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# The Enlightenment prophet: Muhammad in early modern Europe

John Tolan\*,

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the place of Islam in the intellectual history of the European Enlightenment. In 1649, the English civil war resulted in the establishment of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell and the execution of King Charles I; in the same year, the first English translation of the Quran was published in London. For some royalists, the two events were linked: they both signalled the moral demise of the kingdom, and indeed some polemicists depicted Cromwell as a ‘new Mahomet’ seeking to gain power by attacking the moral and religious foundations of the nation. Authors writing in English, such as Henry Stubbe, John Toland and George Sale, embraced the comparison, presenting the Muslim prophet as a reformer who preached pure monotheism and who abolished the powers of a corrupt clergy. They used the prophet and Islam to argue for the curtailing of the power of the Anglican Church; 18th-century French authors similarly lionised him as a polemical tool against the Catholic church. Muhammad, seen as an imposter or a reformer, was at the centre of European debates on the proper relations between Church, Crown and people. The article arises from a British Academy Lecture delivered on 18 May 2023.

**Keywords** Enlightenment, Islam, Quran, Muhammad, polemics, intellectual history, England, France

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On 30 January 1649, in the midst of the English civil war, King Charles I was executed for treason; the British Isles became a Commonwealth, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell. In the same year, the first English translation of the Quran was published in London. For some royalists, these two events were linked: they both signified the ‘moral demise’ of the kingdom, and indeed some polemicists depicted Cromwell as a ‘new Mahomet’ (Muhammad) seeking to gain power by attacking the moral and religious foundations of the nation. This article shows how authors in English such as Henry Stubbe, John Toland and George Sale embraced this comparison, presenting the Muslim prophet as a reformer who preached pure monotheism and who abolished the powers of a corrupt clergy. It will look at how this comparison was used to argue for the curtailing of the power of the Anglican Church; we will see how 18th-century French authors similarly lionised the prophet as a polemical tool against the Catholic Church. Muhammad, whether one sees him as an imposter or as a reformer, was at the centre of European debates on the proper relations between Church, Crown and people. Building on recent work on the reception of Islam and the Quran in early modern European culture, I seek to elucidate the role that the Quran and Muhammad played in political and religious discourse. In particular, we will see how Islam was instrumentalised first in England in

debates about the proper relations between the Crown, the Church of England and the populace, and then on the Continent (particularly in France) where for some anti-clerical authors the prophet Muhammad became a model of religious reform.

## Muhammad and Cromwell in 17th-century England

### Anxieties of influence: Ottoman culture and the English

In the mid-17th century, the Ottoman world provoked unease in England. The empire was depicted as a legendary land of wealth, culture and opulence. Travellers to the Ottoman Empire often described a dynamic, prosperous state where subjects of different faiths and languages lived in harmony; shouldn't England follow this example? They reported that English converts to Islam, such as the pirate John Ward, were thriving in the Ottoman Empire. Some English playwrights wrote them into moralising dramas that transformed them into diabolically inspired villains punished by a violent death (Matar 1998: 50–8). The supposedly hedonistic culture of the Turk was denounced by those who feared its appeal to English men and women, including those who never left their island, but who could be enticed into consuming Ottoman wares: coffee, for example. In 1652, the first coffee house was opened in London. Coffee quickly became popular and some attributed semi-miraculous properties to the drink: Edward Pockocke, Professor of Arabic at Oxford, in 1659 translated an Arabic treatise enumerating the health benefits of coffee. Yet others attacked this 'Mahometan berry'. An anonymous tract saw the popularity of the drink as a dark sign of the times, associated with Cromwell's rebellion and the publication of the first English translation of the Quran: 'When Coffee once was vended here, The Alc'ron shortly did appear' (*The Character of a Coffee-House Wherein Is Contained a Description of the Persons Usually Frequenting It, with Their Discourse and Humors, as Also the Admirable Vertues of Coffee* 1665: title page).

For this anonymous author and for other royalists, religious tolerance, coffee-drinking and the Quran all participated in the corruption and decline of England, culminating in the murder of the king, the upturning of government and the attack on the Church of England. During the periods of the Commonwealth and Protectorate (1649–60), royalists often found themselves constrained to camouflage their critiques of the new political order by inserting them into publications that were apparently unrelated to England and Cromwell. For some authors, the denunciation of the prophet Muhammad was a way to implicitly criticise Cromwell and his associates. After the restoration brought Charles II to the throne in 1660, it was now disenfranchised republicans who used discussion about Muhammad and Islam to criticise the Crown and its relationship with the Church of England.

### The Alcoran of Mahomet (1649)

The first English translation of the Quran (made not from the Arabic but from André Du Ryer's French translation of 1647) was published in April 1649. The

translator is not identified, but it is perhaps a young scholar named Thomas Ross. The Commonwealth authorities arrested the printer, Robert White, confiscated the printed copies and held a hearing which eventually cleared all involved, including Thomas Ross, and authorised the publication.<sup>1</sup>

The translator wrote a preface ‘to the Christian Reader’ in which he justified the publication of the Quran while at the same time implicitly criticising the new Commonwealth authorities who had initially prevented its publication. There is no danger, he says, that such a ‘rude’ and ‘incongruous’ text as the Quran should seduce Englishmen any more than it has other Europeans. Why then would the Cromwellian authorities attempt to prevent its being published? The translator cannot of course criticise them openly, but he gives a good idea of what he thinks:

[Christian Reader] though some, conscious of their own instability in Religion, and of theirs (too like Turks in this) whose prosperity and opinions they follow, were unwilling this should see the Press, yet am I confident, if thou hast been so true a votary to orthodox Religion, as to keep thy self untainted of their follies, this shall not hurt thee: And as for those of that Batch, having once abandoned the Sun of the Gospel, I believe they will wander as far into utter darkness, by following strange lights, as by this Ignis Fatuus [*feu follet*] of the Alcoran. Such as it is, I present to thee, having taken the pains only to translate it out of French, not doubting, though it hath been a poysen, that hath infected a very great, but most unsound part of the Universe, it may prove an Antidote, to confirm in thee the health of Christianity (Ross 1649: preface, unnumbered page).

Thomas Ross (if indeed he is the translator) hides his royalist critiques of Parliamentarism in his anti-Mahometan polemics. He gives a brief and highly polemical biography of ‘Mahomet’, containing many items that had been standard fare in European Christian writings about Islam since the 12th century (Tolan 2019): Mahomet schemes to attain power and women, obtains help from a heretical Christian monk, produces bogus miracles and composes the ‘Alcoran’, a hodgepodge of Christian, Jewish, pagan and heretical elements. In his description of the life of the bogus prophet, this royalist author, unable to criticise overtly the new republican parliamentary regime, associates Cromwell with the false prophet Mahomet. He affirmed that Mahomet had ‘drawn to his devotion, a numerous, though vulgar party of the people’ whom he convinced he was prophet ‘under pretence of Reformation of Religion’. Yet not everyone was convinced, Ross continues, so:

<sup>1</sup>Various scholars, most recently Mahdi (2023), have attributed the translation to Alexander Ross, polymath and former royal chaplain, a relative of Thomas Ross. Indeed, Alexander Ross wrote a brief ‘caveat’ to justify the publication. Noel Malcolm has suggested that the translator may be a certain Hugh Ross, but Mordechai Feingold has argued, convincingly for me, for the attribution to Thomas Ross (Feingold 2012, 2016; Malcolm 2012, 2014).

he resolved to yoke to it that other concomitant in popular disturbances, liberty, proclaiming it to be the will of God, that all Men should enjoy it, and that the Edict might be first obeyed in his own family, enfranchized his Slave, called Zeidi [Zayd ibn Haritha].

This enhanced his fame and multitudes of slaves abandoned their masters and rallied the bogus prophet's cause; they 'fled to him as their Redeemer, and embraced his Law, as the means of their salvation'. Hence Mahomet found himself at the head of a considerable military force:

daily increasing by a multitude of Fugitives and Vagabonds, who by reason of this liberty, to act any villany, resorted to him; he at length took up thoughts of employing them in the confirmation of his Law, which he knew to be the ready way to his establishment, in that power to which he aspired (Ross 1649: preface, vii–viii).

Ross accuses 'Mahomet' of using two false pretexts in order to indulge in his lust for power: reform of religion and freedom. The first element is a variation on standard Christian polemic against Islam since the Middle Ages: Muhammad feigned to be a prophet in order to become king of the Arabs: yet the word 'reform' is by and large absent in earlier texts. Ross's readers would clearly recognise the reference to more recent debates in England about the reform of the Anglican Church and the reduction of its privileges.

The second element, 'freedom', is new to anti-Muslim polemics, and situates Ross's discourse even more clearly in the critique of Cromwellian republicanism. He claims that Muhammad used the promise of liberty to rally people to his cause, and that he did so through freeing his slave Zeidi. Zayd ibn Haritha, according to Muslim tradition, was from the Najd region of central Arabia. As a boy, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery; he eventually became Muhammad's slave. An early convert to Islam, he was freed by Muhammad who adopted him as his son; Zayd accompanied Muhammad on the Hijra to Medina and subsequently commanded a number of military expeditions. While earlier Christian European writers had been aware that Zayd was a slave whom Muhammad had freed, none of them makes this a central element in their critique of Islam. And none of them affirms, as Ross erroneously does, that Muhammad had declared a general manumission of slaves throughout Arabia. Ross may be aware of the historical inaccuracy of his claim, but that is of little concern to him. The point is to attack Cromwell through his depiction of Muhammad. The 'multitude of Fugitives and Vagabonds' accompanying the false prophet, rallying to cries of religious reform and liberty, must seem all too familiar to Ross's royalist readers. Thomas Ross disguises his anti-republicanism as a diatribe against Islam. Were he to do otherwise, his troubles would be much greater than those he already had with the Council of State. Indeed, he was arrested in 1654 on suspicion of treason (in an affair that had nothing to do with the Quran translation) and subsequently released on bail; he later went to Cologne to join the future King Charles II in exile.

Thomas Ross was not the only royalist to compare Cromwell to Muhammad. The anonymous author of *The famous tragedie of King Charles I basely butchered* has Cromwell describe himself as a new Mahomet (Birchwood 2007: 52–64). Other royalist authors made the same comparison, and some of them criticised the Commonwealth government for allowing the publication of the ‘Turkish Alcoran’, a clear sign of their depravity (whereas for Ross, as we have seen, it was their desire to prevent its publication which showed their irreligion) (Tolan 2019: 140–1). Anglican royalist Lancelot Addison published in 1678 *The First State of Mahumedism*, in which he affirmed that the prophet ‘so well managed his ambition and injustice, under the cloak of Religion, as never any have yet proved his Equal: the nearest and most exact Transcript of this great Impostor, was the late Usurper’.<sup>2</sup>

### Henry Stubbe: ‘Copernican revolution in the Study of Islam’?

While royalists lambasted republicans by portraying their leader Cromwell as a new Muhammad, one republican author embraced the comparison and portrayed Muhammad as republican reformer. Henry Stubbe (1632–76) penned his *Originall & Progress of Mahometanism* in 1671. Stubbe, a well-read physician, knew no Arabic and had never travelled to any Muslim country. Yet it is he who, for Nabil Matar, effected a ‘Copernican revolution in the Study of Islam’ (Stubbe 2014: 1). Based on Arabic sources in translation (mostly in Latin), he undertook a complete reassessment of Muhammad’s mission and life, vindicating him against earlier Christian polemicists.

Stubbe may have studied at Oxford with Edward Pococke. One of his principal sources is the *Specimen historiae Arabum* (1650, 1806), Pococke’s Latin translation of the chronicle of Gregory Bar Hebraeus, a 13th-century Syriac bishop; Stubbe also uses Johann Heinrich Hottinger’s *Historia orientalis* (1651). Pococke, Hottinger and other 17th-century Arabists presented Muslim doctrine and devotion in a relatively positive light, but they all saw it as inferior to Christianity. Not so Stubbe. On the contrary, his Muhammad was an ‘extraordinary person’ with a ‘great soul’. Far from corrupting or deforming Christianity, ‘Mahomet’ tried to return to its purest expression. Stubbe traces the history of Judaism and early Christianity, accenting the doctrinal and institutional fractures and the pagan origins of much of Christian practice and doctrine. Baptism, for Stubbe, ‘comes from the pagan custom ... of washing away expiatorily in rivers the most enormous sins’ (Stubbe 2014: 85) Of pagan origin, too, are most of the Church’s feast days, the titles proudly borne by the clergy, and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus himself never claimed to be God and indeed most early Christians, being Jews, did not consider him to be God; the idea is an adaptation of the pagan tradition of deifying great respected leaders. The introduction of the doctrine of Jesus’ divinity caused sharp divisions among the early Christians. Christianity, Stubbe affirms, had degenerated into a variety of paganism, devoted to the ‘three gods of the Trinity’ and to a goddess, the Virgin Mary. The saints, and the devotions given to them,

<sup>2</sup>Cited in Malcolm (2019: 327).

‘differed little from that of the pagans to their heroes and lesser gods’ (Stubbe 2014: 102). The only ones who seem uncontaminated by paganism are the Syriac or ‘Judaizing Christians’.

Stubbe was a friend and admirer of Thomas Hobbes, with whom he corresponded frequently: in the 1650s, Stubbe was at work on a Latin translation of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (2012). His Mahomet fits well the model of the benevolent monarch of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, using the precepts of a simple, natural religion to enforce morality and uphold authority, without handing over power to a caste of grasping priests. Stubbe’s Mahomet is a Hobbesian monarch who returns to a simple form of natural monotheism in accordance with the religion of the primitive Christians.<sup>3</sup>

Stubbe’s work circulated in manuscript: it would have been impossible to find a publisher in Britain, and the open diffusion of his ideas would perhaps have hurt the radical cause more than it would have helped it. It was indeed read and used by others, including English Unitarians, anti-royalists and Irish polymath John Toland, as we will see. It also provoked a hostile reaction on the part of a man who may have studied alongside Stubbe in Pococke’s classroom at Oxford: Humphrey Prideaux.

### **Humphrey Prideaux: denouncing Muhammad to attack Deism**

Republican and Unitarian praise of Muhammad provoked rebuke, in the form of the reaffirmation of the traditional Christian polemical view of the Muslim prophet. In 1697, Humphrey Prideaux published his *The True Nature of The Imposture Fully Display’d in the Life of Mahomet* (Prideaux 1697). Prideaux had studied with Pococke in Oxford. It is unclear whether he had read Stubbe’s *Originall & Progress of Mahometanism*, but in many ways Prideaux’s work reads as a response and rebuttal of Stubbe’s work as well as to more recent pamphlets by Unitarians which cited Muhammad and the Quran in support of the rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. Prideaux brags about his mastery of oriental sources in multiple languages, but as Justin Champion and others have shown, his knowledge is second-hand, relying entirely on translation and scholarship by European orientalis (Champion 2010: 640–1). Like Stubbe, Prideaux casts a critical eye on many of the hostile legends concerning the Prophet. He dismisses medieval tales of bogus miracles: stories of a bull bearing the Quran on its horns, or a pigeon that Mahomet trained to eat grains from his ear in order to pretend it was the Holy Spirit. These stories are ‘idle fables not to be credited’ (38). He similarly dispels what he identifies as other common misconceptions about the Prophet: that Muslims expected him to resurrect (‘totally an error’: 102). Hostile stories which seem less improbable to him, however, such as Mahomet’s epilepsy, he includes without criticism. Prideaux claims to present, in lieu of fables, the ‘true nature’ of Mahomet’s ‘imposture’. He claims that Mahomet carefully crafted a new heretical scripture, the Alcoran, in order to be accepted as a prophet, to become king of the Arabs and to launch a tremendous wave of conquest.

<sup>3</sup>On Stubbe and the relationship between his work and that of Hobbes, see Malcolm (2019: 318–24).

Prideaux's tract became something of a bestseller, going through numerous editions. In 1698, the year after its publication in English, Dutch and French translations were published in Amsterdam. Prideaux presents Muhammad as dominated by the twin passions of lust and ambition, which cause him to feign a religious vocation. Unable to produce miracles, Muhammad 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'. 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 lambasts Deists who affirm that Christianity is an imposture; his goal is to show them a true imposture, that of Muhammad, and then to demonstrate (in a tract published in the same volume) that Christianity is no imposture, but the true religion.

## Muhammad, an anti-clerical hero for the 18th century

While in the 17th century it is principally in England that the Muslim prophet and the Quran are mobilised in debates about the role of the clergy in English society, the power and wealth of the Church, and the Church's relationship with the Crown, in the early 18th century these debates would spread to Continental Europe, in part through the work of Irish polymath John Toland and through a popular—or infamous—tract, the *Treatise of the Three Impostors*.

### John Toland discovers (or pretends to discover) the true Gospel

Irish Deist John Toland portrayed the Muslim prophet as a visionary anti-clerical religious reformer, the better to smash the pretensions of the Church of England's priestly aristocracy. His first book, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, sought to show that the essential doctrines of Christianity were accessible to human reason without the aid of revelation. His work was denounced by both Protestants and Catholics and was condemned to the flames by order of the Irish parliament in Dublin in 1697 (Toland 1997; Bevilacqua 2018: 102–5; Champion 2003; Lucci 2019; Malcolm 2019: 324–6).

It was in Amsterdam that Toland came across a manuscript in Italian of the *Gospel of Barnabas* which, he affirmed, offered proof of this close correspondence between pure primitive Christianity and early Islam. The *Gospel of Barnabas* was supposedly written by Barnabas, one of Jesus' disciples; in fact, it was most likely produced among 16th-century Moriscos in order to reconcile the practice of Islam with the supposed doctrines of early Christians (Wiegers 2014). It has Jesus prophesise the coming of Muhammad as the last prophet and affirm a Muslim vision of Christology: Jesus affirms that he is only a man and a prophet, whose main role is to prepare the coming of the last prophet Muhammad.

Toland recounts his discovery of the manuscript in Amsterdam and how he quickly realised that this was the Gospel that Mahomet had acknowledged. He affirms, moreover, that this is the Gospel observed by the earliest Christians, and that it provides 'the Original plan of Christianity'. The first Christians were Jews,



who continued to observe Jewish Law; they welcomed in their midst Gentiles who were only obliged to follow the law of Noah, not that of Moses. They followed the teachings of Jesus, the Son of Joseph and Mary, on whom they conferred the title 'Son of God' in a merely metaphorical sense, to indicate that he was a man of unusual and exemplary piety. Yet many of the Gentile converts to Christianity, he laments, 'gave their bare names to Christ, but reserv'd their Idolatrous hearts for their native superstitions. These did almost wholly subvert True Christianity' (Toland 1999: 118). In their hatred for the Jews, the Gentile converts changed the date of Easter and sought to avoid frequenting Jews. In many respects, Toland's diatribe echoes that of Stubbe: both accuse early churchmen of corrupting primitive Christianity with pagan rites.<sup>4</sup> Yet Toland dresses this criticism in a much more cautious and learned garb, insisting that he is merely presenting the results of his philological research. And he takes a key step further than Stubbe: for Toland (as for the anonymous Morisco author of the *Gospel of Barnabas*), the principal culprit is Paul. Toland offers a close critical reading of selected passages from Acts and the Pauline Epistles, highlighting in particular the conflicts and disagreements of Paul with Peter and Barnabas. Paul, he says, proffers a new Gospel to the uncircumcised, with a message very different from that of Jesus, creating a clear break from the primitive church founded by the Apostles, that of the Nazarenes. Without explicitly saying so, Toland has proffered a very Muslim vision of Paul as the chief corrupter of the message revealed by God to Jesus.

At the end of the first letter of the *Nazarenes*, Toland affirms:

what the Mahometans believe concerning Christ and his doctrine, were neither the inventions of Mahomet, nor yet of those Monks who are said to have assisted him in the framing of his Alcoran: but that they are as old as the time of the Apostles having been sentiments of whole sects or Churches (Toland 1999: 192).

Whether or not Toland believes in the authenticity of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, he uses the Morisco text to undermine fundamental Christian doctrine (notably the Trinity) and to deny the legitimacy of ecclesiastical (Catholic and Anglican) claims to authority.

Indeed, Toland affirms that Islam is a 'sect' of Christianity, neither more nor less legitimate than other Christian dominations tolerated in England and elsewhere in Europe:

The Mahometans may not improperly be reckon'd and call'd a sort or sect of Christians; ... they might with as much reason and safety be tolerated at London and Amsterdam, as the Christians of every kind are so at Constantinople and thro-out all Turkey (Toland 1999: 135).

Like other contemporary authors, Toland compares the religious tolerance of the Ottomans to the intolerance and sectarian conflict rife in Europe and holds up the former as a model.

<sup>4</sup>Toland clearly has access to Stubbe's work, which he follows in a number of instances; see Champion (2010).

### ***The Treatise of the Three Impostors***

Deists and atheists attacked the founders of the three great monotheisms, taking up many of the standard polemical tropes against Muhammad 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. The anonymous author lambasts the priests and rulers of ancient Greece and Rome, who took advantage of the credulity of their people to 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, fell out of favour with the Pharaoh and fled Egypt after committing several murders. He then plotted revenge against the Pharaoh, and through a series of stunts and magical tricks convinced the ignorant Hebrews to rise up against their Egyptian masters and to follow him through the desert. He was an ‘absolute despot ... a trickster and impostor’ (Anderson 1997: 22). His final trick cost him his life: he threw himself off a high precipice in the desert, so that his body might never be found and that the people would think he had been spirited off to heaven. 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’ (Anderson 1997: 23). The author expresses admiration for his skill in hoodwinking the people through bogus miracles and for his cleverness in arguing with the Pharisees:

One can judge from all that we have said that Christianity, like all other religions is no more than a crudely woven imposture, whose success & progress would astonish even its inventors if they came back to the world (Anderson 1997: 31).

The author describes how Muhammad tricked his people through bogus miracles and false revelations. He concludes:

Mahomet raised himself up & was happier than Jesus, insofar as he saw before his death the progress of his law, which the son of Mary was not able to do because of his poverty. He was even happier than Moses, who by an excess of ambition cast himself down a precipice to finish his days; Mahomet died in peace & with all his wishes gratified, he had moreover some certainty that his Doctrine would subsist after his death, having accommodated it to the genius of his sectaries, born & raised in ignorance; which an abler man might perhaps not have been able to do (Anderson 1997: 33).

The anonymous author sketches a portrait of an impostor, similar to that of other European authors from the 12th 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 Muhammad for centuries (Crone 2016; Malcolm 2019: 3, 11–16).

### Boulainvilliers, *Vie de Mahomed*

Henri, Count of Boulainvilliers (1658–1722), wrote a *Vie de Mahomed* which was published posthumously in 1730. Boulainvilliers, a Normand nobleman, wrote works of history and politics defending the traditional rights of the aristocracy against the increasing absolutism of Louis XIV and exalting enlightened feudalism as the best form of government, deriving the rights of the aristocracy from the conquest of their supposed Frankish ancestors over Gallo–Roman peasants. Yet Boulainvilliers cannot be reduced to a mere aristocratic reactionary; he showed a keen interest in astrology and in Deism, frequenting some of the same intellectual circles as Toland. Like Toland, he came to see in Mahomed a model of religion free from ‘priestcraft’—in his case, the stultifying dominance of the French Catholic Church.

Boulainvilliers never completed his *Vie de Mahomed*, which was published posthumously in London and Amsterdam: given its clear anti-Catholic and anti-royal sentiments, it could not have been published in France. Boulainvilliers presents the prophet at a divinely inspired messenger whom God made use of 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:

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 destroy’d violently his own revelation (Boulainvilliers 1752: 179).

Arguing against Prideaux, he scoffs at the hostile legends concerning the prophet’s supposed heretical Christian sidekick, and denies that Muslim doctrine is irrational or that Muhammad 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. Muhammad ‘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’ (Boulainvilliers 1752: 222). Boulainvilliers’ praise of Muhammad is of course a ringing condemnation of the Catholic Church, an attack on the rites, privileges, possessions and riches of the clergy. As often, when Europeans write about Muhammad, they often do so to settle accounts with enemies closer to home.

Boulainvilliers puts his diatribes against the Catholic Church in the mouth of the Muslim prophet. Boulainvilliers affirms that Muhammad’s profound devotion to the unity of God led him to reject the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. But what bothered him most was the corruption of the clergy:

Mahomed regarded the bishops, priests and secular clergy, chiefly as a political combination of men, united for the purpose of making religion subservient to their passions, their concupiscence, avarice,

pride and dominion, and who had the secret of persuading the people that an implicit obedience to them was inseparable from what was due to God. Moreover he looked upon them as the real authors of an infinite number of disputes, which then divided the professors of Christianity; as the inventors of the superstitions of those times; in short, as false teachers who had laboured to plunge all men into error, according to their several conditions, ranks, and degrees of capacity (Boulainvilliers 1752: 206–7).

The clergy, lusting after power, riches and glory, concoct schisms and superstitions the better to affirm and justify their power over a people that they maintain in ignorance. Boulainvilliers' Muhammad is a reformer who abolished the power of the clergy in order to return to a direct relationship between God and His faithful.

### **George Sale's English translation of the Quran (1734)**

One of the subscribers to Boulainvilliers's *Vie de Mahomed* was Arabist George Sale, who in 1734 produced a new English translation of the Quran that represented a landmark in the European study of Islam. It is the first translation of the Quran in a European language that was not presented 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 Quran, an analysis of Quranic 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 (Khaly Wélé 2021; Mahdi 2023).

Sale was particularly indebted to the work of Ludovico Marracci, a Catholic cleric who learned Arabic from Maronites in Rome and who sought to study Arabic and Islam with an aim of converting Muslims to Christianity. Chair of Arabic at the University of Rome, La Sapienza, Marracci, with the help of a team of scholars, many of them Maronites, published in 1698 an annotated Latin translation of the Quran.<sup>5</sup> The 850-page volume provides the Arabic text for each sura, followed by his Latin translation, accompanied by notes and by extensive 'refutations'; Marracci bases his work on a large range of works of *tafsir*—Muslim commentaries on the Quran—which he consulted in the rich Arabic collection of the Vatican library. It is in his refutations that Marracci's missionary and polemical goals become clear. Sale was not the only European scholar to be indebted to Marracci's work while at the same time rejecting his Catholic missionary bias: he was preceded in particular by two Protestant orientalist scholars, Adrien Reland and Jean Gagnier (Tolan 2019: 163–4). Sale cites all of these scholars in his copious notes. Marracci was particularly useful because his notes and commentary provided access to works of *tafsir* which were unavailable to Sale in London. Sale closely read Marracci's translation and used it to help him understand the Arabic text of the Quran, but he often makes

<sup>5</sup>Marracci (1698). On Marracci's translation and its impact on European studies of Islam and the Quran, see Gleis and Tottoli (2016), Hamilton (2018), Hamilton (2019) and Bevilacqua (2018).

translation choices different from those of Marracci (Bevilacqua 2013; Mahdi 2023).

Sale opens his ‘Preliminary discourse’ with a description of Arabia at the time of Muhammad’s birth. His pre-Muslim Arabs are a freedom-loving nation which had managed to preserve its liberty by foiling the attempts at conquest by diverse empires. Their love of eloquence raised poetry to a high art among them. Their traditional religion was essentially monotheistic, to which a number of idolatrous practices and minor deities had accrued. In all ways, they compare favourably to the decadent Roman and Persian empires:

As these empires were weak and declining, so Arabia, at Mohammed’s setting up, was strong and flourishing; having been peopled at the expense of the Grecian empire, whence the violent proceedings of the domineering sects forced many to seek refuge in a free country, as Arabia then was, where they who could not enjoy tranquillity and their conscience at home, found a secure retreat. The Arabians were not only a populous nation, but unacquainted with the luxury and delicacies of the Greeks and Persians, and inured to hardships of all sorts; living in a most parsimonious manner, seldom eating any flesh, drinking no wine, and sitting on the ground. Their political government was also such as favoured the designs of Mohammed; for the division and independency of their tribes were so necessary to the first propagation of his religion, and the foundation of his power, that it would have been scarce possible for him to have effected either, had the Arabs been united in one society. But when they had embraced his religion, the consequent union of their tribes was no less necessary and conducive to their future conquests and grandeur (Sale 1734: 37–8).

Sale here is very much in continuity with Stubbe, Toland and Boulainvilliers; the political degeneracy of the two world empires combined with the religious corruption of Christianity provide the opportunity for Mohammed and his freedom-loving Arabs. In Sale’s lengthy narration of the life of Mohammed, he frequently cites *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī akhbār al-bashar*, the universal history by the Syrian Ayyubid prince and scholar Abu’l-Fida (1273–1331), in Jean Gagnier’s 1723 Latin translation (Gagnier 1723; Talmon-Heller 2008). He also cites Prideaux and Boulainvilliers, offering numerous correctives and criticisms of both authors. He in particular rejects Prideaux’s assertion that Mohammed made the Arabs ‘exchange their idolatry for another religion altogether as bad’. On the contrary, ‘his original design of bringing the pagan Arabs to the knowledge of the true God, was certainly noble, and highly to be commended’ (Sale 1734: 39).

For Sale, as for many of the 18th-century authors he cited, Muhammad was above all a reformer and a destroyer of idols—the pagan idols of Mecca, but also the new idols erected by false Christians. A hero who smashed priestcraft:

They take their priests and their monks for their lords, besides God, and Christ the son of Mary; although they are commanded to

worship one God only: there is no God but he; far be that from him, which they associate with him! They seek to extinguish the light of God with their mouths; but God willeth no other than to perfect his light, although the infidels be adverse thereto' (Quran 9: 31–32, translation Sale 1734: 153).

Sale also presents the prophet as a legislator, drawing a parallel with Numa Pompilius, who claimed, according to Livy, to have received laws from the nymph Egeria and transmitted them to the Roman people (Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 1:19). For Livy this pious fraud was necessary to make the Romans fear the gods and respect the laws he issued for them. Various early modern authors evoked Numa as an exemplar lawgiver. Machiavelli praised Numa for having recognised that religion was 'absolutely necessary' to reduce 'a very fierce people' to civil obedience.<sup>6</sup> Jesuit Antonio Possevino, in 1593, explains that Numa subdued the Roman people through his fictive relations with Egeria, and his successor Tullus Hostilius then imposed this law through the force of arms; in the same way, Mahomet imposed his laws on the Arabs by referring to the Archangel Gabriel and imposed them by force.<sup>7</sup> Similar comparisons were taken up by Gabriel Naudé in 1625 and other authors (Malcolm 2019: 294–5). Thomas Hobbes, who, as we have seen, collaborated with Stubbe, evokes in his *Leviathan* (1651, 2012) various legislators who feigned divine revelation in order to foist laws on their people, from Numa to the founders of the Inca Empire to Muhammad, who 'to set up his new Religion, pretended to have conferences with the Holy Ghost, in forme of a Dove'.<sup>8</sup> Adrien Reland, in his description of the rituals of the Mecca pilgrimage, and in particular the circular movement around the Ka'ba, compares them to the rites that Numa Pompilius imposed on the Romans, citing Plutarch's life of Numa (Tolan 2019: 163). Here and elsewhere, Reland uses comparisons with classical antiquity to valorise Islam both by associating it with the revered cultures of Greco–Roman antiquity and by removing it from a simple comparison with Christianity. Sale's strategy is very much the same as Reland's.

Sale's translation had considerable impact on how Western intellectuals perceived Muhammad and Islam. Thomas Jefferson bought a copy from a Williamsburg, Virginia, bookseller in 1765; Goethe had read a German translation of Sale's version by 1771. One of the readers most marked by his reading of Sale was Voltaire.

### **'Ecrasez l'infâme': Voltaire and Muhammad**

In 1741, Voltaire makes cynical fraud the centrepiece of his *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophete* (Voltaire 2002). The drama takes place at Mecca, still in the hands of Mahomet's opponents, the 'Senate' whose 'shérif', Zopire, denounces Mahomet as an imposter and tyrant lording over Medina: 'a lowly camel driver, insolent imposter to his first wife' (Voltaire 2002: 185) Mahomet himself later brags: 'The sword and Quran in my bloodstained hands bring

<sup>6</sup>Machiavelli, *Discorsi* I.11, i; cited by Malcolm (2019: 168).

<sup>7</sup>Possevino (1593: 443). See Tommasino (2013: 241), Chicote Pompanin (2016: 145).

<sup>8</sup>Hobbes (2012: 2: 174–8); cited by Malcolm (2019: 319).

silence down on everyone else' (Voltaire 2002: 207–8) A lustful, ambitious imposter with a penchant for violence: this Mahomet seems much like Prideaux's. Yet Voltaire's drama is based on a plot of his own invention that has nothing to do with earlier polemics against the prophet. None of the fabrications of the medieval polemicists was as groundless as this pure invention; none of their stories was more zealous in denigrating Mahomet as a cynical, power-hungry leader driven, by lust and raw ambition, to feign prophecy. Yet the real target of Voltaire's work is not Islam, but the Catholic Church. As Voltaire said himself in a letter in 1742:

I wanted to show in this work the horrible excesses that fanaticism can inspire when weak souls are seduced by scoundrels. My play represents, under the name of Mahomet, the prior of the Jacobins placing the dagger in the hand of Jacques Clément [the assassin of King Henri III] (Voltaire 1856: 1:453).

But Voltaire's vision of Muhammad and of Islam would eventually be changed, in part through his encounter with Boulainvilliers' *Vie de Mahomed* and with George Sale's translation of the Quran. He came across Sale's text in London, and praised it in letters he wrote to Nicolas-Claude Thieriot and to Frederick II of Prussia (Tolan 2019: 179). Voltaire's close reading of Sale's Quran is apparent in his *Essai sur l'histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1757). He sets the stage in much the same way as Sale had in the Preliminary discourse (though far more succinctly): at the time of Mahomet's birth, his country 'defended its liberties against the Persians and against the princes of Constantinople'. He describes the divisions within these empires and the conflicts between them, which make them ripe for conquest. Voltaire briefly relates that Mahomet, from a poor family, was in the service of a Meccan woman named Cadigha whom he married and that he 'lived an obscure life until he was forty'. It is then that he began to display 'the talents that rendered him superior to all his countrymen'. Voltaire ascribes to him a simple and forceful eloquence, fine features and 'besides the intrepidity of Alexander, his liberality, and that sobriety which Alexander wanted, in order to render his character complete'. Mahomet well knew his fellow Meccans, their 'ignorance, credulity and disposition for enthusiasm'. He thus 'pretended to receive revelations' (Voltaire 1759 (English translation): 1:43).

Voltaire gives a summary of these revelations: that the Arabs should cease worshiping the stars and worship the God who created them; that the books of the Jews and Christians are corrupted; that the Arabs should pray five times a day, give alms, acknowledge only one God and Mahomet as the last of his prophets, and 'hazard their lives in defence of that faith'. He banned wine, enjoined circumcision, and (in accordance with Eastern custom since time immemorial) allowed polygamy. Voltaire writes that the interpreters of the Quran all affirm that its moral is contained in the following words (a rough translation of Quran 7: 199) 'Court him who discards thee; give to him to taketh from thee; forgive those who have offended thee; do good to all; and never

dispute with the ignorant' (Voltaire 1759: 1:44). While Voltaire charges that the Quran contains 'contradictions, absurdities and anachronisms', other passages he describes as 'sublime'.

Voltaire narrates Mahomet's Hijra and his success at unifying the Arabs under the banner of Islam and launching conquests against the Romans and Persians, demanding tribute from those who submit to his power. 'Of all the legislators, who founded a new religion, he is the only one that extended his by conquests.' Then, at the age of 63, Mahomet fell ill: Voltaire gives a description of the death of a saintly man. Voltaire's Mahomet is descendant of Abraham and is a more successful prophet than Moses, whom he elsewhere portrays as weak and dependent on God's intervention. Mahomet is greater than Alexander. Indeed, he becomes, for Voltaire the great man against whom others are to be measured, a touchstone that he returns to time and again in the *Essai sur les mœurs*:

As a conqueror, legislator, monarch and pontiff, he played the greatest role that can be played on earth in the eyes of the common people, but the wise will always prefer Confucius, precisely because he was none of these things, and because he was content to teach the purest morality to a more ancient, more populated, and more polite nation than the Arab nation (quoted in Elmarsafy 2009: 116–17).

Yet if the distant Confucius can surpass the prophet of Islam, heroes closer to home are not quite up to snuff. We have seen that English royalists compared Cromwell with Mahomet; Voltaire compares them as well and concludes 'Mahomet accomplished infinitely greater things' (quoted in Elmarsafy 2009: 94–5).

### **Muhammad as legislator: Emmanuel Pastoret**

Emmanuel Pastoret published in 1787 his *Zoroastre, Confucius et Mahomet*, 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 (Pastoret 1787: 385). He defends Islam's prophet, too often calumniated as an impostor. In fact, the Quran proffers 'the most sublime truths of cult and morals' (234); it defines the unity of God with an 'admirable concision' (236). 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' (320). Pastoret rejects the vulgar polemical legends such as that of the dove that he trained to eat out of his ear: the Mahometans themselves would laugh at such nonsense (409–10). Granted, he does refer to both Mahomet and Zoroaster as impostors who feigned divine revelations in order to convince their people to accept their laws; this is something that Confucius, to his credit, would have been ashamed to do (387–9). Yet in so doing, Mahomet and Zoroaster merely 'imitated their predecessors', great lawgivers such as Minos, Lycurgus, Numa or Solon, who all pretended to act under the authority of gods such as Jupiter or Apollo.



Unhappy condition of mankind! The purest morality, the most sublime precepts of reason rarely secure men's homage; we need to be seduced rather than convinced; and often it is through our imagination that we can be led (388).

The Marquis of Pastoret, trained in law, was a Freemason who at the age of 24 (in 1779) published his *Éloge de Voltaire*. He wrote on the relations between philosophy, religion and law and on the history of law, publishing in 1784 a treatise on the influence of the maritime law of Rhodes on that of ancient Greece and Rome and in 1788 on *Moses, considered as a legislator and moralist*. Where Voltaire had sought as a historian to offer a non-Eurocentric vision of universal history, Pastoret attempts a similar exercise for the history of law in his *Zoroaster, Confucius and Mahomet*, whom he portrays first and foremost as legislators. Pastoret subsequently embraced the revolution and argued for a moderate, constitutional conception of the new republic.

Lawyer and legislator participating in the creation of the French Republic, Pastoret has a very different perspective on Muhammed than had his predecessors. Not only does he reject the Christian prejudices of many of them, he also eschews the anti-Christian stance of Voltaire. His Mahomet is not a purveyor of polemical arguments against the Church, but rather a positive example of a legislator who brought a new code of law to his nation. Pastoret compares him not to Moses and Jesus (as did the anonymous author of the *Treatise of the Three Impostors*), but to Zoroaster and Confucius, whom he similarly casts as great men and legislators to their respective nations.

Pastoret presents a brief biography of Mahomet, followed by five 'articles': (1) on Mahomet's dogmas (essentially from the Quran, which he has read both in Ludovico Marracci's 1698 Latin translation and in the 1783 French translation by Claude-Étienne Savary); (2) on his religious laws (fasting, pilgrimage, prayer, etc.); (3) his civil laws; (4) his criminal laws; and (5) his moral laws. Pastoret sees his work above all as an exercise in comparative legal history. He presents Mahomet as a brilliant leader and a sage legislator; if he owed his power in part to his military victories, he kept it because his clemency (shown in particular to his former enemies at Mecca) won over the hearts of his opponents, and made them into his most fervent supporters (228).

In his presentation of Mahomet's laws, Pastoret defends him from the attacks of biased Christian critics. The Quran has been vilely abused, but even the Catholic Marracci admits that it conserves the most plausible parts of Christianity alongside what seems most consistent with reason (Pastoret 1787: 234). An 'odious accusation' (320) makes Mahomet into a libertine revelling in pleasures of the flesh and seducing his followers by allowing them to lead dissolute lives. Nothing could be further from the truth: the Quran orders the Muslim to avoid debauchery and to abstain from alcohol. Moreover, his laws favour all the virtues: here Pastoret insists on the Quran's injunctions to justice and to treat with generosity and compassion the poor and the weak.

Mahomet adapted his message to the needs and desires of his people, but this, far from being reprehensible, is a sign of his 'genius': 'Consulting the climate

and the character of the nations for whom he was preparing a law, he saw that, since this nation was born under a burning sky, it was naturally excited by the pleasures of love; he permitted them to enjoy them' (408–9). Mahomet's desire, says Pastoret, was to unify humanity in a universal religion, and to do so by respecting the revelations of Judaism and Christianity and by tolerating their adepts. 'Let us add that this false prophet in general appears to be a reformer less interested in toppling received principles than in reconciling them' (411). Pastoret, writing two years before the revolution, presents these three great men as models of sagacity and tolerance that 18th-century Europeans would be wise to follow.

### Edward Gibbon's Mahomet

Edward Gibbon, British parliamentarian, essayist and historian, gave a detailed portrait of Muhammad and the rise of Islam in the fifth volume of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 1788 (Gibbon 1994; Bevilacqua 2018: 187–95; Fowden 2016; Tolan 2019: 176–83). Like Sale, whom he has read carefully, Gibbon opens his chapter on the rise of Islam with a 'Description of Arabia and Its Inhabitants': a rough and inhospitable land, a simple and noble people: above all, a free people. He also follows Sale in his description of Mahomet's eloquence, good looks and charm, as well as his affability with both the influential and the poor, qualities which earned him the respect and admiration of all. While some have accused him of having cobbled together the Quran from bits and pieces offered by Christian and Jewish collaborators, for Gibbon the unity and vision of the Quran are those of a single focused mind.

In his portrayal of the prophet, Gibbon echoes the Radical Enlightenment view of 7th-century Christianity as a degenerate faith in need of a radical reformer. In one of the more lyrical passages of his chapter on Muhammad and the beginnings of Islam, he writes:

The Christians of the seventh century had insensibly relapsed into a semblance of Paganism: their public and private vows were addressed to the relics and images that disgraced the temples of the East: the throne of the Almighty was darkened by a cloud of martyrs, and saints, and angels, the objects of popular veneration; and the Collyridian heretics, who flourished in the fruitful soil of Arabia, invested the Virgin Mary with the name and honors of a goddess. The mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation appear to contradict the principle of the divine unity. In their obvious sense, they introduce three equal deities, and transform the man Jesus into the substance of the Son of God: an orthodox commentary will satisfy only a believing mind: intemperate curiosity and zeal had torn the veil of the sanctuary; and each of the Oriental sects was eager to confess that all, except themselves, deserved the reproach of idolatry and polytheism. The creed of Mahomet is free from suspicion or ambiguity; and the Koran is a glorious testimony to the

unity of God. The prophet of Mecca rejected the worship of idols and men, of stars and planets, on the rational principle that whatever rises must set, that whatever is born must die, that whatever is corruptible must decay and perish. In the Author of the universe, his rational enthusiasm confessed and adored an infinite and eternal being, without form or place, without issue or similitude, present to our most secret thoughts, existing by the necessity of his own nature, and deriving from himself all moral and intellectual perfection. These sublime truths, thus announced in the language of the prophet, are firmly held by his disciples, and defined with metaphysical precision by the interpreters of the Koran. A philosophic theist might subscribe the popular creed of the Mahometans; a creed too sublime, perhaps, for our present faculties (Gibbon 1994: 3:177).

No more than a page or two earlier, Gibbon had hesitated between fraud and enthusiasm to describe Mahomet's mission. Here he comes down firmly on the side of enthusiasm, indeed 'rational enthusiasm'. Gibbon is careful not to reject outright the doctrine of the Trinity; he does not want his enemies to be able to dismiss him as simply a Unitarian apologist, a new Arthur Bury or Stephen Nye, 17th-century English Unitarian authors who had affirmed that Muhammad had been closer to Christian truth than the Trinitarians (Malcolm 2019: 325; Tolan 2019: 147–9). Some would make such accusations against Gibbon nonetheless: Samuel Johnson jokingly referred to him as 'Mahometan' (Boswell 1980: 695; Womersley 2002: 148–9). The Quran is a 'glorious testimony to the unity of God' whose 'sublime truths' are the essence of Muslim doctrine. This religion he describes as Unitarianism; it is moreover a doctrine that a Deist, or as he says a 'philosophic theist', might adopt. Not a creed likely to seduce Gibbon's clerical opponents, though, he seems to suggest, as he fears it is 'too sublime for our present faculties'. This is the formidable force of Gibbon's prose; he suggests that his clerical opponents are too obtuse to comprehend the sublime, Unitarian truths contained in the Quran. His opponents seem to have neither Mahomet's enthusiasm nor his rationality.

Gibbon has read most of the authors we have discussed and more; his copious footnotes bristle with references to Sale (who, he quips, 'is half a Mussulman'), Pococke, Marracci, Voltaire and others. He uses these notes to remark where these writers differ from each other and why he rejects or accepts their various arguments. He notes, 'two professed Lives of Mahomet have been composed by Dr. Prideaux and the count de Boulainvilliers, but the adverse wish of finding an impostor or a hero has too often corrupted the learning of the doctor and the ingenuity of the count' (Gibbon 1994: 3:190 n111). He ironises that Prideaux reveals the secret thoughts of Mahomet's wives while Boulainvilliers was privy to the patriotic views of Cadijah and the first disciples. He berates Voltaire for the historical inaccuracy of his *Mahomet ou le fanatisme* affirming that 'some reverence is surely due to the fame of heroes and the religion of nations' (Gibbon 1994: 3:204–05 n139). As one reads Gibbon's careful assessments of

his predecessors and his cautious construction of the narrative of the life of Mahomet and the formation of the Muslim community, it becomes clear that Gibbon is doing something that Stubbe, Toland, Sale or Voltaire had not: he is writing history. Toland's *Nazarenus*, for all its scholarly apparatus, as we have seen, was fiercely polemical, and much of it was tongue-in-cheek: a skilful and ambiguous mix of scholarship, diatribe, and parody of scholarship. Voltaire's entertaining and brilliant *Essai sur les mœurs*, while based on an impressive range of reading, was not first and foremost the work of a historian. Voltaire sought to provide an alternative narrative of world history to that of Catholics like Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet; he shows no qualms about tweaking his sources to fit his polemical purposes. It is not that Gibbon is not polemical; he indeed can be, as we have seen. Yet his meticulous scholarship and careful exposition of the errors of his predecessors are as important to his intellectual arsenal as is his razor-sharp irony. And clearly he relishes displaying both. Gibbon's largely positive view of Muhammad and the rise of Islam would have a major impact on subsequent Anglophone historiography.

## Conclusions

Intellectual histories of the Enlightenment often have little to say about Islam. And when they do speak of the changing views on religion and a more positive assessment of Islam, they tend to place this in a continental, in particular French and German, context and date these developments to the 18th century. Jonathan Israel, for example, presents the exercise in 'demolishing priesthood' as an 18th-century, principally Continental affair; the texts we have examined in this article, on the contrary, confirm the hypothesis of Justin Champion, that 'it is possible to see a radical engagement with Islam some half a century before the works of Boulainvilliers and Voltaire'.<sup>9</sup>

As we have seen, in the 17th century, various English authors instrumentalised the history of Islam and the biography of Muhammad for political ends. Admittedly, in doing so many of them reiterated and manipulated the tropes of earlier Christian polemics against Islam: Luther or Calvin were new Muhammads for Catholic authors from the 16th century, just as Cromwell is a new Muhammad for the English royalists of the 17th. But what is new in England in the 17th century is that some republicans, instead of refuting this identification, own it and trumpet it: notably Stubbe, followed by Toland and Sale. The same could be said of Boulainvilliers, a French author who uses the prophet to argue against the power of the Catholic Church in France. Boulainvilliers' anti-royalist works could not be published in France; they were published in Amsterdam and London, where they were read by Sale and Voltaire. It is Boulainvilliers and Sale who bring this vision of Islam as a model for religious and political reform to a broad European readership: their work is read and taken up by authors ranging from Voltaire and Pastoret to Goethe and

<sup>9</sup>Israel (2006), especially chapter 4, 'Demolishing priesthood, ancient and modern'; Champion (2010: 479).

Thomas Jefferson. Some of the authors whose works we have examined showed real curiosity about Islam and its prophet. But in general, first and foremost in their minds were problems closer to home: the authority of scripture, the role of the Church and clergy in European societies, the relationship between Church and Crown. Various Europeans found in Muhammad and the Quran ways of dealing with these issues which were substantially different from those in Christian Europe. For some, Islam provided a foil for traditional Christian values: someone who challenged the traditional order, a Luther or a Cromwell, was denounced as new ‘Mahomet’. Yet for many of the writers we have examined here, Muhammad provided a positive model of pure monotheism, stripped of much of its rituals and trappings, devoid of a corrupt clergy. For all of these authors, as Ziad Elmarsafy puts it, Islam is ‘good to think with’ (Elmarsafy 2009: 20).

Islam and in particular the Quran played a more important role in European intellectual history than is commonly acknowledged. They provided a powerful heuristic model for theologians, exegetes, historians, linguists, jurists and others, whether they saw the Islamic model as inimical, positive or ambivalent. The recent work cited in this article testifies to the interest in the field. The ongoing research programme ‘The European Qur’an’ (or EuQu, <https://euqu.eu/>) brings together researchers from across Europe and beyond to study various uses of the Quran in medieval and early modern European culture: how the Quran was studied, translated, refuted, used as a chrestomathy for the study of Arabic. How, in sum, it became an important part of European cultural baggage, in sometimes surprising ways (Loop 2018; Tolan 2021; Tottoli 2023).

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## About the author

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