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Introduction

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD IN WESTERN DISCOURSE

ON OCTOBER 2, 1808, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Napoleon Bonaparte met in Erfurt. The two men discussed politics and chatted about literature. When Napoleon learned that Goethe had translated Voltaire's play *Mahomet, ou le fanatisme* into German, he declared that it was not a good play, that it painted an unworthy portrait of a world conqueror, a great man who had changed the course of history.¹ In this discussion, Napoleon and Goethe talked about Muhammad, or perhaps better said, about "Mahomet," the fictitious scoundrel that Voltaire made into the epitome of fanaticism (in order to attack the Catholic Church), the charismatic leader and military genius who served as a role model for Napoleon; for Goethe he would become, in subsequent writings, the archetypal prophet, a figure that allowed him to explore the interstices between prophet and poet. For these three men, as for many other Europeans, "Mahomet" is not merely a distant historical character, prophet of a foreign religion, he is a figure whose story and whose living legacy are a constant source of curiosity, worry, astonishment, and admiration.

Not all European writers on Muhammad show him the admiration and respect that we find in Bonaparte and Goethe, of course. Much of what is written about him is hostile. It would have been easy for me to compile a chronicle of that hostility, a catalog of

disdain, fear, and insult from the earliest Christian polemical texts against Islam to the shrill declarations of politicians like Geert Wilders, parliamentarian of the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Dutch extreme right) who, to discredit Islam, attacks its prophet, whom he calls a terrorist, a pedophile, and psychopath.² The 2005 controversy over the cartoons of Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* illustrate the potentially explosive nature of Western views of the Muslim prophet, as do the killing of cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015. Tinged by the history of European colonialism and orientalism and by terrorism that claims Islam as its justification, the controversy has provoked a flood of polemics and violence.

Muhammad has always been at the center of European discourse on Islam. For medieval crusade chroniclers, he was either a golden idol that the “Saracens” adored or a shrewd heresiarch who had worked false miracles to seduce the Arabs away from Christianity; both these depictions made him the root of Saracen error and implicitly justified the crusade to wrest the Holy Land from Saracen control. Such contentious images, forged in the middle ages, proved tenacious; in slightly modified forms, they provided the dominant European discourse on the prophet through the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, variants of the image of Muhammad as an “impostor” have been used to justify European colonialism in Muslim lands and to encourage the work of Christian missionaries. This hostility toward Islam and its prophet is an important part of the story that will be told in these pages, but it is only a part. Muhammad occupies a crucial and ambivalent place in the European imagination; he figures as the embodiment of Islam, alternatively provoking fear, loathing, fascination, or admiration, but rarely indifference.

Indeed, the figure of Muhammad and the text of the Qur’ān could inspire interest and esteem, particularly from those who criticized the power of the Church in European society or who deviated from its accepted dogmas. Sixteenth-century Unitarian Miguel Servet mined the Qur’ān for arguments against the doctrine of the Trinity; condemned by the Catholic inquisition, he escaped only to be burned at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva. In the midst of bloody confessional wars that were tearing Europe apart, some looked to the

toleration of religious diversity grounded in the Qur'ān and practiced by the Ottomans as a model Europeans should follow. Various authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in England, France, and elsewhere, portrayed Muhammad as a reformer who abolished the privileges of a corrupt and superstitious clergy, showed tolerance to Jews and Christians, and reestablished the true spirit of monotheism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he is increasingly portrayed as a “great man,” a sort of Arab national hero, bringing law, religion, and glory to his people. Many of these authors are interested less in Islam and its prophet per se than in reading in Muhammad's story lessons that they could apply to their own preoccupations and predicaments.

This book is not about Muhammad, prophet of Islam, but about “Mahomet,” the figure imagined and brought to life by non-Muslim European authors between the twelfth and twenty-first centuries. This is why, throughout this book, I distinguish between “Muhammad” (which I use both for the historical person and for the figure portrayed in Muslim traditions) and the various spellings or deformations of his name found in European languages, which I have reproduced verbatim: Machomet, Mathome, Mafometus, Mouamed, Mahoma, and above all Mahomet. This book, examines the changing faces of Mahomet, the many facets of Western perceptions of the prophet of Islam.

If we are to appreciate the construction of a “European Mahomet,” we must have some idea about the archetype, the seventh-century Arab Muhammad. Here the historian faces the same problem as with other great religious leaders: it is difficult, often impossible, to distinguish historical fact from pious legend, biography from hagiography. Did the biblical patriarchs even exist? Or are they merely mythical figures? Historians have expressed doubt about the existence of Moses, David, and others.³ Jesus, like Muhammad, is a historical figure; we know when and where Jesus and Muhammad lived and what their followers believe about them. The four gospels provide a narrative of Jesus's life and death, which (despite some differences) gives a relatively coherent picture of who Jesus was and what he preached. Yet the Gospels were written between forty and seventy years after Jesus's death. They reflect not only what the authors remember about Jesus but also the social,

political, and religious upheavals of the young Christian community. How can the historian use the Gospels to understand Jesus and the movement he founded? Is it possible to sift through layers of devotion and mythmaking to find a kernel of historical truth? This is the issue that nineteenth-century European scholars grappled with in their quest for the historical Jesus.⁴ Their scholarship provoked controversy, of course, among some European Christians. It is still a problem for historians today seeking to understand Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity. It is impossible to avoid the Gospels, for without them we can know virtually nothing about Jesus. Yet by what criteria can one distinguish historical fact from pious legend?

The historian seeking to understand Muhammad faces similar problems; if anything, his or her task is more daunting. As Maxime Rodinson warned in 1957, “A biography of Mohammed limited only to absolutely unquestionable facts could amount to no more than a few dry pages.”⁵ The Gospels provide a narration of Jesus’s life; the Qur’ān offers nothing of the sort for Muhammad. The dating and composition of the Qur’ān have been objects of scholarly debate, but recent scholarship has more or less confirmed important aspects of the traditional Muslim version: written copies of various suras (chapters) of the Qur’ān existed during Muhammad’s lifetime. ‘Uthmān, the third caliph (644–56), ordered the compilation of what became the standard, definitive edition of the Muslim holy text.⁶ The Qur’ānic text was established by about twenty years after the death of Muhammad, at a time when many of the prophet’s companions were still alive. While, as we shall see, many non-Muslim European authors see “Mahomet” as the author of the Qur’ān, for Muslims it is the word of God revealed through Muhammad. God speaks in the first person, frequently addressing Muhammad as *you* in the singular and Muhammad’s audience as *you* in the plural. As the word of God directed through Muhammad to his Arab listeners, there is no need for the Qur’ān to narrate the life of Muhammad. Muhammad is mentioned by name four times in the Qur’ān, which affirms that he is the “Messenger of God” (rasul Allah). The Qur’ān refers to his preaching in Mecca, the hostility of many of the Meccan pagans to his teaching, his flight to Medina,

some of his marriages, and his political and military struggles as ruler of the Muslim community.

Yet many of the events narrated or alluded to in the Qur'ān can only be understood through the context of later traditions, chiefly the hadiths, sayings attributed to Muhammad or his followers, thousands of which circulated orally during the first two Islamic centuries. It is in the ninth century, during the Abbasid caliphate, that Muslim scholars began to seriously study these hadiths, collecting them and classifying them as *sahīh* (authentic), *hasan* (good; i.e., theologically sound but not necessarily authentic), and *da'īf* (weak). These scholars, such as Muhammad al-Bukhari (810–870) and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (817–875), based their judgments notably on the reliability of the chain of transmission (*isnād*). In order to be authentic, a hadith must have a clear chain of transmission from Muhammad to one of his companions, to another trustworthy source and so forth, down to the informant of the compiler; the content of the hadith, and its compatibility to evolving Muslim doctrine, was also important in ascertaining its authenticity. Yet the compilers themselves acknowledged the difficulty of their task, at a distance of two centuries, to distinguish authentic hadiths among the thousands of spurious ones in circulation. The historian who tries to avoid or ignore hadiths will have little to go on to construct the biography of Muhammad and the early community of his followers. Yet the hadiths as preserved by the compilers of the ninth century reflect in many cases the consensus of Abbasid Baghdad, a very different place from seventh-century Mecca or Medina.

The other major source on the life of Muhammad, closely related to the hadiths, is the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (*Life of the Messenger of God*), originally written by Ibn Ishaq (704–768) but preserved only in the version of Ibn Hisham (d. 833). Here one can read in detail (Ibn Hisham's text is over seven hundred pages long in Alfred Guillaume's English translation) about Muhammad's life and career. Ibn Hisham offers a pious biography containing many elements that explain in detail, and in chronological order, events only alluded to in the Qur'ān. Other passages contradict the Qur'ān; for example, at various places in the Qur'ān, skeptical Meccan pagans demand that Muhammad produce miracles to prove the truth of his preaching. The

Qur'ān responds, "Is it not enough of a miracle that we sent down to you this book?" (Q 29:51). Yet during the first two centuries following Muhammad's death, as Muslims praised their prophet to often skeptical Christians, Jews, and others, they attributed to him a series of miracles similar to those attributed to holy men in pre-Muslim texts. Ibn Hisham relates many of these stories: how angels cut open the chest of the boy Muhammad and purified his heart; how at the bidding of skeptical Meccans the prophet split the moon in two; how he visited heaven and hell in the company of the Archangel Gabriel, and many other miraculous stories. We also find inconsistencies in the texts relating Muhammad's last days: his illness, death, burial, and the succession of Abu Bakr as the first caliph. There are variant, indeed contradictory, accounts in the traditional sources, leading to uncertainty even in the basic questions of the date and place of his death.⁷ Hence for the historian the problem of discerning the "historical Muhammad," of searching for kernels of historical truth in the *Sīra* and the vast collections of hadiths, is at least as difficult as the search for the historical Jesus.

These traditional sources nevertheless largely agree on the principal events in Muhammad's life. Born in the Hashimite clan of Mecca's ruling Quraysh tribe, Muhammad was an orphan—his father died before he was born and his mother when he was a young boy. He was brought up by his paternal uncle, Abū Tālib, and participated in his uncle's business, accompanying his caravans to Syria. On one of these trips, a Christian hermit, Bahīrā, recognized the young Muhammad as a prophet predicted in Christian scripture. At the age of twenty-five, Muhammad married Khadija, a Meccan widow for whom he had worked. At the age of about forty, around 610, Muhammad began to retire to the cave of Hira, in the mountains near Mecca, to meditate. It is here that he received the first revelations of the Qur'ān from the Archangel Gabriel, informing him that God had chosen him as a messenger. He continued to receive these revelations, which he shared first with Khadija and a close circle of family and friends, and eventually began to preach publicly in Mecca.

The essential message of God's revelation to Muhammad, as preserved in the Qur'ān, is that God is one, that he is the creator of the world and of man, and that it is sacrilegious to worship other divini-

ties beside him or in his place. Muhammad called on his listeners to acknowledge God's unity, to reject the cult of idols, and to live righteously, giving alms to the poor and showing justice and compassion. To those who heeded his words, God promised the delights of heaven; to those who refused to listen, the agonies of hellfire. His message provoked hostility from Mecca's religious and social elite, though Abū Tālib protected his nephew. Some of Muhammad's followers took refuge across the Red Sea in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia. When both Khadija and Abū Tālib died, Muhammad's situation became more precarious and he decided to leave Mecca.

It is in 622 that Muhammad made his *hijra* (flight or immigration), a momentous event that marks the year 1 of the Muslim calendar. He went to the town of Yathrib, about 350 kilometers north of Mecca, which subsequently came to be known as the "City of the Prophet," *Madinat al-Nabi*, or simply Medina. Muhammad had been in contact with the people of the city, who agreed to make him their leader. The hijra thus marks a key transformation in Muhammad's life and mission, as he became a charismatic political and military leader as well as a religious and legal authority. Although here is not the place to relate the political and military history of the Medinan community in detail, Muhammad and his associates fought and defeated pagan rivals in Arabia, Jewish tribes in Medina, and finally imposed defeat on Mecca's Quraysh. The Qur'anic suras from the Medina period allude to many of these struggles; they also provide legal guidance for the community of believers in Medina on topics including prayer, purity, marriage, and inheritance.

By about 630, Muhammad was the dominant spiritual, political, and military force in the Arabian Peninsula. He and his followers marched on Mecca in 630; the city surrendered without a fight, and Muhammad and his troops went to the Ka'ba and destroyed the idols there, purifying the sanctuary that, according to the Qur'an, had originally been built by Abraham and his son Ishmael, the oldest temple to the One God. He returned to Medina, capital of his expanding empire. He would come back to Mecca in 631 and 632 to perform the rites of pilgrimage. Muhammad became ill in 632 and died in Medina in the month of June, his head in the lap of his wife Aisha. This narrative, based largely on the *Sira*, has been accepted by most people, Muslim and non-Muslim, who have tried to sketch

the prophet's biography, though it bears repeating that it is difficult if not impossible to separate historically true elements from later pious accretions.

What is clear is that during the two centuries following Muhammad's death, Islam emerged as a religion linked to but clearly distinguished from Judaism and Christianity. Muslim caliphs of the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) dynasties ruled over an immense empire in which the majority was non-Muslim, prompting the caliphs and the ulama (religious/intellectual elite) in their entourage to clearly distinguish Islam both theologically and juridically. Muhammad's role was seen as central to this self-definition: the *shahada*, or Muslim credo, first attested during the Umayyad period, affirms "there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God." The belief in Muhammad's stature as prophet became the essential element that distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims.⁸

Muhammad has always been for Muslims not only a prophet who announced God's word but also a role model. Muslim perceptions of him have varied immensely over time and have led to divergent portraits: a Sufi might see him as a model mystic; a ruler might see him as a sacred king; a pious Muslim as a model to follow in everything from how to pray, to how to greet one's neighbor, to how to brush one's teeth. His very name means "the praised one," and he is variously "praised as a divinely sent apostle, eschatological messiah, political revolutionary, statesman and community leader, military strategist and commander, arbiter of disputes, dispenser of justice, or quintessential mystic."⁹ The history of these rich diverse Muslim traditions about Muhammad has been chronicled and analyzed by a number of scholars, most recently Christiane Gruber.¹⁰ For non-Muslim Europeans and Americans, Muhammad has been the object of everything from indifference, fear, or hostility to curiosity and admiration. My goal in this book is to offer an overview of these "Western" views of Muhammad.

One might fairly ask, in today's globalized world, what "Western" means. Too often, "Muslim" and "Western," or "Muslim" and "European," are presented as self-evident, mutually exclusive terms. Yet of course many Europeans are Muslim and have been so ever since

the forces of Tāriq ibn Ziyād crossed the straits of Gibraltar in 711. Muslims were present in Spain and Sicily for centuries. Beginning in the fourteenth century, the Ottoman Empire expanded into the Balkans and central Europe; some of the ex-Ottoman territories in Europe have significant (in some cases majority) Muslim populations today: Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo. Perhaps rather than “Western” I should speak of “non-Muslim European and American perceptions of the prophet of Islam.” Moreover, “Islam” and “Muslim” can be misleading as well, as the terms refer either to a religion or to a culture and civilization—and often to a confusion of the two. For this reason, historian Marshall Hodgson coined the term “Islamdom” to speak of Islamic civilization, and as a corresponding adjective used “Islamicate.” Yet his terminology has not spread beyond a small group of scholars. In a similar vein, Montgomery Watt preferred to use the term “Eur-America” instead of “West.”¹¹

The terminology is difficult because these categories are both overlapping and in constant flux. Common fallacy opposes the categories of “Europe” and “Islam,” even in scholarly circles. For Tomoko Masuzawa, “the European idea of Islam was curiously monolithic and, for the most part, consistently negative.”¹² In fact, as we will see in this book, European ideas on Islam were anything but monolithic, and many of them have been quite positive. Until the nineteenth century, one could distinguish between traditional Muslim discourse about the prophet Muhammad and the writings of non-Muslim Europeans and Americans (which ranged from polemical to scholarly). Yet in the nineteenth century, many Muslim colonial subjects of the French and British empires read and reacted to European scholarship about Islam. Much scholarship about Islam in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been written by European and American Muslims (some of them immigrants or descendants of immigrants, others converts to Islam).¹³

Nor can we speak of “Christian” perceptions of Islam, for two reasons. First, European Catholic and Protestant Christianity are merely two branches of a world religion including Syriac, Coptic, Greek, Armenian, Ethiopic, and a host of other churches. Many of these latter, “Eastern,” churches have a rich history of long and close contact with and knowledge of Islam. The story of their various perceptions of Islam and its prophet is a fascinating one, but it lies

outside the ambit of this study (though I will at times refer to the works of Christians writing in Greek and Arabic, to the extent that they are influential in Western Europe).¹⁴ Second, many of the Europeans whose writings we will be looking at did not define themselves as Christian, but as Jewish, Deist, or atheist. With these caveats in mind, in the nine chapters that follow, I will attempt to trace the history of European perceptions of the prophet of Islam.

In chapter one, we will see that some Europeans, from the twelfth century to the seventeenth and beyond, portray Islam as a cult of idols and imagine that “Mahomet” is one of their chief gods. A number of the chroniclers who described the capture of Jerusalem by the troops of the First Crusade cast their enemies in the familiar and despised guise of pagan idolaters. The imagined devotions of these “Saracen” enemies echoed the rites of the pagans of ancient Greece and Rome, but paradoxically also resembled the cult of Christian saints. Crusade chroniclers and epic poets like the author of the *Chanson de Roland* narrate wars between Christian knights and Saracen pagans. The victory of righteous Christian crusaders offers proof of the efficacy of Christ and his saints and of the impotence of the Saracen idol Mahomet.

Of course those who knew much of anything about Islam knew that it was monotheistic and that Muhammad was the Saracens’ prophet, not their god. As we will see in chapter two, various medieval authors portray “Mahomet” as a wholly human founder of a new, deviant version of Christianity, a heresy. Through preaching, magic tricks, and false miracles, this charlatan hoodwinked the naive and lustful Arabs into taking him for a prophet and making him their leader. As the “Saracens” had taken over much of the formerly Christian Roman Empire, produced a rich and thriving culture, and consistently defeated crusader armies, these authors sought to comfort their readers that Christians were nevertheless favored by God, and that Mahomet had proffered nothing more than a crude caricature of true religion, which appealed to the Saracens because it gave them license to indulge in violent conquest and sexual debauchery.

One would expect a more nuanced approach from Christians in Spain, where Islam was present from the arrival of the troops of Tāriq ibn Ziyād in 711 to the expulsion of the Moriscos in the seven-

teenth century. Indeed, as we will see in chapter three, it was in thirteenth-century Spain that scholars like Archbishop of Toledo Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada studied Muslim sources on the life of Muhammad. Yet they did so largely to bolster their controversial image of Muhammad as a false prophet and rebel against legitimate political authority. In the fifteenth century, various Spanish and other European authors used this image of the prophet to argue for new crusades against Muslims in Nasrid Granada and the Ottoman Empire. Following the conquest of Granada in 1492, there was increasing pressure on Muslims to convert to Christianity; forced conversions created a large population of Moriscos, nominal Catholics, many of whom continued to practice Islam in secret or developed hybrid practices and beliefs. In this context, sixteenth-century Moriscos forged apocryphal texts that purported to be from the early Church, and which sought to confer legitimacy on their religious beliefs and practices.

At the same time, north of the Pyrenees, Europe's confessional landscape was undergoing tremendous upheaval, provoked both by the Protestant Reformation and by the Ottoman conquest of much of southeastern and central Europe. In order to understand these changes, various Christian authors tried to define the differences and similarities between Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, as we will see in chapter four. In order to denigrate Luther or Calvin, Catholic writers affirmed that they were worse than Mahomet, often highlighting similarities (iconoclasm, sexual license). Protestant polemicists responded in kind, asserting that the pope was worse than Mahomet, that "Mahometanism" and "Papism" were two great heresies concocted by the devil. In this inter-Christian strife and anxiety in the face of Ottoman conquests, a number of European intellectuals took an interest in the Qur'ān. In 1543, Theodor Bibliander published the first printed Qur'ān, the twelfth-century Latin translation by Robert of Ketton, accompanied by an anthology of texts about Islam, including a preface by Martin Luther who explained that there was no better way to combat the Turk than to expose the "lies and fables of Machomet."

The study of the Qur'ān was often undertaken in order to combat Islam, yet increasingly Christian writers mined it for arguments to use against other Christians. For some Protestants, Mahomet's

success was made possible by the corruption of Christianity: the cult of the saints, relics, and the power of the clergy. Unitarians such as Miguel Servet went further, making Mahomet into a true reformer who rightfully rejected the absurd doctrine of the Trinity and who preached the unity of the true God. The prophet of Islam could even be mobilized for inter-Catholic doctrinal disputes; he is cited as an authority testifying to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and as such we find him painted, proudly holding the Qur'ān, in altarpieces in central Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. While most of what is written about the prophet in European languages continues to be negative, more positive assessments begin to be voiced.

England, too, experienced political and religious turmoil in the seventeenth century, and the prophet of Islam was drawn into English debates (as we shall see in chapter five). The first English translation of the Qur'ān was published in 1649, the same year that saw the beheading of King Charles I and the establishment of the commonwealth. The preface to this translation relates the life of Mahomet, making him into a crafty, cynical rebel against legitimate power and a destroyer of long-established social hierarchies, suggesting a parallel with Oliver Cromwell. Indeed, for royalists Cromwell was a new Mahomet. While some republicans rejected this parallel, at least one embraced it enthusiastically: Henry Stubbe, whose *Originall & Progress of Mahometanism* (1671) describes the Muslim prophet as a great reformer who fought the superstition and illegitimate power of Christian clergy and sought to return to a pure, unsullied monotheism. Stubbe's Mahomet is a religious reformer, beloved and admired ruler, and sage legislator. Stubbe becomes the first European non-Muslim to present the prophet in such glowing terms. He is followed by others, in particular English Unitarians and Deists of the late seventeenth century. Anglican scholars defended their Church from such criticism; Humphrey Prideaux, a fellow student with Stubbe at Oxford, in 1697 published his *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet*, in order to show that Mahomet was an impostor and to defend Christianity. Yet increasingly, anticlerical writers such as Irish Deist John Toland portrayed Mahomet as a visionary anticlerical religious reformer, the better to smash the pretensions of the Church of England's priestly aristocracy.

In eighteenth-century France, Mahomet was similarly instrumentalized to attack the prerogatives of the Catholic Church, as we will see in chapter six. Some painted him as an impostor in order to associate his imposture or fanaticism with that of Christians, notably in the *Treatise of the Three Impostors* (1719) and in Voltaire's play *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète* (1741). Yet others follow the lead of Stubbe and Toland to make Mahomet into a reformer who eradicates superstition and combats the power of the clergy. This is how Henri de Boulainvilliers paints the prophet in his *Vie de Mahomed* (1730), and how George Sale presents him in the "preliminary discourse" to his English translation of the Qur'an (1734). Voltaire, thanks in part to his reading of Sale, depicts Mahomet as a reformer and great statesman in his *Essai sur les mœurs*. Indeed, by the end of the century, writers such as English Whig Edward Gibbon see him as a "great man," charismatic leader, and legislator to the Arab nation.

Napoleon Bonaparte, as we have seen, was an admirer of Muhammad. Indeed, as we will see in chapter seven, for Bonaparte the prophet was something of a role model: stirring orator, brilliant general, sage statesman. Nineteenth-century romantics, from Goethe to Carlyle and Lamartine, place both Muhammad and Bonaparte in their pantheon of great men who have changed the course of history. A great man cannot be an impostor, he is necessarily sincere, affirms Carlyle; many other nineteenth-century romantics would agree. Muhammad's sincerity and deep spiritual values are reflected in his humble lifestyle and simple generosity, which won him the love and admiration of his people. For these authors, Muhammad believed in the divine origins of his inspiration; Lamartine gives a psychological portrait of a genius and mystic convinced that his visions come from God. For many of these romantic authors, Muhammad's spirituality shines even more when seen from an increasingly materialistic, skeptical Europe.

Things looked a bit different for nineteenth-century European Jews, as we shall see in chapter eight. Some of the century's finest scholars of the Qur'an and hadiths were German and Hungarian Jews. Abraham Geiger was one of the leaders of the reform movement that sought to modernize Judaism by simplifying its ritual and making it more amenable to European society. He was also a scholar of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Geiger presented Mohammed

as a brilliant reformer who had learned his monotheism from Talmudic scholars and who subsequently adapted it to his Arab audience. Geiger's Mohammed was in essence a Jewish reformer (as was Jesus): not strictly a Jew, to be sure, but nonetheless a better Jew than Geiger's Orthodox Jewish critics. Other Jewish scholars (in particular, Gustav Weil and Ignác Goldziher) embraced and refined this image of the Muslim prophet as a model for Jewish reform.

A number of European authors of the twentieth century, in the context of decolonization and increasing calls for interreligious and intercultural dialogue, argued that Christians should recognize Muhammad as prophet (as we shall see in the ninth and final chapter). In the twentieth century, the figure of the prophet is at the heart of a controversy that animates the Catholic Church concerning the universality of the Christian message and the attitude to be adopted toward the adherents of other faiths. If the issues were different from those of earlier periods, perhaps the essence remains the salvific role of the Christian religion: are only Christians (or only Catholic or Protestants) destined to Paradise, or is it imaginable that others can be saved? Louis Massignon, professor at the Collège de France, was a brilliant Arabist and a devout Catholic. At the same time, he showed a fascination and respect for Islam, especially its mystical currents. For Massignon, Muhammad was a genuine leader, inspired by God, who preached the truth and brought his people to the worship of one supreme God. But if not a false prophet, he nevertheless failed to reach the ultimate truth of Christianity. Subsequently, the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng has developed in detail a theological argument for the recognition of the Prophet Muhammad by the Catholic Church.

Montgomery Watt, scholar of Islam and Anglican priest, was committed to ecumenical dialogue and struggled to find ways to eliminate (or at least reduce) doctrinal barriers to that dialogue. For him (as for Massignon and Küng), Christian recognition of the prophetic role of Muhammad was crucial. For Massignon and his disciple Giulio Basetti-Sani, Islam was positive and could lead to salvation, but it was imperfect because it did not recognize Christ as God and savior; their vision is what Küng classified as inclusive, "conquest by hugging." Küng and Watt try to go further, though each reaches his own limits. Küng remains grounded in the Catholic

Church and, though he confers more legitimacy than Massignon on non-Christian religions, in the end the recognition of Jesus Christ as God and savior remains the highest truth. Watt seems ready to go further still, at times imagining that one new world religion will emerge from a sort of fusion by emulation of the best elements of current religions, and that Islam has as good a claim, or better, than Christianity for providing the basis for that new world religion. For all of these twentieth-century Christian authors, Islam and Muhammad offer a positive, creative challenge to Christianity, an opportunity to rethink its claims to universalism and its relations with the wider world.

The portrayals of the prophet Muhammad that I address in this book represent only a sampling of the rich and varied portraits that European authors and artists have sketched of the prophet of Islam. What should be clear to anyone who reads this book is that European images of Islam and of the prophet Muhammad are anything but monolithic and are far from being invariably hostile. Yet that is how they are often perceived. In part this stems from trends over the last several decades' scholarship (particularly in English) in what has come to be called "postcolonial studies," in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978. Said chronicles the ideological implications of representations of the Orient in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French culture. Orientalism as discourse, for Said, is the ideological counterpart to the political and military realities of British and French Empires in the Near East: Orientalism provides justification for empire. Said has had a profound impact on the field, not least because he emphasized how scholarship is not immune to the political and social pressures of the surrounding society, and how through deliberate distortion or unconscious bias scholarship can support or reinforce the colonial project.¹⁵

Said and other more recent scholars in postcolonial studies have helped us understand how institutions (including those devoted to teaching and research) can conceive and construct colonialist discourses and how the broader culture (including literature and the arts) can justify and even celebrate these discourses. Some of the writings about Islam and Muhammad that we will examine in this

book indeed correspond to this schema; the supposed foibles of the prophet are used to explain the weaknesses and shortcomings of modern Muslims who need the tutelage of the French or the British. Yet to focus solely on these aspects of European discourse on Islam is to miss the ambivalence and nuance this book seeks to highlight. For Humberto Garcia, Said's schema is based on a "Whig fallacy" according to which, for example, radical Protestant writers and Deists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are little more than precursors to the secular reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁶ As a result, Said and others ignore the religious nature of much of these authors' work, or they reduce it to a kind of code for the political. For these authors, "Orientalism" defined Islam as religious and hence atavistic, enforcing a Western superiority and justifying Western domination. This makes them incapable of appreciating the complexity of European responses to Islam, in particular, for Garcia, what he calls "Islamic Republicanism": using primitive Islam, the community that Muhammad founded in Medina, as a model for a rightly ordered society and for proper relations between Church and State. It also makes them incapable of understanding the frank admiration that many European romantics had for Muslim spirituality and for the prophet Muhammad.

Restoring the variety, ambivalence, and complexity of European views of Muhammad and Islam is one of my principal goals in this book. For over a thousand years, Europeans have been writing, thinking, talking, and arguing about the prophet of Islam. Much of what they have to say is negative, but much is ambivalent or praiseful. Muhammad is seen as a brilliant general, a sincere reformer, an inspired mystic, a sage legislator. An apt example of the ambivalence that many Europeans felt toward the Muslim prophet is seen in a watercolor by Eugène Delacroix (fig. 1), a study for a painting in the library of the Palais Bourbon, the seat of the French National Assembly in Paris (though he did not in fact include it in the paintings that adorn the wall of the library).

Muhammad sits on a step, his elbow propped on the pedestal of a column, in a position that suggests either sleep or contemplation. Delacroix has not painted his facial features, so we do not know



FIGURE 1. Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), *Étude pour Mahomet et son ange*. Drawing with watercolor, nineteenth century. Paris, Musée du Louvre (RF 10017). © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Gérard Blot

whether his eyes are open or closed. Above him, in the upper right of the image, we see an angel descending toward him as if to make a revelation. The angel takes the form of a woman, with no wings, rather than the austere male figure of a winged Gabriel seen in the Muslim iconographical tradition. Is Muhammad receiving a

revelation from an angel? Is he waking or dreaming? Is he inspired or deluded? Delacroix, whose travels in France's new colonies and protectorates in North Africa provided the inspiration of many of his works, presents a romantic, orientalist view of Muhammad in all its rich ambiguity. Delacroix's large, energetic brush strokes resist a tidy composition, a technique that echoes the dynamism with which Europeans forged images of Muhammad over the centuries. His subject not only fails to show his face, defying attempts to limit and define him, he also partakes of an angelic world (or is it a dream world?) that bursts in from beyond the neat confines of the paper. An apposite image of the European struggle to comprehend and appreciate the prophet of Islam.

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