

Constructing the Prophetic “Other”: Medieval and Modern Polemics against Muhammad ﷺ in Western Intellectual History

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Abstract

This article investigates the historical development of hostile Western representations of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ from the eighth century to the nineteenth century. Rather than viewing these polemical portrayals merely as products of historical ignorance, this study argues that they functioned as strategic “epistemic shields” designed to define and secure Christian and later secular-Western identities. The analysis traces three key historical shifts: the early Byzantine heresiological integration, the high medieval apocalyptic reframing during the Crusader and Gregorian reform eras, and the nineteenth-century secularization of these tropes within academic Islamwissenschaft. By tracing the evolution of specific recurring stereotypes—specifically regarding the Prophet’s sincerity, sensuality, and use of violence—this study demonstrates the long-term continuity of medieval polemics within modern historical-critical scholarship. Finally, drawing on the postcolonial critiques of Edward Said, Talal Asad, and Wael Hallaq, the article calls for an epistemic decolonization of the historical-critical method in the study of Islamic origins.

Introduction

For more than thirteen centuries, the figure of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has been a central point of conflict in Western thought. Western writers have frequently portrayed him through negative stereotypes, such as a “false prophet” or a “libidinous charlatan” (Daniel, 1960, p. 267). While these caricatures might seem like simple products of ignorance or a lack of sources, historical evidence shows that they were actually designed for a specific purpose: to protect Christian identity and defend it from the theological challenge of Islam (Tolan, 2019, p. xi). The Western image of the Prophet ﷺ is a collection of ideas shaped by Crusader history, church anxieties, and competition between religions (Tolan, 2002, p. 45). Rather than being accidental mistakes, early Byzantine and Latin writings reveal a deliberate effort to fit Islam into a familiar framework of Christian heresy (Southern, 1962, p. 14).

Historically, Western thinkers faced a deep theological crisis when confronted with the rapid growth of Islam, which claimed to complete the Abrahamic revelation (Southern, 1962, pp. 1–2). To manage this threat, they integrated the new faith into their own religious history as a deviant heresy (Tolan, 2002, pp. 135–137). Over the centuries, these polemical ideas evolved. By tracing their path from early medieval times to the nineteenth century, we can see how theological stereotypes were eventually secularized and integrated into modern academic scholarship (Said, 1978, pp. 60–62).

To understand the scope of this transformation, we can contrast how different historical eras reshaped the image of the Prophet ﷺ to serve specific political and religious goals (see Table 1).

Table 1. Traditional Christian Framework vs. Modern Secular Polemics

Phase/Era	Core Representation	Primary Ideological Motive
Byzantine (8th C.)	Heretical Schismatic	Defend internal Christological boundaries
Cluniac (12th C.)	Precursor to the Antichrist	Prevent Christian conversion to Islam
Crusades (12th–14th C.)	Pagan Idol (Mahomet)	Justify and redirect military violence
Enlightenment (18th C.)	Impostor / Clever Politician	Critique church authority and religious institutions
Modern (19th C.–Present)	Divided Leader / Despot	Maintain Western academic and political hegemony

The earliest organized Christian critique of Muhammad ﷺ came from the eighth century in the Umayyad capital. John of Damascus (d. 132/749) worked in the caliph’s tax administration before retiring to the Mar Saba monastery. There, he wrote *De Haeresibus* (Concerning Heresies) and laid the groundwork for future Western arguments (Chase, 1958, pp. 153–156). In Chapter 101, John classified the “cult of the Ishmaelites” as a Christian heresy—a strategic move rather than an accidental error (Chase, 1958, pp. 153–155). As Sidney Griffith explains, early Christian writers under Muslim rule wrote these disputations to keep clear boundaries between their communities and the surrounding society (Griffith, 2008, pp. 34–37).

John’s critique focused on what he called the “mutilation” of God’s Word and Spirit. He argued that by denying the divinity of Christ, Muslims left God “without-Word” and “without-Spirit.” He claimed that this state was worse than pagan association (shirk) (Chase, 1958, p. 156). This shows that the Byzantine response was mostly about maintaining Christian theology, not understanding Islamic life (Sahas, 1972, pp. 67–69). John’s work also shows that he encountered a fluid version of early Islam, which was still developing its formal doctrines (Donner, 2010, p. 10). His claim that Muhammad ﷺ performed no miracles is significant. While the Qur’an points to its own verses as the sole miracle, John turned this absence into a standard argument to deny his prophethood (Chase, 1958, pp. 154–155; Daniel, 1960, pp. 93–97).

The Cluniac Translation: Apocalyptic Reframing and the Toledan Collection

By the twelfth century, anti-Islamic writing shifted to the Latin West, driven by the Cluniac reform movement and the Second Crusade. Peter the Venerable changed how the West studied Islam by commissioning the first Latin translation of the Qur’an (Resnick, 2016, p. 39). This translation project, known as the Toledan Collection, allowed Western scholars to refute Islam by engaging with its actual scriptures, even if their goal was entirely hostile (Resnick, 2016, pp. 6, 34).

Under this new framework, Peter reframed the Prophet ﷺ from a simple heretic into a “precursor to the Antichrist” (Resnick, 2016, p. 68). This change in view was triggered by the failure of the Crusades to secure Jerusalem permanently and the rise of the Mongol threat (Southern, 1962, pp. 37–39). By labeling Islam as a spiritual plague spread through a false revelation, Peter tried to keep European Christians from converting to Islam (Tolan, 2002, p. 158). From this perspective, Muslim military victories were not a sign of God’s favor, but a punishment for Christian sins (Resnick, 2016, p. 68).

The Gregorian Reform and the Construction of Islamic Sensuality

Another highly persistent stereotype—the claim that the Prophet ﷺ was overly sensual—developed as a byproduct of the eleventh-century Gregorian Reform (Moore, 1987, p. 123). The church constructed this image

of a sensual impostor to solve an internal crisis: the enforcement of clerical celibacy (Mulligan, 2022, pp. 4–5).

During the reform, the Pope faced strong resistance from married priests who wanted to keep their traditional lifestyle (Rademacher, 1973, pp. 12–14). To break this resistance, reformers like Peter Damian and Pope Gregory VII used Muhammad ﷺ as a negative example (Elliott, 1993, p. 14). They argued that if celibacy represented Christian holiness, then its opposite—sexual permissiveness—had to be equated with the false religion of the Saracens (MacCulloch, 2024, pp. 222–225).

Western writers stripped the Prophet’s domestic life of its legal and social context. Instead, they used narratives like his marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh as proof that he made up revelations to suit his desires (Roded, 2014, p. 3). By projecting these traits onto Muhammad ﷺ, the reformers defined Christian identity through the virtues of restraint and asceticism, justifying celibacy as a mark of spiritual superiority (Elliott, 2020, p. 45).

The Crusader Imagination: Chansons de Geste and Idolatry

While highly educated scholars viewed Islam as a heresy, popular medieval culture transformed the Prophet ﷺ into a pagan idol (Tolan, 2002, p. 124). In the famous Song of Roland, Muslims are depicted as worshipping a trinity of “Mahomet, Apollo, and Tervagant” (Tolan, 2002, p. 126; Southern, 1962, p. 35). This major theological error served a practical purpose: it helped redirect military violence (Tolan, 2002, p. 130). As Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes, the Crusades created a new mental map that divided the world into strict racial and religious categories (Akbari, 2009, pp. 114–118).

By describing Muslims as pagan idolaters, Crusader ideology turned the conquest of Islamic lands into a holy war, similar to the biblical conquest of the Promised Land (Tolan, 2002, p. 133). This theatrical representation made the Muslim enemy less foreign by fitting them into familiar pagan categories (Said, 1978, p. 63). When traders and travelers established closer contact with the Muslim world, Western images shifted back to the “heretical” model, but the popular image of a violent, idolatrous faith remained in folklore and art (Tolan, 2002, pp. 165–168).

Comparative Geographies: Triangulating the Religious Other

Medieval Christian polemics did not operate in isolation. They existed within a shared mental map that grouped all non-Christians together (Ames, 2020, pp. 470–491). This created a “triangulation” where stereotypes were shared and adapted between Jews, Muslims, and heretics (Ames, 2020, p. 472). While similar accusations of sexual deviance and demonic influence were used against all three groups, the practical consequences differed (Ames, 2020, p. 473).

For example, the “obstinacy” of the Jew was contrasted with the “lasciviousness” of the Muslim (Tolan, 2002, p. 168). Jews lived within European society and were treated as “witnesses” to the truth of the Old Testament, even as they were demonized (Ames, 2020, p. 475). Muslims, however, were seen as an external military threat (Southern, 1962, p. 18). Heretics were viewed as traitors inside the church, and accusations of “Islam” were often used as an insult to silence Christian rivals (Tolan, 2019, p. 165). This close connection meant that arguments against one group were easily adapted to target another (Ames, 2020, p. 478).

The Enlightenment Paradox: From Imposture to Hero Worship

During the Enlightenment, the image of Muhammad ﷺ was secularized, but it remained hostile (Tolan, 2019, p. 165). Thinkers like Voltaire used the Prophet ﷺ as a weapon to critique the Catholic Church and religious fanaticism, portraying him as a clever politician who fabricated revelations for power (Hammerbeck, 2003, pp. 5–7). As Talal Asad has argued, this secular shift did not eliminate the old theological anxieties; instead,

secularism simply inherited them, keeping the image of the “impostor” as a basic standard to define modern rationality against religious backwardness (Asad, 2003, pp. 181–183). This critique created the “Self-Serving Revelation Hypothesis”—the idea that the Qur’an was invented for personal gain (Muir, 1861, pp. 320–322).

On the other hand, writers like Thomas Carlyle offered a more positive view, describing Muhammad ﷺ as a hero or a great leader (Carlyle, 1841, pp. 43–45). However, this hero-worship still denied his claim to true prophethood, reducing his message to a human achievement of the Arab race (Al-Olaqi, 2025, p. 102). In the end, this modern portrayal remained a secular version of the medieval “false prophet” trope, replacing the devil with a human charlatan (Said, 1978, pp. 120–122).

The Nineteenth-Century Academic Shift: Muir, Renan, and Nöldeke

In the nineteenth century, the academic study of Islam (Islamwissenschaft) was formalized, but it retained many medieval frameworks (Said, 1978, pp. 1–3). Sir William Muir’s *The Life of Mahomet* (1861) used advanced Arabic philology to support the old idea of a self-serving revelation (Muir, 1861, p. 325). Muir argued that while Muhammad ﷺ may have been sincere in Mecca, his move to Medina led to a moral decline where he used revelation for political goals (Muir, 1861, p. 327; Buaben, 1996, pp. 45–48).

Ernest Renan added a racial element to this critique. In 1851, he famously wrote that “Islam was born in the full light of history,” but he used this historical visibility to claim that the “Semitic mind” was incapable of philosophy or scientific progress (Renan, 1851, p. 1063). This bipartite narrative—dividing the life of the Prophet ﷺ into a sincere religious phase in Mecca and a violent political phase in Medina—became the standard academic model, adopted by scholars like Theodor Nöldeke and Ignaz Goldziher (Watt, 1961, p. 232).

Modern Critiques: Said, Hallaq, and the Limits of Historical Criticism

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) challenged these academic traditions by showing how Western representations of the East were tied to colonial power (Said, 1978, pp. 1–3). Said argued that the image of the Orient was constructed to justify European imperial domination (Said, 1978, p. 204). While Said focused on cultural representation, Wael Hallaq has offered a deeper critique of the methods of modern scholarship (Hallaq, 2018, p. 4).

Hallaq argues that the historical-critical method is a form of “Western epistemic sovereignty”—the claim that modern Western scholars have the exclusive authority to define what is true (Hallaq, 2018, p. 14). In this view, Western studies have dismantled the traditional legal and moral framework of Islamic law to fit the administrative needs of the modern state (Hallaq, 2018, p. 72). This process of dismantling, which he calls “epistemicide,” represents the modern continuation of medieval polemics under a secular guise (Hallaq, 2018, p. 232).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the hostile Western image of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is not a simple relic of medieval ignorance, but an active, adaptive system of thought (Tolan, 2019, p. 259). From early Byzantine theology to modern secular scholarship, these representations have always been used to protect Western self-conceptions during times of crisis (Daniel, 1960, pp. 268–270). The persistence of these tropes in modern media—where Islam is frequently linked to violence and misogyny—shows the enduring power of these historical archives (Tolan, 2019, p. 261).

For contemporary Islamic studies, moving past these polemics requires a deep decolonization of the field. This means recognizing the internal logic, moral consistency, and independent agency of the Islamic tradition. By understanding how these historical stereotypes were constructed, we can move beyond

defensive apologetics and approach the biography (sirah) of the Prophet ﷺ with intellectual confidence and clarity.

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