

# ISLAM AS VIEWED BY SOME NON-MUSLIM LITERARY WRITERS

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## Introductory note:

**My** interest in Islam did not begin with my interest in literature. The latter came at a much earlier period of my student life and preparation as future teacher of English. But a greater awareness of the subjects "Islam" and "Literature" came by chance as I was going over an annotated bibliography of works on Arab culture in a library in Cairo some years back. I was even more struck when I came across the title "Islam in English Literature", a Ph.D dissertation of the late Prof. Porter Smith. I didn't realize then how that interest sparked by the two subjects *together* would lead me to what I call a personal odyssey. The dissertation was unavailable then and I had searched for it every summer and every chance I could get anywhere and in any form even writing the inter-library loan for a microfilm copy of it but without success. I almost got hold of it in Madison in 1976 but it was lent out and in the same campus library in 1983, I read a part of the original dissertation. Finally, in the summer of 1983, I had the most recent edition of it at the library of Columbia University, N.Y. which granted the Ph.D degree to its author. On choosing to write on a subject of this kind, I must admit I am not fully qualified for it, being a non-Arab Muslim convert. I am at best, an interested general reader of both subjects with an added advantage: some understanding of the former and a professional experience in teaching literature.

There is felt today an upsurge of interest in Islam particularly in the West and elsewhere. This marked revival is evidenced by the growing number of converts from all over the world and the ever-increasing clamour of Muslim communities in the West to have a truly Islamic education for their children.

Furthermore, the prestige and influence of Saudi Arabia at the international level has made the words "Arab" and "Islam" as one – a dominant force to be reckoned with – and to a great many people – a threatening one. Doubtless, this view is held by many present-day orientalists whose endeavours in prestigious

western universities have shaped the thinking of their students. Some of them are said to be engaged in activities that are not exactly academic in nature. Still others say that the revival itself is a reflection of the emergence of the “reborn enemy”.

A.L. Tibawi<sup>(1)</sup>, in his scholarly and thought-provoking article sums up by saying that the “subjects of Islam and Arabs as written and taught by Orientalists (are) in tone and content, still anti-Islam and anti-Arab, particularly as regarding contemporary affairs”.<sup>\*</sup> He points out further, that the origin of this great distortion is the persistence in studying Islam and the Arabs through the application of western European categories by Christians and Jews who cannot free themselves of their inherited prejudices.

Some forty years earlier, Smith<sup>(2)</sup> in his study of Islam in English literature, first published in 1939, decried the gross misrepresentation of Islam and the Arabs as depicted in poetry, drama, and prose in the form of travelogues. This misrepresentation, either brought about by ignorance or prejudice was perpetuated as writers took from their predecessors information drawn from usually unreliable sources.

Tibawi’s view, as mentioned earlier, runs parallel to Smith’s but while the former deals with historical material – past and present – the latter dealt in an intensive study with the literary works of English writers from the Middle Ages, the Age of Dryden, to the early Victorian age culminating in Carlyle’s<sup>(3)</sup> famous “On Heroes, and Hero Worship” (1841).

“Islam in English Literature” was first published in 1939 in Beirut where the author had taught for well over forty years. He died in 1955. A recent edition was published by Caravan Books N.Y. edited by S.B. Bushrui and Anahid Melikian and a foreword by Omar A. Farroukh. In the foreword to the second edition, the writer says that the book is “a credit to Islam and a tribute to the Prophet”. Some changes have been made, the editors have pointed out; whether the changes are linguistic or contextual have not been mentioned. The bibliography (about 275 references) is a rich source of information for anyone who wishes to pursue the subject further.

Professor Smith’s study of Islam in English literature traces the distortions and misconceptions about Islam and the Prophet (peace be upon him) and how these prevailed throughout the centuries. From his study, one gets a glimpse of how Islam was viewed from the Middle Ages to the 19th century as reflected in the

works of literary writers. In their presentation and treatment of Islam, writers tended to perpetuate traditional beliefs mostly coloring them with their own Christian concepts.

For example, in the Digby Mysteries cited by Smith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was called "Sentt Mahwed". Here one notes the affixed title "St." Also noted are the various ways the Prophet's name was spelled, about 17 forms for the spelling of "Mahomet", 17 for "Mahoud" and 33 for "Maumet" and 6 for "Mohammad" making a total of 73 ways.

Apart from the fixed "Saint", further Christian overtones is seen when one of the characters in the play from the Digby Mysteries supplicates the Prophet thus:

**"Good Lord, lett my sowle  
be lost  
All my counsell dow wost."**

In these lines are revealed:

1. The mistaken belief prevailing at the time that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was both god and saint; perhaps a carry-over of the Christian concept of Jesus as son of God worshipped by the "Saracens".
2. The choice of words, tone and manner of the supplication is definitely Christian.

The term "Saracen", "Moor" in English literature was meant to refer to any Muslim, Arab, or Turk, or Persian or even an enemy. It is no wonder that western negative reaction towards "Arab" may again be a carryover of an earlier prejudice against Islam as a religion and as a civilization.

Another example of gross misrepresentation of Islam by literary writers who color their ideas with their own Christian concepts is shown in the following lines from William Cowper's<sup>(4)</sup> "Love of the World Reproved: or Hypocrisy Detected (1782)."

**Thus says the prophet of the Turk  
"Good Musulman, abstain from pork;  
There is a part in every swine  
No friend or follower of mine  
May taste, what'er his inclination  
Or pain of excommunication".**

**Such Mahomet's mysterious charge  
And thus he left the point at large.**

Apparently, "Musulman" here is a corruption of "Muslim". Cowper's poem makes absurd reference of Muslim's practice – the prohibition to eat pork. But what is incredible about the lines – from a Muslim's point of view – is the supposed permission to eat any part of the swine except the part prohibited by the "prophet of the Turk". Otherwise, there's the punishment of excommunication. To a Christian, the severest form of punishment he can imagine is excommunication. Here again, one finds the poet applying his own concept of punishment on a topic supposedly Islamic.

Daniel's study<sup>(5)</sup> (1960) of how the west formulated its view of Islam, points out that ignorance of the true nature of Islam was not the only reason for the hostility between the Christian West and the Islamic East. The Christian East was considered the source of information about Islam by the Christian West; thus making it the original source of western knowledge of and feeling towards Islam. The East here refers to the Byzantine world and the Mozarabs of Spain. Latin Europe in turn received its information from Spain, which the Arabs occupied in 711; from Sicily which they held from 825 to 1091, and finally, from the Crusades which lasted for about two centuries.

Another source of information about Islam was the Holy Koran of which the first translation into a western language (Latin) was said to have been completed in 1143 by an English scholar, Robert of Ketton. Several other translations which appeared over the centuries were found to be inaccurate and misleading. The fact that there appeared many translations indicates at least the interest in Islam; yet it was mainly the writer's intention to invalidate Islam as a religion.

Ideas expressed by writers many of whom were monks and churchmen became widespread through the 14th century, some six centuries later from the first contact of Islam in the 8th century.

In England, knowledge about Islam was obtained from the stories of travellers and clergymen who studied "Arabic philosophy mostly from Spain and from the Crusaders. The most popular vehicle in spreading the knowledge of Islam and of Muslims is through literature. From the source of information mentioned above, one can readily see how misconceptions arose and how these have been perpetuated by literary writers who picked up without verification from reliable sources the current ideas of the time. One of the most widely read and translated

into many languages was **The Travels of Sir John Mandeville**<sup>(6)</sup>, originally written in French. It gives an imaginative account of the prophet's life but unfortunately had been accepted through five centuries as authentic and authoritative.

References to Islam, the Prophet (peace be upon him) and Muslims abound in the literature of western countries and even in countries that are not western but exposed to western influence. The Philippines, for example, with Christianity as a legacy from Spain, has a literature heavily influenced by Christian elements. Being a trilingual country, the Philippines has a body of literature representing the languages or dialects in which the work was written: Thus:

**Philippine literature in Spanish,  
Philippine literature in English, and  
Philippine literature in the vernacular.**

Over 300 years of Spanish rule in the Philippines had produced a body of literature – poetry, novels, drama, etc. originally written in Spanish, and the vernacular. Relevant to the present article are the early dramatic plays in the vernacular known as “moro-moro” plays. “Moro” is a term which refers to the Filipino Muslim. One notes its close approximation to the Europeans’ “Moor”.

The “moro-moro” plays were a “must” in towns and villages.

In fact, the social and economic prestige of a town is reflected in terms of the duration the plays are shown. Nightly shows extending over the three-day fiesta period reflect the town's coffers and enthusiasm. The plays are presented in make-shift stages dismantled after the holidays. The setting, costumes, characters and romantic embellishments are not unlike the plays of restoration England. The players are drawn from the notables of the town. Interestingly enough, the much-sought for part by the town's young beauties is the role of the Muslim princess – despite the stress on the play's real purpose: to teach religion as well as to entertain. The theme of the plays is the constant combat between Muslims and Christians wherein the Muslims are invariably slaughtered or converted to Christianity. This of course, is the Christian's concept of a happy ending. A standard feature of the “moro-moro” play is the presence of the fiery moro princess whose long “speech” is considered by the usually enthusiastic audience as **the** part of the play not to be missed. In the speech is brought out the player's dramatic talents as it reflects a whole gamut of emotions – from indignation in defense of her honor, identity, and integrity – to grief and

resignation. Finally, she succumbs and is later won over by the Christian soldier or crusader.

Plays of this kind were very popular and yet they may have contributed albeit unintentionally to the deep wedge between the Muslim south and the Christian north. Apparently, attitudes towards the Moros – not unlike the westerner's view of them as “poor, ignorant barbarians” have remained. But one cannot say for certain, to what extent the play as a popular literary vehicle of the time, had perpetuated this view. But the fact remains, that there still exists the conflict today.

If literature as such had contributed to negative and misguided views, it can also sway readers positive attitudes towards Islam. A case in point is Carlyle's **On Heroes and Hero-Worship** (1841).

Despite centuries of misguided information about Islam and Muslims brought about by sheer ignorance and a passing down of literary traditions and attitudes among writers, a breakthrough came in the 19th century. The particular work cited above was said to have “jolted” the minds and conscience of his century. Through his series of lectures on this subject, he gave a definitive, positive and fair attitude towards the Prophet (peace be upon him). He had refuted- and won-over a generation indoctrinated with the idea of the “Great Imposter”.

Most importantly, no work in English literature had ever dared from that time on to question Carlyle's view.

Gascoyne<sup>(7)</sup> (1963) says of him ... (Carlyle) tried his utmost to communicate the truth he could most clearly see, that men willingly or unwillingly would listen to him, that they should recognize the truth in so far as he could succeed in communicating it to them, and that eventually they would be changed by it. His whole life was built on the faith...

Carlyle gave an inspiring series of lectures on heroes and hero-worship. It had not been easy for him to make a choice of who fits the concept of a hero. He was said to have deliberated long and hard what qualities make a hero, since the concept of a hero consists of an impressive array of qualities found in a number of people. He finally came upon a “hierarchy” of the “heroic” resulting in heroes as king (Cromwell), prophet (Mohammad, the Prophet, peace be upon him), poet (Dante and Shakespeare), and men of letters (Johnson and Bacon), and priests (Luther and Knox).



To have succeeded in swaying and reversing the centuries' old and prevailing misconception about Islam and the Prophet and to make them see the prejudice and ignorance, this is what Carlyle had done. And it is not a mere accomplishment. He communicated the truth as he saw it. How far he has succeeded in doing so and how much a change has come as a result of these new concepts – one cannot say for certain. But one thing is certain: English literature's view on the subject has not been the same since then.

### Concluding statement

Perhaps, it would be worthwhile to have a deeper look at various literary forms in search of inherited prejudices and misconceptions, and negative attitudes towards Islam and Arabs since, as have been pointed out – literary vehicles have been greatly instrumental in developing them. It is the task of the literary writer to correct the great injustice to the readers. The enlightened ones, it is true, would find that the misconceptions are not due to Islam as a religion or civilization but rather to the failings and shortcomings of the writers themselves. Books written and meant to be a "credit" to Islam or as a "tribute" to the Prophet (peace be upon him) are actually an awareness and a recognition of Islam as a religion or as a way of life. Condemnation or praise does not detract from or add to its real worth. As one writer has put it, its permanence is the criterion of its worth. Indeed, Islam persists and pervades.



### Reference Notes

1. Tibawi, A.L. "Second Critique of English-Speaking Orientalists and their Approach to Islam and the Arabs" *Islamic Quarterly* 23:1 London, Islamic Center, 1979, p. 36.
2. Smith, Byron Porter, *Islam in English Literature*. Second Edition, Delmar, New York, Caravan Books, 1980.
3. Carlyle, T. *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, 1841.
4. Wenhham, W. ed. *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, London, 1879, p. 168.
5. Daniel, Norman. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Edinburgh, 1960.
6. *Mandevilles Travels*. Translated from the French of Jean d'Outremeuse. Edited by P. Mameluis, 2 vols. EETS Nos. 153, 154.
7. Gascoyne, David. *Thomas Carlyle*. Published for the British Council and the National Book League. Longmans, Greene and Co., 1963, p. 19.