem Saracenorum*, ed. J. Merigoux, *Memoire Domenicane*, n.s., 17 (1986): 1–144; see Tolan, *Saracens*, 251–4. Nicholas of Cusa, *De pace fidei and Cribratio Alcorani*, trans. J. Hopkins (Minneapolis: Banning, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 173, 187.

## MAHOMET THE IMPOSTOR IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Indeed, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans continued and renewed polemics against Islam and its prophet, motivated in part through fear of the expansionist Ottoman Empire – often simply referred to as the Turk. In 1543, Theodore Bibliander published, in Basel, Robert of Ketton's twelfth-century translation of the Qur'ān along with a collection of medieval polemics against Islam: the Latin translation of the *Risālat al-Kindī* and works by Riccoldo da Montecroce, Nicolas of Cusa, and others. There was even a preface by Martin Luther himself, who affirmed that there was no better way to combat the Turks than to expose the "lies and fables" of Muḥammad; Luther translated Riccoldo da Montecroce's *Contra legem Saracenorum* into German.<sup>27</sup>

In 1697, Humphrey Prideaux, an Anglican minister and Oxford-educated doctor of theology, published a work called *The True Nature of The Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet*.<sup>28</sup> Prideaux casts a critical eye on much of the legendary elements concerning the Prophet. He dismisses the stories of the bull bearing the Qur'ān on its horns and the pigeon passed off as the Holy Spirit as "idle fables not to be credited."<sup>29</sup> He similarly dispels what he identifies as other common misconceptions about the Prophet: that Muslims expected him to resurrect ("totally an error"<sup>30</sup>). When describing his burial beneath 'Ā'isha's bed, he remarks, "There he lyeth to this day, without iron coffin or loadstones to hang him in the Air, as the Stories which commonly go about him among Christians fabulously relate."<sup>31</sup> Hostile stories that seem less improbable to him, however, such as Muḥammad's epilepsy, he includes without criticism. Prideaux claims to present, in lieu of fables, the "true nature" of Muḥammad's "imposture":

The whole of this imposture was a thing of extraordinary craft, carried on with all the cunning and caution imaginable. The framing of the *Alcoran* (wherein lay the main of the cheat) was all contrived at home in as secret a manner as possible, and

<sup>27</sup> James Boyce and Sarah Henrich, "Martin Luther Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: Preface to the *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530) and Preface to Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'ān (1543)," *Word & World* 16 (1996): 250–66.

<sup>28</sup> Humphrey Prideaux, *The True Nature of the Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet with a Discourse Annex'd for the Vindication of Christianity from this Charge Offered to the Consideration of the Deists of the Present Age* (London: W. Rogers, 1697, and E. Curll, 1723). Page citations herein refer to the 1723 edition.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

nothing hazarded abroad, but the success of preaching it to the people. And in doing of this, no art or cunning was wanting to make it as effectual to the End design'd as possible: and therefore whatever stories are told of this matter, that are inconsistent with such a management, we may assure ourselves are nothing else but fables foolishly invented by some zealous Christians to blast the imposture, which needed no such means for its confutation.<sup>32</sup>

He uses a number of medieval polemical texts, citing by name Theophanes, Riccolodo da Montecroce, and others; he has consulted Robert of Ketton's twelfth-century Latin translation of the Qur'an and the other works published by Bibliander. He also relies on more recent works, including Edward Pocock's 1650 edition and translation of Bar Hebraeus's *Specimen historiae arabum*. He presents Muḥammad as dominated by the twin passions of lust and ambition, which cause him to feign a religious vocation. Unable to produce miracles, Muḥammad gains adherents through threats of violence and promises of a carnal paradise, well adapted to the hot temperaments of the inhabitants of the "torrid zone."<sup>33</sup> Prideaux is moved less by the desire to attack Islam than to defend Christianity – not from Muslims but from Deists. In the opening passages of his tract, he lambastes Deists who affirm that Christianity is an imposture; his goal is to show them a true imposture, that of Muḥammad, and then to demonstrate (in a tract published in the same volume) that Christianity is no imposture but the true religion.

Prideaux was writing at the height of the Deist movement in England. Deists and atheists attacked the founders of the three great monotheisms, taking up many of the standard polemical tropes against Muḥammad and making similar attacks on Moses and Jesus. The most elaborate and most notorious such attack was made in *Le traité des trois imposteurs* (*The Treatise of the Three Impostors*), first published in 1719.<sup>34</sup> The anonymous author lambasts the priests and rulers of ancient Greece and Rome, who took advantage of the credulity of their people to

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 38–9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>34</sup> The first edition was published in a book entitled *La vie et l'esprit de Mr. Benoit de Spinoza* (Amsterdam: Charles le Vier, 1719); it was subsequently printed under the title *Le traité des trois imposteurs* in 1721 and republished numerous times in the eighteenth century. For an English translation, based on the 1777 edition, see Abraham Anderson, *The Treatise of the Three Imposters and the Problem of the Enlightenment* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); the page numbers herein are to this translation. On this text, see S. Berti, F. Charles-Daubert, and R. Popkin, eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe*:

give their power a sacred aura and to create a cadre of rich and compliant priests. But the greatest scoundrels, for this author, are the founders of the three monotheistic religions. Moses, a magician trained in Egypt, was an "absolute despot . . . a trickster and impostor."<sup>35</sup> Jesus Christ was no better; he "got himself followed by some imbeciles whom he persuaded that the Holy Spirit was his Father; & his Mother a Virgin."<sup>36</sup> He paints Muḥammad in similar colors:

Mahomet was not a man who seemed fit to found an Empire, he excelled neither in politics nor in philosophy; he knew neither how to read nor how to write. He even had so little firmness that he would often have abandoned his enterprise if he had not been forced to stand by his wager by the skill of one of his Sectaries. As soon as he began to raise himself up & to become famous, Corais, a powerful Arab, jealous that a nobody had the audacity to deceive the people, declared himself his enemy & crossed his enterprise; but the People, persuaded that Mahomet had continual conferences with God & his Angels, brought it about that he defeated his enemy; the family of Corais had the worse of it, & Mahomet seeing himself followed by an imbecile crowd which believed him a divine man, judged he had no more need of his companion: but for fear that the latter would reveal his impostures, he wanted to prevent him, & in order to do it the more surely, he loaded him with promises, & swore to him that he only wanted to become great in order to share with him his power, to which he had contributed so much. "We are arriving," he said, "at the time of our elevation, we are sure of a great People which we have won over, we must now assure ourselves of it by the artifice which you have so happily imagined." At the same time he persuaded him to hide himself in the ditch of the Oracles.

This was a well from which he spoke in order to make the People believe that the voice of God declared itself for Mahomet who was in the midst of his proselytes. Tricked by the caresses of this traitor, his associate went into the ditch to counterfeit the Oracle in his usual fashion; Mahomet passing by at the head of an infatuated multitude, a voice was heard which said: "I

*Studies on the "Traité des trois imposteurs"* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, *Treatise*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

who am your God declare that I have established Mahomet to be the Prophet of all the nations; it will be from him that you will learn my true law which the Jews & the Christians have adulterated."

Muḥammad subsequently orders his people to fill in the ditch with stones, crushing his erstwhile rival Corais; the false prophet thus became the undisputed master of the Arabs. The anonymous author sketches a portrait of an impostor, similar to that of other European authors from the twelfth century on. Indeed, what is new is that he has applied to the lives of Moses and Jesus the same techniques of denigration and misrepresentation of religious traditions that Christian European authors had used against Muḥammad for centuries.

The portrait of Muḥammad the impostor remained the dominant image of the Prophet in European discourse, even in learned works such as Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville's *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697), or in the *Encyclopédie*.<sup>37</sup> We find it in nineteenth-century apologists of empire and mission, such as William Muir (1819–1905), who wrote a massive, erudite four-volume study on Muḥammad: "Britain must not faint," he wrote, "until her millions in the East abandon both the false prophet and the idol shrines and rally around that eternal truth which has been brought to light in the Gospel."<sup>38</sup>

#### LAWGIVER AND SAGE

Yet in the eighteenth century, other Europeans began to see Muḥammad in another light, as a statesman and legislator. Henri, Count of Boulainvilliers (1658–1722), wrote the *Vie de Mahomed*, which was published posthumously in 1730. He presents the Prophet as a divinely inspired messenger whom God employed to confound the bickering Oriental Christians, to liberate the Orient from the despotic rule of the Romans and Persians, and to spread the knowledge of the unity of God from India to Spain: "Since if the fortune of this personage was not the effect of natural means, the success could be only from God; whom the impious will accuse of having led half the world into an error, and

<sup>37</sup> Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville, *Bibliothèque orientale* (Paris: Compagnie des Libraires, 1697), 598–603; Denis Diderot and D'Alembert *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* 9 (Neufchâtel: Samuel Faulche, 1765), 864–88.

<sup>38</sup> William Muir, *The Mohammadan Controversy*, qtd. in Clinton Bennett, *Victorian Images of Islam* (London: Grey Seal Books, 1992), 111.

destroy'd violently his own revelation."<sup>39</sup> Arguing against Prideaux, he scoffs at the hostile Christian legends around the Prophet's supposed heretical Christian sidekick and denies that Muslim doctrine is irrational or that Muḥammad is a coarse impostor. On the contrary, the Prophet rejected all that was irrational and undesirable in Christianity as he found it: the cult of relics and icons, the grasping power of superstitious and avaricious monks and priests. Muḥammad "seems to have adopted and embraced all that is most marvelous in Christianity itself. So that what he retrenched, relates obviously to those abuses alone, which it was impossible he should not condemn."<sup>40</sup> Boulainvilliers's praise of Muḥammad is, of course, a ringing condemnation of the Catholic Church, an attack on the rites, privileges, possessions, and riches of the clergy. His works were banned in France and were published in Protestant Amsterdam and London. As often, when Europeans write about Muḥammad, they often do so to settle accounts with enemies closer to home.

Voltaire's instrumentalization of Muḥammad to attack the Catholic Church verges on the schizophrenic: he vilifies the Prophet as a symbol of fanaticism in his play *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète* (first staged in 1741), yet in his later historical works, he came to regard him as a sage and tolerant legislator (to contrast with Catholic fanatics).<sup>41</sup> His play, as the title shows, presents Muḥammad as the paragon of fanaticism: an impostor desiring self-glorification and beautiful women who is willing to lie, to kill, and even to wage war against his homeland to get what he desires. In an essay published with the play in 1748, he calls Muḥammad "a sublime and hearty charlatan."<sup>42</sup> Yet in later years, Voltaire increasingly praised the religious tolerance preached by Islam and its founder, in sharp contrast with the intolerance that produced the wars of religion in Christian Europe. In his sweeping historical survey, the *Essai sur les mœurs*, he presents Muḥammad as a legislator and a

<sup>39</sup> Henri de Boulainvilliers, *La vie de Mahomed* (Amsterdam: P. Humbert, 1730); Boulainvilliers, *The Life of Mahomet* (London: W. Hinchliffe, 1731), 179. The work, published posthumously, was left incomplete at the author's death; part 3, by another author, is of a quite different spirit: Muḥammad is described as an "impostor" and "false prophet" who "feigned a journey from Mecca to Jerusalem" (350).

<sup>40</sup> Boulainvilliers, *Life of Mahomet*, 222.

<sup>41</sup> Two books published in 1974 bear the same title – *Voltaire et l'Islam* – an analysis of Voltaire's play *Mahomet* by M. Badir, *Voltaire et l'Islam*, vol. 25, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1974), and a much richer study of a number of Voltaire's works by Djavad Hadidi, *Voltaire et l'Islam* (Paris: Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, 1974).

<sup>42</sup> Voltaire, "De l'Alcoran et de Mahomet," in *Les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 20B:333; the play is published in the same volume.

conqueror, not an impostor but an “enthusiast,” so carried away that he believed himself inspired by God.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, in Enlightenment France, Muḥammad is increasingly seen as a sage lawgiver and brilliant leader. Rousseau, in his *Social Contract* (1762), brushing aside hostile legends of Muḥammad as a trickster and impostor, presents him as a sage legislator who wisely fused religious and political powers.<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Pastoret published in 1787 his *Zoroaster, Confucius and Muḥammad*, in which he presents the lives of these three “great men,” “the greatest legislators of the universe,” and compares their careers as religious reformers and lawgivers.<sup>45</sup> He defends the Prophet, too often calumniated as an impostor. In fact, the Qur’ān proffers “the most sublime truths of cult and morals”; it defines the unity of God with an “admirable concision.”<sup>46</sup> The common accusations of the Prophet’s immorality are unfounded: on the contrary, his law enjoins sobriety, generosity, and compassion on his followers: the “legislator of Arabia” was “a great man.”<sup>47</sup>

In an age of empire, as Europeans subjected large swaths of the world to their dominion, Muḥammad is increasingly seen as a statesman and conqueror and, as such, is an object of admiration – frank or grudging. Edward Gibbon devotes a long chapter of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to the life of the Prophet and the Islamic conquests. The impostor figure, indeed, has not disappeared: Muḥammad “consulted the spirit of fraud or enthusiasm, whose abode is not in the heavens, but in the mind of the prophet.”<sup>48</sup> Yet he affirms that “the creed of Mohammed is free from suspicion or ambiguity; and the Koran is a glorious testimony to the unity of God.”<sup>49</sup> He echoes Boulainvilliers (whom he cites frequently) in praising Muḥammad for instituting tithes (*zakat*) for the benefit of the poor. Even in his death, the Prophet showed himself worthy of emulation, a model of humility and penance. The violence of the Qur’ān, often the object of Christian polemicists, pales in comparison with that of the Torah. On the whole, Gibbon paints a portrait of a pious man and a brilliant leader who gave his people a

<sup>43</sup> Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, chap. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social* (Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1762), 303–4.

<sup>45</sup> Emmanuel Pastoret, *Zoroastre, Confucius et Mahomet, comparés comme sectaires, législateurs, et moralistes; avec le tableau de leurs dogmes, de leurs lois et de leur morale* (Paris: Buisson, 1787), 385, l. 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 234 and 236.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 320.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 3:80.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:82.

unity and purpose that allowed them to subject half the world to their rule.

Napoléon Bonaparte, in a mixture of real admiration and calculated interest, made the Prophet into something of a role model, seeing himself as a new world conqueror and legislator walking in Muḥammad's footsteps. In May 1798, Napoléon set off to conquer Egypt at the head of a fleet of some fifty-five thousand men; in June, he captured Malta after a brief siege and continued toward Egypt. Hoping to gain the allegiance of the Egyptians and to convince them to throw off the yoke of their Ottoman masters, he addressed the following missive to the Egyptian people:

In the name of God the Beneficent, the Merciful, there is no other God than God, he has neither son nor associate to his rule.

On behalf of the French Republic founded on the basis of liberty and equality, the General Bonaparte, head of the French Army, proclaims to the people of Egypt that for too long the Beys who rule Egypt insult the French nation and heap abuse on its merchants; the hour of their chastisement has come.

For too long, this rabble of slaves brought up in the Caucasus and in Georgia tyrannizes the finest region of the world; but God, Lord of the worlds, all-powerful, has proclaimed an end to their empire.

Egyptians, some will say that I have come to destroy your religion; this is a lie, do not believe it! Tell them that I have come to restore your rights and to punish the usurpers; that I respect, more than do the Mamluks, God, his prophet Muḥammad and the glorious Qur'ān. . . . Qāḍī, shaykh, shorbagi, tell the people that we are true Muslims. Are we not the one who has destroyed the Pope who preached war against Muslims? Did we not destroy the Knights of Malta, because these fanatics believed that God wanted them to make war against the Muslims?<sup>50</sup>

It would be easy to dismiss such rhetoric as cynical and self-serving. Indeed, the following year (in autumn 1799), as he prepared to leave Egypt, he left instructions to French administrators in Egypt, explaining among other things that "one must take great care to persuade the

<sup>50</sup> Qtd. in Henri Laurens, *L'Expédition d'Égypte, 1798–1801* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 108.

Muslims that we love the Qur'ān and that we venerate the prophet. One thoughtless word or action can destroy the work of many years."<sup>51</sup>

Years later, in exile on the British island of Saint Helena, Napoléon wrote his memoirs, including the description of his Egyptian campaign. It is here he develops his portrait of Muḥammad as a model lawmaker and conqueror:

Arabia was idolatrous when Muḥammad, seven centuries after Jesus Christ, introduced the cult of the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Moses and Jesus Christ. The Arians and other sects that had troubled the tranquility of the Orient had raised questions concerning the nature of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Muḥammad declared that there was one unique God who had neither father nor son; that the trinity implied idolatry. He wrote on the frontispiece of the Qur'ān: "There is no other god than God."

He addressed savage, poor peoples, who lacked everything and were very ignorant; had he spoken to their spirit, they would not have listened to him. In the midst of abundance in Greece, the spiritual pleasures of contemplation were a necessity; but in the midst of the deserts, where the Arab ceaselessly sighed for a spring of water, for the shade of a palm where he could take refuge from the rays of the burning tropical sun, it was necessary to promise to the chosen, as a reward, inexhaustible rivers of milk, sweet-smelling woods where they could relax in eternal shade, in the arms of divine houris with white skin and black eyes. The Bedouins were impassioned by the promise of such an enchanting abode; they exposed themselves to every danger to reach it; they became heroes.

Muḥammad was a prince; he rallied his compatriots around him. In a few years, his Muslims conquered half the world. They plucked more souls from the false gods, knocked down more idols, razed more pagan temples in fifteen years, than the followers of Moses and Jesus Christ did in fifteen centuries. Muḥammad was a great man. He would indeed have been a god, if the revolution that he had performed had not been prepared by the circumstances.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Napoléon, *Campagnes d'Égypte et de Syrie* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1998), 275.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 140–1.

Bonaparte's Muḥammad is a model statesman and conqueror: he knows how to motivate his troops and, as a result, was a far more successful conqueror than was Napoléon, holed up on a windswept island in the South Atlantic. If he promised sensual delights to his faithful, it is because that is all they understood: this manipulation, far from being cause for scandal (as it had been for European writers since the twelfth century), provokes only the admiration of the former emperor.

Napoléon is ready to excuse, even to praise, parts of Muslim law that had been objects of countless polemics, including polygamy. Why did Muḥammad allow polygamy? First, explains Napoléon, it had always been a common practice in the Orient; Muḥammad actually reduced it by allowing each man a maximum of four wives. Moreover, polygamy has an important benefit:

Asia and Africa are inhabited by men of many colors: polygamy is the only efficient means of mixing them so that whites do not persecute the blacks, or blacks the whites. Polygamy has them born from the same mother or the same father; the black and the white, since they are brothers, sit together at the same table and see each other. Hence in the Orient no color pretends to be superior to another. But, to accomplish this, Muḥammad thought that four wives were sufficient. . . . When we will wish, in our colonies, to give liberty to the blacks and to destroy color prejudice, the legislator will authorize polygamy.<sup>53</sup>

Adolph A. Weinman, a German-born American sculptor, gave visual expression to the image of Muḥammad as lawgiver in his 1935 frieze in the main chamber of the U.S. Supreme Court. The Prophet is one of eighteen great lawgivers commemorated in a series that ranges from Hammurabi to John Marshall and includes Moses, Confucius, and Napoléon. Muḥammad bears an open Qur'ān in his left hand and, in his right, a sword (as do many of the rulers in the frieze).<sup>54</sup>

This image of Muḥammad as a great man, a statesman, and conqueror was a common trope in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. It allowed a relatively objective and irenic appreciation of the importance of the Prophet and of Islam on the stage of world history,

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>54</sup> Architectural notes provided by the Supreme Court (<http://www.supremecourtus.gov/about/north&southwalls.pdf>) qualify the image as "a well-intentioned attempt by the sculptor, Adolph Weinman, to honor Muhammad and it bears no resemblance to Muhammad. Muslims generally have a strong aversion to sculptured or pictured representations of their Prophet."



Figure 7. Muhammad between Charlemagne and Justinian, from the eighteen lawgivers in Adolph A. Weinman's frieze in the U.S. Supreme Court.

avoiding the bitter religious polemics that had so often colored European discourse on Islam. Yet by presenting Muḥammad as first and foremost a political and military leader, his role as an envoy of God and a model for Muslims was willfully avoided.

#### MUḤAMMAD, PROPHET FOR THE SONS OF ABRAHAM

In the twentieth century, some Christian writers rethought the role of Muḥammad in the divine plan. Instead of seeing Islam as hostile to Christian truth, they stressed the common truths recognized by both religions. Most of these writers saw Muḥammad as a positive (if at times imperfect) witness to Christian truth: Islam is hence a sort of preparation for the realization of Christian truth, an intermediate step that Muslims will transcend when they ultimately convert to Christianity. Some twentieth-century Christian writers, such as Hans Küng and Montgomery Watt, have gone further. For them, the world's great religions are not inferior to Christianity but equal to it: the Prophet Muḥammad showed his followers a spiritual path to enlightenment and salvation that is neither inferior nor superior to that of the Christian Church.

A few Europeans had previously recognized Muḥammad as a prophet; the sixteenth-century French Orientalist Guillaume Postel had affirmed that Muḥammad was a bona fide prophet and should be recognized as such by Christians.<sup>55</sup> But it is in the twentieth century, in the context of interreligious dialogue, that a number of Christians have called for recognition of the Prophet's positive role in the divine plan.

Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was a brilliant and prolific scholar of Arabic and Islam and a fervent Catholic. Massignon's writings are a strange mix of remarkable erudition, profound appreciation of Muslim piety and mysticism, and a polemical vision of Islam as an imperfect expression of Christianity.<sup>56</sup> For Massignon, Muḥammad was a sincere, divinely inspired leader who preached truth and brought his people to the worship of the one supreme God. He was by no means a false prophet but a negative prophet, a witness to indisputable but partial truths.

Various disciples of Massignon carried on his work. The Franciscan Giulio Basetti-Sani is the author of numerous books on the relations between Islam and Christianity: he tells of how he first accepted the standard Christian view of Muḥammad as "a sad instrument of Satan," yet eventually (thanks in no small part to his meeting with Massignon) came to see him as "a valid instrument for bringing about the reign of God" and called on Christians to recognize him as a prophet.<sup>57</sup> Yet for him, as for Massignon, Islam is only a partial truth, as it fails to recognize the divine nature of Christ. Basetti-Sani's goal, as expressed in the title of one of his books is to find "Jesus Christ hidden in the Qur'ān."<sup>58</sup>

Various twentieth-century authors go further than Massignon and his followers: Muḥammad is a prophet and Christians should recognize this. Montgomery Watt, the author of a landmark biographical study of the Prophet, concluded that Christians in dialogue with Muslims

<sup>55</sup> Guillaume Postel, Πανθενωσία (Basel, 1547?), 111, qtd. in W. Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 204–5.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, *Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident; comment quelques orientalistes occidentaux se sont penchés sur l'Islam et se sont formé une image de cette religion*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Mouton, 1969), 141–8; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 263–74; G. Harpigny, *Islam et Christianisme selon Louis Massignon* (Louvain la Neuve: Homo Religiosus, 1981).

<sup>57</sup> Basetti-Sani, *Il Corano nella luce di Cristo: saggio per una reinterpretazione cristiana del libro sacro dell'Islam* (Bologna: EMI, 1972), 17n; English translation is *The Koran in the Light of Christ: A Christian Interpretation of the Sacred Book of Islam* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977). Basetti-Sani, *Islam nel piano della salvezza* (Fiesole: Edizioni Cultura della Pace, 1992), 351, qtd. in C. Troll, "Changing Catholic Views," in Waardenburg, *Islam and Christianity*, 46–8.

<sup>58</sup> Basetti-Sani, *Gesù Cristo nascosto nel Corano* (San Pietro in Cariano: Il Segno, 1994).

"should reject the distortions of the medieval image of Islam and should develop a positive appreciation of its values. This involves accepting Muḥammad as a religious leader through whom God has worked, and that is tantamount to holding that he is in some sense a prophet."<sup>59</sup>

But it is no doubt the Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, who has developed in greatest detail a theological argument for such recognition. Küng begins by noting the evolution of the church's position concerning the salvation of those outside its fold. The Council of Florence in 1442 declared that no one outside the Catholic Church could be saved but was damned to the eternal flames of hell. In 1962, however, Vatican II proclaimed that "those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – they too may achieve eternal salvation."<sup>60</sup> Hence, those outside the church, including Muslims, may reach heaven. Indeed, the council expressed in particular its admiration for its two monotheistic sister religions, Judaism and Islam, praising Muslims for adoring the One God and for honoring Christ and Mary. Yet, as Küng notes, Vatican II did not mention the name of Muḥammad. What should Christians think of him? Should they recognize him as a prophet? Küng asks his reader to compare Muḥammad with the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament: Muḥammad's authority, like that of the prophets, came not from any official capacity but from a special relationship with God; he saw himself as the verbal instrument of God, addressing God's message to his people; he proclaimed God's unity and justice and demanded submission to his will; and he did all this in the midst of a spiritual and political crisis among his people. In all these things, Muḥammad acted just like the Hebrew prophets. Küng concludes:

In truth, Muhammad was and is for persons in the Arabian world, and for many others, *the* religious reformer, lawgiver, and leader; the prophet *per se*. Basically Muhammad, who never claimed to be anything more than a human being, is more to those who follow him than a prophet is to us: he is a model for the mode of life that Islam strives to be. If the Catholic Church, according to the Vatican II "Declaration on Non-Christian Religions," "regards with esteem the Muslims," then the same

<sup>59</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991), 148.

<sup>60</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16.

church must also respect the one whose name is embarrassingly absent from the same declaration, although he and he alone led the Muslims to pray to this one God, for through him this God "has spoken to humanity": Muhammad the prophet.<sup>61</sup>

This brief survey has touched on only a few of the hundreds of European writers who have written about the Prophet of Islam. In the twenty-first century, European scholars, journalists, novelists, and cartoonists continue to be fascinated with the figure of Islam; their portraits show the same ambivalent mix of revulsion, attraction, curiosity, fascination, and admiration.

For centuries, Islam has been Christendom's *frère ennemi*: a rival, neighbor civilization whose roots tapped deep into a common heritage of Greco-Roman-Persian antiquity and of Jewish monotheism. When Christians have reflected on Islam as a religion, they have often focused on its prophet and founder, making him either the embodiment of error or a symbol of religious freedom and tolerance. European discourse concerning Muḥammad is often best understood as a deforming mirror: it often tells us more about the hopes and fears of the writer than of the elusive figure of seventh-century Arabia.

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<sup>61</sup> Hans Küng, "Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam," in *Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of A Dialogue*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 3:161–75. See also Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007). Troll, "Changing Catholic Views," 56–61; David Kerr, "'He Walked in the Path of the Prophets': Toward Christian Theological Recognition of the Prophethood of Muḥammad," in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and W. Haddad (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 426–46.

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