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WESTERN SĪRAH LITERATURE FROM INCEPTION TO CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study investigates the varied approaches of Western scholars and writers toward the life and character of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) under the title, "*Western Sīrah Literature from its Inception to Contemporary Developments: A Historical Analysis*". It addresses the deep-rooted stereotypes and polemical narratives in Western discourse, which often depicted the Prophet negatively, framing him as a figure of opposition and "the Other." These portrayals persisted from medieval times through the European Renaissance, as seen in works by figures like Dante, Chaucer, and Milton. The research highlights the shift in these perspectives over time. Early Western polemics against Islam and the Prophet influenced Islamic discourse significantly, but by the 18th and 19th centuries, voices like George Sale challenged these entrenched biases. Sale's translation of the Qur'ān marked a significant break from medieval depictions of the Prophet as the "anti-Christ". In modern times, many Western academics have adopted more nuanced approaches, critiqued Orientalism and contributed to a better understanding of Islamic culture and history. This article emphasizes the work of contemporary non-Muslim scholars such as Karen Armstrong, John Esposito, and Martin Lings, whose independently researched portrayals aim to present a balanced view of the Prophet Muhammad.

Key words: *Western Sīrah, Classical and modern Sīrah Literature, Orientalism, Western Perspectives towards Prophet.*

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Introduction

The world's most comprehensive biography is arguably that of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Every aspect of his life, in its minuscule details, has been passed on through generations.

Muhammad's (PBUH) life is known to the world from different sources. Qur'ān contains peripheral details on Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life and events. Furthermore, his sayings, and actions were carefully preserved and collected to form another early source, the poems of Hassān ibn Thābit, who joined the Prophet in Medina and sang of the important events in the life of the Muslim community, praising Muhammad (PBUH) and derogating his enemies. Also very early are the various descriptions of the Prophet's wars and raids (Maghāzī) and the spread of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. All this constituted raw material for his Sīrah, his biography. The Sīrah composed by Ibn Ishāq (d. Ca. 768) and then edited by Ibn Hishām (d. Ca. 830) became the basis of all later biographies.

Muhammad's biographical dates have always been considered the best-known among those of all great religious founders, but even in earliest Islam a "sacred biography," which nonetheless certainly kept in mind the major external events of his life, including the dates, developed among the Muslims and has remained intact to our day (Schimmel, 2008, p. 5). It was elaborated in the various Islamic languages and retold in prose and verse, sometimes (as in Ottoman Turkey) even adorned with illustrations. As late as a few years ago a Turkish poet composed a series of sixty-three "pictures" from the Prophet's life in simple verse. "The quest for the historical Muhammad" is, as the innumerable studies of his life show, a seemingly impossible undertaking, but without attempting to divest Muhammad's biography of the luminous haze of legends, we can sketch his historical life approximately in the following way. Later, Ḥadīth compilation was made and it became the major source of Prophetic history.

Sīrah Literature

Sīrah literature is a genre of Islamic literature that focuses on the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The word "Sīrah" comes from the Arabic word "sāra" which means to travel or to make a journey. Sīrah

literature is thus a narrative of the Prophet's life and his physical and spiritual journey.¹

Sīrah literature is one of the most important genres of Islamic literature, as it is the primary source of knowledge about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The Sīrah is also important because it provides insights into the social, political, and cultural context in which Islam emerged.

As Ziauddin Sardar States “The life of Muhammad is known as the Sīrah and was lived in the full light of history. Everything he did and said was recorded. Because he could not read and write himself, he was constantly served by a group of 45 scribes who wrote down his sayings, instructions, and activities. Muhammad (PBUH) himself insisted on documenting his important decisions. Nearly three hundred of his documents have come down to us, including political treaties, military enlistments, assignments of officials, and state correspondence written on tanned leather. We thus know his life to the minutest details: how he spoke, sat, slept, dressed, walked and the Prophet's behaviour as a husband, father, and nephew, his attitudes toward women, children, and animals, his business transactions and stance toward the poor and the oppressed (Sardar, 2003, p. 36).

The Sīrah literature can be divided into two broad categories: classical Sīrah literature and Modern Sīrah literature. Classical Sīrah literature was written in the early centuries of Islam, while modern Sīrah literature includes works written in the last Centuries.

Classical Sīrah Literature

The earliest Sīrah literature was oral tradition, with the first written Sīrah dating back to the 8th century. The most important works of classical Sīrah literature are the biographies of the Prophet written by Ibn Ishāq and al-Tabari. Ibn Ishāq's biography, called *Al-Sīrah h al-Nabawīyyah*, is the oldest and most important work of Sīrah literature. It was written in the 8th century, about a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

Al-Tabari's work, called the *Tārikh al-Rusūl wa al-Mulūk*, is a chronicle of Islamic history from the creation of the world up until the time of al-Tabari. It includes a section on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and it is considered to be one of the most important works of Islamic history.

¹ Encyclopaedia of Islam

Other important works of classical Sīrah literature include the works of Ibn Hishām, Ibn Sa'd, and al-Waqidi. Ibn Hishām's biography of the Prophet, called *As-Sīrah an-Nabawīyah*, is a revised and abridged version of Ibn Ishāq's work. Ibn Sa'd's work, called the *Kitāb al-Tabaqāt al-Kabīr*, is a collection of biographical sketches of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Waqidi's work, called the *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, is a collection of stories about the military campaigns of the Prophet Muhammad.

These works of classical Sīrah literature were written by scholars who were contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad's companions or who lived in the generation immediately following them. These scholars relied on oral tradition, and they collected and compiled the stories about the Prophet Muhammad's life and teachings from a wide range of sources.

Modern Sīrah Literature

Modern Sīrah literature includes works written in the last century or so. These works are characterized by a greater emphasis on historical accuracy and a more critical approach to the sources. Some of the most important works of modern Sīrah literature are Martin Lings' *Muhammed: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, Karen Armstrong's *Muhammad: A biography of the Prophet*, Ann Marie Schimmel's *Muhammad is his messenger*.

As a biography of Muhammad (PBUH) and one of the earliest genres of literature in the Muslim tradition, the Sīrah fulfilled a variety of functions that all affected how it was shaped and developed. Sīrah has mostly been investigated as a significant source for the biography of Muhammad. It's still utilised to recreate the early history of Islam and Muhammad's biography, even though modern scholarship has called into question its reliability as a historical source (Azmi, 2017, p. 4).

Sīrah Literature in West

In Europe, where Muhammad (PBUH) has at times been understood as an idol-worshiper or transformed into Mahound, the Spirit of Darkness, his historical biography was studied from the eighteenth century onward, and although he was generally depicted as a kind of Antichrist or a Christian heretic and arch-schismatic, he also appeared to some philosophers of the Enlightenment period as representative of a rational religion, one devoid of speculations about

Trinity and Redemption and, even more importantly, a religion without a powerful clergy. From the nineteenth century onward, Western scholars began to study the classical Arabic sources, which henceforward slowly became available in Europe. However, even during that period biographies of the Prophet were often marred by prejudices and in no way did justice to the role of the Prophet as seen by pious Muslims. It is understandable that the Muslims reacted with horror to the European image of their beloved Prophet, with which they became acquainted, particularly in India, through British educational institutions and missionary schools.

It was as a consequence of this confrontation that the Muslims, reacting to works like William Muir's *Life of Mohamet*, began to study the historical role of the Prophet. For in the course of the centuries his historical personality had almost disappeared behind a colourful veil of legends and myths; the bare facts were commonly elaborated in enthusiastic detail, and were rarely if at all seen in their historical perspective. The new interest in the study of the life of Muhammad (PBUH), which runs almost parallel, in Muslim India, with the emergence of interest in the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (the quest for the historical Jesus) in the Protestant West, resulted in a number of serious, but also numerous superficial, purely apologetic writings. Syed Ameer Ali's *Life and Teachings of Muhammad*, or *The Spirit of Islam*, published in 1897, showed the direction in which modern Islamic biographies of Muhammad (PBUH) were to develop in the following decades.

At the moment there are available in Western languages a considerable number of biographies of the Prophet or discussions of his pivotal role in Islamic life and culture that have been written by Muslim authors and hence reflect different approaches to his personality in the Muslim community. An important introduction is Muhammad Hamidullah's *Le Prophete d'Islam*, which, based on his lifelong penetrating studies into the original Arabic sources and his deep personal piety, depicts the life of the Prophet as it appears to a devout Muslim who has received his academic training mostly in Western universities. Similarly, Emel Esin's beautiful book *Mecca the Blessed, Medinah the Radiant* contains a fine account of the Prophet's biography and, more importantly, an excellent description of the feelings of a highly cultured modern Turkish lady at the threshold of the Rauda (mausoleum) of the Prophet in Medina. Martin Lings' *Muhammad, his life based on the earliest sources*, is an

excellent introduction to the subject and very well written. These are only three typical examples from a large number of publications.

On the non-Muslim side, biographies of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) written in recent years by European scholars are certainly much more objective than the works of earlier generations and try further to do justice to his personality. W. Montgomery Watt's *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman* (1961) is perhaps the best-known of these studies. We may also mention here as one of the latest, and certainly most controversial, attempts the book by Günter Lüling, *The Rediscovery of Muhammad: A Critique of Christian Arrogance*, in which Muhammad (PBUH) is presented as a Christian prophet who was influenced by the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. This view is rejected by most Muslims, who believe that Muhammad was a unique prophet who received his revelations directly from God (Lüling, 1985, p. 25).

Adolf von Hamack was a German theologian who argued that Islam was a Christian heresy. He believed that Muhammad was influenced by the teachings of Nestorian Christians, who were a group of Christians who believed that Jesus was both human and divine. Lüling's book revives Hamack's thesis but with a more favourable attitude toward Muhammad (Hamack, 1902, p. 10).

Chronology of Western Perspectives towards Prophet

Western society does indeed have a long history of humiliating Islam and its Prophet. Western propaganda and polemics against Islam and its Prophet are as old as Islam itself and have influenced Islamic discourse ever since. Thus, so many Western scholars and writers addressed the personality of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from the 8th century to the present century with varied perceptions and depictions. It's needed to seek the common factors in early polemics and recent evolutions in approaches of the West towards the prophet of Islam to understand the very important topic (Ahmed, 1992, p. 21)

Much has been written about Muslims and their faith in European literature as we mentioned. And indeed, much of them have been directed at the prophet of Islam. The early Western works on the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were written by powerful and hostile stereotypes based on Christian doctrinal unity and opposition to Islam. These works were robust enough to survive the failure of the

crusade, and the rise of Protestantism, the Enlightenment, and the Scepticism.

The campaigns to defame the prophet of Islam by Western scholars and churchmen continued throughout medieval times, taking a direct polemical form. It became constitutive of European identity, as hatred and fear of Islam were used by religious leaders as the cement to unite the warring Europeans. However, the perception of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the Western world has undergone significant evolution over time. Here, the researcher checks the history of Western Sīrah Literature in chronological order.

Early Christian Perspective towards The Prophet

During the early years of Islam, Christian perceptions towards Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were largely negative. This was because Islam was seen as a rival religion to Christianity and its teachings were perceived as a challenge to Christian doctrine. Islam and Christianity were in the fight from the earliest time of its expansion to the outside of the Arabian Peninsula. So, they are compelled to study Islam and its Prophet, at least for defamation and abuse. Here, the researcher sheds light on some personalities, who were seriously engaged with the Prophet and other Islamic discourses in the early Christian period.

Sebeos:

The oldest archive, about the Prophet from outside Islam, is written by Sebeos. He was an Armenian bishop of the House of Bagratuni. He is aware of Muhammad's name, that he was a merchant by trade, and that an unexpected revelation from God altered the course of Muhammad's existence (Thomson, 1999, p. 238). Sebeos is the first non-Muslim author to present a theory for the rise of Islam that pays attention to what the Muslims themselves thought they were doing (Hoyland, 1997, p. 128).

He was a contemporary of Muhammad (PBUH) and wrote a history of the world from its creation to his own time. As mentioned above, Sebeos mentions Muhammad (PBUH) in several places in his history. He describes Muhammad as a merchant who received a revelation from God. He also mentions that Muhammad preached a new religion that rejected polytheism and called for the worship of one God.

John of Damascus:

One of the earliest Christian writers to mention Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was John of Damascus, a Syrian monk who lived in the 7th and 8th centuries. In his writings, John of Damascus portrayed Islam as a heretical religion and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a false prophet who deceived his followers with his teachings.

John of Damascus described Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a “false prophet” who was “full of lies and deceit” and accused him of plagiarizing parts of the Bible in the Qur’ān. He also criticized Islamic practices such as the prohibition of alcohol and the promotion of polygamy (John of Damascus, 1967). Hence, Jonathan A.C. Brown, an American scholar described him as “The godfather of Christian polemicists” in his book (Brown, 2014, p. 105).

Other early Christian writers such as Sophronius of Jerusalem and the Byzantine emperor Heraclius also viewed Islam and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a negative aspect. They saw Islam as a threat to the Christian world and portrayed Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a false prophet who had misled his followers.

Despite these negative perceptions, some Christian writers showed a more nuanced understanding of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. For example, the Christian monk, Maximus the Confessor, who lived in the 7th century, acknowledged that Islam had a genuine religious message and that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a sincere religious leader (Maximus the Confessor, 1996). It is important to note that Maximus the Confessor was a Christian monk who lived in the 7th century. His views on Islam are shaped by his own religious beliefs, but they are also more nuanced and balanced than the views of many other Christian writers of his time.

Overall, early Christian perceptions towards Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were largely negative and characterized by a lack of understanding and fear of the new religion of Islam. These perceptions would continue to evolve as Islam spread throughout the world and came into contact with other cultures and religions.

Medieval European Period

During the medieval period, European perceptions towards Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were largely negative and shaped by the

political and religious conflicts between Christian and Muslim powers.

The campaigns by scholars and churchmen started early and continued throughout medieval times, taking a direct polemical form. It became constitutive of European identity, as hatred and fear of Islam were used by religious leaders as the cement to unite the warring Europeans.

As one commentator put it, “The demonization of the prophet was to become the very instrument of the making of Christian Europe. Psychologically and physically Islam was regarded as Christianity's worst enemy, threatening Christian identity and its very superiority. The crusades, which extended from 1095 to 1270, were only one expression of this great Christian resurgence” (Said, 1978, p. 121).

One of the most influential medieval portrayals of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri, who wrote in his famous work “The Divine Comedy” that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a schismatic who had led people astray from the true faith.

Other European writers also portrayed Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a false prophet who had deceived his followers with his teachings. For example, the French historian Guibert de Nogent described Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as “the devil’s messenger” who had spread a false religion among the ignorant and gullible (Lewis, 1988, p. 10).

In addition to these religiously motivated critiques, medieval European perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were also influenced by political and military conflicts with Muslim powers. The Crusades, which were a series of Christian military campaigns against Muslim forces in the Holy Land, played a significant role in shaping European attitudes towards Islam and its prophet.

During the Crusades, European writers portrayed Muslims and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as barbaric and cruel and used religious rhetoric to justify the use of force against them. These portrayals reinforced negative perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a false prophet and a threat to Christianity.

However, there were also some European writers who showed a more nuanced understanding of Islam and Prophet Muhammad. For example, the Spanish scholar Raymond Lull, who

lived in the 13th century, acknowledged that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had been a great leader who had united the Arabian tribes under the banner of Islam.

Overall, medieval European perceptions towards Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were largely negative and shaped by a combination of religious, political, and military factors. These perceptions would continue to evolve as Europe's relationship with the Islamic world changed and new cultural and intellectual exchanges took place.

Renaissance and Enlightenment Period

The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods (17-18th century) were significant eras in Western history that were characterized by a renewed interest in classical learning, scientific inquiry, and the development of new ideas about government, society, and religion. During this time, Western scholars and intellectuals encountered the figure of the Prophet Muhammad, who was the founder of Islam and a central figure in the Islamic tradition.

In the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, some Western intellectuals began to view Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a more positive light. For example, Voltaire praised Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a great legislator and admired Islamic civilization. The perception of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) varied among Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers, depending on their backgrounds, religious beliefs, and cultural context. Some viewed him as a model of leadership and moral conduct, while others saw him as a false prophet or a symbol of religious fanaticism and intolerance (Tolan, 2002, pp. 132–133).

One notable figure who had a positive view of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the French philosopher and writer Voltaire. In his book "Mahomet" (1741), Voltaire presented the Prophet as a courageous and charismatic leader who inspired his followers with his teachings and example. Although Voltaire was critical of Islam as a religion, he admired the Prophet's ethical teachings and his role in spreading a message of peace and justice (Voltaire, 2013).

Despite his criticisms, Voltaire ultimately admires the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) for his ethical teachings and his role in spreading a message of peace and justice. He writes that "Mahomet was a great man, who, by his courage, his talents, and his enthusiasm,

founded a great empire, and established a religion which has spread over a third of the globejustice (Voltaire, 2013)".

On the other hand, other thinkers, such as the Scottish philosopher David Hume, were more critical of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam. Hume, in his *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), regarded Islam as a primitive and superstitious religion that lacked the philosophical and moral sophistication of Christianity. He also characterized the Prophet as a “fanatic” who used violence to spread his message.

Another influential figure who had a negative view of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche saw Islam as a “decadent” and “weak” religion that embodied a slave mentality. He viewed the Prophet as a “tyrant” who used the promise of eternal life to control and manipulate his followers (Mahmood, 2006, p. 375).

For large parts of the 17th century, the Ottomans’ expansion into eastern and Southern Europe inspired Christian writers working not just in the southern Catholic but also in the central and northern European lands to formulate vitriolic attacks on Islam and its prophet Muhammad. Hugo Grotius shows himself to be surprisingly uninterested in the Ottoman question, in his magnum opus, *De iure belli ac pacis* (*The Law of War and Peace*), first published in 1625. Presumably out of an anti-Habsburg sentiment. Grotius even voices a measure of appreciation for the Muslim law of war, urging his Christian audience to follow the example of the Muslims, by rejecting the permissibility of enslaving prisoners of war.

As if to cap his roundabout condemnation of Islam as being contrary to reason and to human nature, and to demonstrate the gullibility of its adherents, Grotius makes reference to several alleged miracles of Muhammad. Jesus, he reminds his audience, performed true miracles: he cured the sick and revived the dead. Muhammad, however, did not produce miracles; he only brought the sword (Klein, 2000, p. 143).

The ‘dove flying to a man’s ear’ alludes to the legend, already told in the 13th- Century Golden Legend of Jacobus da Varagine (1228–1298) and repeated by Boccaccio in the 14th century, William Shakespeare in the 16th century and Walter Raleigh in the early 17th century, of Muhammad (PBUH) tricking the Meccans to follow him using a trained dove. According to this story, Muhammad (PBUH) put seeds in his ear and let a dove pick at them

while preaching to the Meccans so that they would believe that he was inspired by the Holy Ghost (Shakespeare, 1972, Act 1, Scene 3, lines 129–131).

Imposture, sensualism, and violence were three of the claimed “sins” that were stereotypically highlighted in mediaeval European representations of Muhammad (PBUH)(Daniel, 1958, pp. 92–93). So many Western scholars wrote about the Prophet during this period in satirical approaches. Some of them are listed below:

Montesquieu

Montesquieu, the French philosopher and writer, wrote about Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in his work, "The Spirit of Laws." Montesquieu's approach towards Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was one of respect and admiration. He recognized Muhammad's impact on the world, especially in terms of religion and politics.

Montesquieu saw Muhammad (PBUH) as a successful leader who was able to bring together diverse tribes and establish a new religion that would go on to have a profound impact on the world. He also admired the legal and political system that Muhammad (PBUH) established in Medina, which he saw as a model of good governance.

At the same time, Montesquieu was critical of certain aspects of Islamic law, particularly its treatment of women. He also criticized the way that Islamic law had been used to justify political oppression in some parts of the world.

Montesquieu's approach towards Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was nuanced and balanced. He recognized his achievements and contributions, while also acknowledging the limitations of his worldview and the flaws in some of the legal and political systems that he established.

Voltaire

Voltaire's play “Fanaticism or Mahomet the Prophet” is a thought-provoking work that explores the themes of religion, power, and fanaticism. It was written in 1736 and was intended as a criticism of religious intolerance, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Europe at the time.

The play is set in 7th-century Arabia, and it tells the story of Mahomet, the founder of Islam. The central character of the play is Omar, one of Mahomet's followers, who becomes increasingly fanatical in his devotion to the prophet. Omar's fanaticism leads him

to commit acts of violence and bloodshed, which ultimately results in his downfall (Voltaire, 1964, p. 10).

The play is also his critique of religious intolerance. Voltaire was a strong advocate of religious freedom and believed that people should be free to worship as they chose. In the play, he portrays the conflict between the Muslims and the Christians as a result of their inability to tolerate each other's beliefs. This message is particularly relevant today, given the ongoing conflicts between different religious groups around the world.

The play has been controversial since its inception. It was banned in France and other Catholic countries for many years, and even today, it is still considered a provocative work. However, it is also widely regarded as a masterpiece of Enlightenment literature, and it continues to be studied and performed today.

Fanaticism or Mahomet the Prophet is a powerful work that explores the themes of religion, power, and fanaticism. Through its portrayal of the conflict between reason and faith, the play highlights the importance of critical thinking and the dangers of blind devotion. At the same time, it is a powerful critique of religious intolerance and a call for greater religious freedom and tolerance. As such, it remains an important work of literature that continues to resonate with readers and audiences today.

Voltaire's approach towards the prophet, specifically in his play "Fanaticism or Mahomet the Prophet," can be described as critical but complex. On the one hand, Voltaire portrays Mahomet as a charismatic leader who inspires his followers with his vision of a just and peaceful society. However, he is also shown as a flawed and human character who is prone to bouts of anger and violence. Through the character of Mahomet, Voltaire highlights the dangers of blind faith and the need for critical thinking.

Voltaire's criticism of Mahomet, however, is not solely focused on the prophet himself. Rather, he uses Mahomet as a vehicle to critique the dangers of religious fanaticism and intolerance. Voltaire believed that people should be free to worship as they chose and that religious differences should not lead to violence and bloodshed. In this sense, his criticism of Mahomet is not an attack on Islam per se, but rather a critique of any form of religious intolerance (Voltaire, 1949, p. 423).

It is worth noting that Voltaire's approach towards religion and religious figures was consistent across different religions and figures. He was critical of Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular, and he also wrote critically of other religious figures such as Moses and Jesus. Voltaire was a strong advocate of religious freedom and believed that people should be free to believe and worship as they chose. Pierre Milza says that it may have been "the intolerance of the Catholic Church and its crimes done on behalf of the Christ" that were targeted by the philosopher (Milza, 2007).

In conclusion, Voltaire's approach towards the prophet in "Fanaticism or Mahomet the Prophet" was critical, but it was not solely focused on the prophet himself. Rather, Voltaire used him as a vehicle to critique the dangers of religious fanaticism and intolerance more broadly. His criticism was consistent with his overall approach towards religion, which emphasized the importance of critical thinking and religious freedom. However, Milza considers that Islam wasn't the only focus of the plot and that the author's purpose while writing the text was to criticize "the intolerance of the Church and the crimes that have been committed in the name of the Christ (Milza, 2007).

Johann Goethe

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was a renowned German writer, poet, and philosopher who lived from 1749 to 1832. His works, including "Faust" and "The Sorrows of Young Werther," are considered masterpieces of German literature (Goethe, 1869). Goethe was also known for his interest in religion and spirituality, and he had a nuanced and complex approach to the Prophet Muhammad.

Goethe's views on Islam and Muhammad (PBUH) evolved throughout his life. As a young man, he was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason and individual freedom. He saw Islam as a religion that stifled individuality and creativity, and he criticized Muhammad (PBUH) for his supposed intolerance and violence.

However, as he matured, Goethe began to take a more nuanced view of Islam and its founder. He recognized that Islam had played an important role in shaping the cultures and civilizations of the Middle East and North Africa, and he came to appreciate the beauty of Islamic art and architecture.

In his later years, Goethe began to see Muhammad (PBUH) as a complex and multifaceted figure. He recognized that Muhammad (PBUH) had been a great leader who had brought a message of social justice and equality to a society that had been plagued by tribalism and inequality. He also recognized that Muhammad (PBUH) had been a man of great spiritual insight, and he saw in the Prophet's teachings a profound understanding of the nature of God and the human condition.

In *Faces of Muhammad*, author John Tolan brings a short description of the meeting that occurred between Goethe and Napoleon Bonaparte. In short, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Napoleon Bonaparte met in Erfurt on October 2, 1808. During their conversation, they talked about politics and literature. Napoleon expressed his dislike for Goethe's translation of Voltaire's play *Mahomet, ou le fanatisme* into German, as he believed it portrayed an unworthy image of a world conqueror and a great man who changed the course of history. The discussion also touched on Muhammad, or "Mahomet" as depicted in Voltaire's play, who was a fictitious character created to criticize the Catholic Church. Napoleon, served as a role model and a charismatic military genius, while for Goethe, he became the archetypal prophet, allowing him to explore the boundaries between prophecy and poetry. To many Europeans, including these three men, "Mahomet" is not just a distant historical figure or the prophet of a foreign religion, but a source of constant curiosity, wonder, worry, and admiration due to his story and living legacy (Tolan, 2019, p. 1).

In one of his most famous poems, "Mahomet's Song" Goethe imagines the Prophet reflecting on his life and his mission. The poem portrays Muhammad (PBUH) as a man who is deeply aware of his own limitations and weaknesses, but who is nonetheless driven by a powerful sense of purpose and a desire to bring the light of truth to his people. The poem ends with the lines:

"And so, bears he all his brothers/ and his treasures, and his children/ to their Sire, all joyous roaring/ Pressing to his mighty heart" (Goethe, 1869, pp. 163–164).

These lines capture the essence of Goethe's approach to Muhammad: he saw the Prophet as a moral guide who taught people to follow their conscience and strive for righteousness. Although Goethe did not convert to Islam, his writings on Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam show a deep respect for the religion and its founder and a

recognition of the important role that Islam has played in human history.

Alphonso Marie Louis De Lamartine

Alphonse Marie Louis de Lamartine was a French writer, poet, and politician who lived in the 19th century. He was a prominent figure in French literary circles and is best known for his poetry and his work as a politician. Lamartine was also a keen observer of history and religion, and his writings often reflected his views on these subjects.

One of Lamartine's most interesting observations was his view of the Prophet Muhammad. Although he was not a Muslim himself, Lamartine had a deep appreciation for Islam and the role of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in spreading the religion. In his famous work, *History Of Turkey* (1854) Lamartine writes about his encounters with Muslims and his admiration for their faith (Peleg, 2005).

Lamartine describes the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a "great man," who had a profound impact on the world. He notes that the Prophet Muhammad's teachings were based on "the worship of one God, the fraternity of believers, and the equality of all men before God." These ideas, according to Lamartine, were revolutionary at the time and helped to shape the world we live in today.

Lamartine also recognized the Prophet Muhammad's role as a political leader. He notes that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was not just a religious figure, but also a leader who brought together diverse groups of people and united them under a common cause. Lamartine writes that the Prophet Muhammad's leadership was characterized by "wisdom, courage, and integrity," and that he was able to overcome great obstacles and challenges in his lifetime.

In his book *History of Turkey*, Alphonse de Lamartine writes:

If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers, which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislation, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then-inhabited world; and more than that he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and souls. His forbearance in victory, his ambition which was entirely devoted to

one idea and in no manner striving for an empire, his endless prayers, his mystic conversations with God, his death and his triumph after death – all these attest not to an imposture, but to a firm conviction, which gave him the power to restore a dogma. This dogma was two-fold: the unity of God and the immateriality of God; the former telling what God is, the latter telling what God is not; the one overthrowing false god with the sword, the other starting an idea with the words. Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational beliefs, of a cult without images; the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he”(De Lamartine, 1885, p. 356).

Despite his admiration for the Prophet Muhammad, Lamartine was also critical of some aspects of Islam. He believed that the religion had become too focused on ritual and tradition, and had lost sight of its original message of equality and fraternity. However, Lamartine’s criticism was not directed at the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself, but rather at the way Islam had evolved.

Alphonse Marie Louis de Lamartine was a complex figure who had a deep appreciation for religion and its role in shaping history. His views on the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) reflect his admiration for Islam and his recognition of the Prophet’s importance as a historical figure. Lamartine's approach towards the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was one of respect and admiration, and his writings on the subject continue to be studied and appreciated by scholars today.

George Sale

George Sale was an 18th-century English Orientalist and scholar who is best known for his translation of the Qur’ān into English. In his translation, Sale was generally respectful towards the Prophet Muhammad, whom he considered to be a genuine religious leader and moral guide.

Sale's approach to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was shaped by his understanding of the historical context in which he lived. Sale recognized that Muhammad (PBUH) was a product of his time and place and that his teachings were shaped by the culture, politics, and social norms of Arabia in the 7th century. At the same

time, Sale admired Muhammad's commitment to social justice, his efforts to reform the practices of the Arab tribes, and his emphasis on personal piety and devotion to God (Sale, 1734, p. 12).

Sale's translation of the Qur'ān was one of the earliest in English and was highly influential in shaping Western perceptions of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Although Sale's approach to Islam and the Qur'ān was not always free from bias, his translation is generally regarded as a scholarly and accurate rendering of the Arabic text, and his work helped to establish the study of Islam as a legitimate field of academic inquiry in the West.

As mentioned above, Sale produced a new English translation of the Qur'ān that represented a landmark in the European study of Islam. It is the first translation of the Qur'ān in a European language not framed as a means to refute Islam or to "expose" the errors of the Turks. Sale prefaces his translation with a 187--page "preliminary discourse": a scholarly presentation of the life of Muhammad, the composition of the Qur'ān, an analysis of Qur'ānic doctrine, and a history of the emergence and expansion of Islam. Sale's work is remarkable in his careful use and citation of recent scholarship and polemics. Indeed, Sale exhibits a considerable erudition and peppers his pages with footnotes citing the work of recent scholars, Pococke, Jean Gagnier, Toland, Reland, Ludovico Marracci, and others.

Sale presents Muhammad (PBUH) as a great lawgiver, linking him to prestigious lawgiver--kings of classical antiquity: "as Muhammad (PBUH) gave his Arabs the best religion he could, as well as the best laws, preferable, at least, to those of the ancient pagan lawgivers, 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" (Tolan, 2019). While both Muhammad (PBUH) and the Qur'ān provoke Sale's admiration, he sees in this story the hand of man, not God: "That Muhammad (PBUH) was the author and chief contriver of the Koran, is beyond dispute," despite the affirmations of his pious followers (64). He nonetheless relates, without reserve or polemic, the standard Muslim account of the revelation of the Qur'ān and its compilation during the reign of 'Uthmān. He insists on its beauty and elegance. He relates (from Qur'ān 2) the story of the Meccan poet Labid, who had one of his finest poems displayed in the Ka'ba; when Muhammad (PBUH) put up one of the Qur'ān's suras next to it, Labid, "struck with

admiration, immediately professed the religion taught thereby”(Tolan, 2019).

In summary, Sale's translation had a significant influence on how Western intellectuals saw Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam. Overall, a range of factors, such as religious bias, cultural background, and personal convictions, influenced how Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophers perceived the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). While some considered him an example of moral leadership, others saw him as a representation of religious intolerance and fanaticism.

Colonial Period

The colonial period, which spanned from the 15th century to the mid-20th century, was a time of European expansion and conquest, in which European powers established colonies and exerted political and economic control over non-European societies. During this time, European perceptions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam played a significant role in shaping colonial policies and attitudes towards Muslim societies.

The perception of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) among colonial powers varied depending on their political and religious motives. Some colonial powers, such as the British, viewed the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a political and military leader who was able to unite the Arab tribes and establish a powerful empire. In this sense, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was admired for his leadership qualities and his ability to create a stable political order.

However, other colonial powers, such as the Spanish and Portuguese, viewed the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam as a threat to Christianity and European values. These colonial powers saw Islam as a religion of violence and intolerance, and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a false prophet who had corrupted the message of Jesus Christ (Esposito, 1988, p. 10).

Additionally, colonial perceptions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were often used to justify colonial policies towards Muslim societies. For example, colonial powers used the image of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a despotic ruler to justify their intervention in Muslim societies, claiming that they were bringing democracy and freedom to oppressed peoples. Similarly, colonial powers used the

image of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a violent and intolerant figure to justify their own suppression of Muslim religious practices and traditions.

Overall, colonial perceptions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) played a significant role in shaping colonial attitudes towards Muslim societies and were often used to justify colonial policies and actions. While some colonial powers admired the Prophet for his leadership qualities, others saw him as a threat to European values and Christianity. These perceptions continue to influence contemporary perceptions of Islam and Muslim societies in the post-colonial era.

Postcolonial Period

The perception of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in post-colonial times has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and cultural factors. In the aftermath of colonialism, the Muslim world was left struggling to reconcile its traditional values and beliefs with the demands of modernization and globalization. This has led to a variety of interpretations of the Prophet's life and teachings, ranging from religious fundamentalism to secularism.

One of the key factors that has influenced post-colonial perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the legacy of colonialism itself. Many Muslim societies were subjugated and exploited by Western powers, which often used religion as a tool to maintain control over the local population. As a result, some Muslims have come to view the Prophet as a symbol of resistance against colonialism and imperialism. They see his teachings as a source of inspiration for their struggles for independence and self-determination (Esposito, 1988, p. 10).

In the post-colonial period, Western perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) have become more diverse and nuanced. While there are still negative perceptions of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, there is also a growing appreciation for the contributions of Muslim civilization to world history and culture. This has been fuelled in part by increased cultural exchange and dialogue between the Western and Islamic worlds.

At the same time, the colonial period also brought Western ideas and values to Muslim societies, which led to a questioning of traditional religious beliefs and practices. Some Muslims began to view the Prophet's teachings as outdated and irrelevant to modern

times and sought to reinterpret or even reject them entirely. This has led to a range of new movements within Islam, such as liberal or progressive Islam, which seek to reconcile Islamic traditions with modern values.

Another factor that has influenced post-colonial perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the rise of political Islam. This refers to the use of Islamic beliefs and values to justify political action and mobilize popular support. Political Islam has been a major force in many Muslim societies since the 1970s and has played a significant role in shaping public opinion about the Prophet. Some political Islamists see the Prophet as a model for their political activism, and view his teachings as a source of legitimacy for their actions.

However, political Islam has also been criticized for its often-authoritarian tendencies and its use of violence to achieve its goals. This has led to a backlash against the politicization of Islam and a renewed interest in more traditional forms of Islamic spirituality and practice. Many Muslims today are seeking to reclaim the Prophet's teachings as a source of personal guidance and spiritual inspiration, rather than as a tool for political mobilization.

Post-colonial perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and cultural factors. While some Muslims see him as a symbol of resistance against colonialism and imperialism, others view his teachings as outdated and irrelevant to modern times. The rise of political Islam has also played a significant role in shaping public opinion about the Prophet. However, there is also a growing interest in reclaiming the Prophet's teachings as a source of personal guidance and spiritual inspiration, rather than as a tool for political mobilization.

Overall, the evolution of Western perceptions towards Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) reflects broader historical trends and cultural shifts in the Western world, as well as changing global relationships between the Western and Islamic worlds.

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