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John Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. xii + 309 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780691167060.

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John Tolan is perhaps the foremost Anglophone scholar of European depictions of Islam, especially depictions dating from the Middle Ages (see, for example, his excellent 2002 book *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*). In Tolan's new book, he extends this career-long interest in European constructions of Islam and its prophet beyond the medieval, through the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Age of Empire, all the way to twentieth-century debates surrounding Vatican II and the Catholic Church's softening towards Islam. Tolan positions his book as a corrective to what he sees as the misleading influence of Edward Said's Orientalism and "postcolonial studies" (p. 15). Against Said, Tolan argues, Western views of Islam were far from "monolithic" or uniformly negative (p. 9). While it would be easy to "compile a chronicle of...hostility," Tolan writes, he is more interested in Westerners who showed "interest and esteem," even "frank admiration" for the Prophet (pp. 1-2, 16).

From chapter to chapter, Tolan describes different phases in European depictions of the Prophet, different "faces of Muhammad": "idol, heresiarch, reformer, statesman, mystic, or poet" (p. 260). During the first Frankish encounters with Islam and then the early Crusades, European propagandists, bards, and scholars depicted Muslims as pagan idolaters, and "Mahomet" as their idol; during the twelfth-century spread of Cluniac scholarship, as the Spanish *Reconquista* recovered troves of Muslim texts and made total ignorance of Islam no longer tenable, the West reinvented Muhammad as an Arian heretic, a fraudulent, unoriginal corrupter of Christianity; to Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth-century, he was a rhetorical foil against which to evaluate the alleged folly and intolerance of their religious enemies at home in Europe (e.g., "you Catholics/Protestants are even worse than the Turks!"); to English republicans in the seventeenth century, he was a rational reformer; to the Enlightenment, an example of religious tolerance; to nineteenth-century Romantics, a world-historical genius, a "great man" like Jesus Christ or Napoleon; and to a small but growing number of advocates of Muslim-Christian dialogue in the twentieth century, a legitimate prophetic voice.

These broad strokes of Tolan's outline—from idol to heretic, statesman to Romantic, and beyond—will not come as a revelation to scholars familiar with the work of Norman Daniel, Maxime Rodinson, Henry Laurens, Kecia Ali, or Tolan's own previous *œuvre*. However, there is much here that is new and striking. Tolan shows that these successive stages in European knowledge

about the Prophet were anything but clear, epistemic shifts. On the contrary, canards and legends fabricated in the very first, most propagandistic moments of Muslim-Christian encounter have had enormous staying power across the centuries: that Muhammad trained a dove to land on his shoulder, or a bull to bring him a book, to trick the “credulous” Arabs into believing his revelations were divine; that his visions were actually the result of epileptic seizures; that he borrowed his ideas from a disgruntled Christian heretic named Sergius; that he was poisoned by a virtuous Jewess as he attempted to seduce her; that he claimed he would rise again after three days, but instead his corpse began to decompose like any mortal’s; that later Muslims suspended his body in an “iron coffin held aloft by magnets” (p. 68), as an idol for their superstitious worship; or, finally, that his body was ignominiously devoured by pigs. Many of these Christian fabrications can be traced to the tenth-century “Letter of Al-Kindī,” an attack on Islam and its prophet written by and for Arabic-speaking Christians (possibly in what is now Iraq) to persuade them to resist conversion to Islam. Ever since the twelfth century, after the Christian conquest of Toledo and other centers of Muslim culture in Iberia, European theologians and educated elites gained access to the Qur’an and other authentic Muslim texts. Nevertheless, these negative tropes have remained popular and have tended to reemerge at moments of conflict, whenever it was necessary to rally the Christian troops. Even into the twentieth century, Spanish villagers continued to reenact the *Reconquista* in a yearly ritual by burning in effigy the “Mahoma,” the supposed idol of the Moors.

Tolan traces with painstaking detail the transmission of anti-Muslim legends from one medieval text to another, emphasizing the different contexts and audiences of these documents. For example, if a medieval apologist’s goal was to dissuade fellow Christians from conversion, he might especially highlight the “fraudulent” or “heretical” aspects of Muhammad’s revelation; if the goal was to explain Islam’s troubling success and expansion, the writer might blame it on Muhammad’s alleged licentiousness and worldly appeal. Conversely, in the context of crusade or “reconquest,” where the goal was to justify holy war, propagandists depicted Muhammad as a false god, too weak to protect his followers in battle. Unsurprisingly, texts addressed exclusively to fellow Christians—preaching to the choir—often trafficked in even wilder anti-Muslim fantasies than texts that might have Muslims among their audience.

A special highlight of the book is its careful attention to a series of fascinating figures, often religious dissenters on the margins of European culture, who admired Muhammad or even held him up as an example to emulate. To the “Moriscos”—Andalusian Muslims forced to convert to Christianity in sixteenth-century Spain—Muhammad became a syncretistic figure, foretold by the Christian scriptures and compatible with their new Christian belonging. Morisco manuscripts like *The Essence of the Gospel* and the *Gospel of Barnabas* purported to be ancient biblical texts, foretelling the conversion of the Arabs to Christianity, or explaining that (consistent with Muslim Christology) the historical Jesus had denied being equal with God, and had escaped crucifixion (pp. 95-99). Unitarians, like Miguel Servet (Servetus) and John Toland, went so far as to positively embrace Islam as confirmation of the truth of their theology. For Servet, famously burned at the stake for heresy in Calvin’s Geneva, Muhammad was right: the Apostle Paul and other early Christians had corrupted the original, monotheistic simplicity of Christianity. The Trinity was an “absurd,” pagan doctrine, guilty of driving sensible people like Muhammad and his followers away from Christianity (pp. 113-116). John Toland, the eighteenth-century Irish freethinker, even relied on a copy of the Moriscos’ apocryphal *Gospel of Barnabas* for proof that the earliest Christians had not taught the doctrine of the Trinity (pp. 150-154). (This freethinker’s attack on the Trinity was a kind of posthumous “sweet revenge” against

Christendom, Tolan quips, by the persecuted Moriscos who apparently authored this gospel [p. 151].) And in the nineteenth century, Reform Jews admired Muhammad as a positive example of how to reform a religion along more rational lines (p. 232). Rather than apply the new historical-critical methods to their own Hebrew scriptures, Jewish religious scholars like Abraham Geiger, Gustav Weil, and Ignaz Goldziher found it safer to study Islam. But Muhammad's reform of Arab paganism became a cipher for talking about the reforms they wished to see within Judaism. In the process, these men helped create the field of Islamic studies and overcome the more racialized approach of orientalists like Ernest Renan (p. 227).

Another highlight is Tolan's sensitive and elegant analyses of a number of actual "faces" of Muhammad: illuminated manuscripts, sketches, and paintings, from Delacroix's wonderfully unfinished and inchoate "Study for Mahomet and His Angel" (pp. 17-18) to Louis Bouquet's mural of Muhammad for France's 1931 Colonial Exhibition. These are suggestive images and could serve as provocative conversation-starters in the classroom.

On one level, Tolan pits himself against Edward Said's allegedly too-negative and too-monolithic account of European Orientalism; and indeed, as we have seen, Tolan does uncover a series of more admiring and complex representations of the Prophet. On another level, of course, Tolan is never too far from Said's shadow. For Tolan, as for Said, orientalist representations are not interesting as evidence of real dialogue or cross-cultural encounter, but mainly as evidence of Europeans' own self-understanding: "This book is not about Muhammad, but about 'Mahomet,' the figure imagined and brought to life by non-Muslim European authors" (p. 3). A recurring psychological concept in the book is that of "projection." For example, Tolan argues that *The Song of Roland* accuses Muslims of idol-worship because of Christians' own "problematic relations with images" (p. 21), in order to "[redirect Christian] anxiety" about the Catholic cult of saints (p. 35). Twelfth-century Churchmen who developed the idea that Muhammad was merely a Christian heretic—an Arius on steroids—were "preoccupied with the spread of heresy...in an age when issues of reform and heresy sharply divided the Church and European society" (p. 47). The historian of the Crusades Guibert of Nogent "often attributes to [his religious enemies] perverse sexual practices" because of his own anxieties about his "vow of celibacy" (p. 52). Christians "assumed that Muslims went to Mecca to see Mahomet's tomb" because of their own traditions of pilgrimage (pp. 68-69). And for Voltaire, Muhammad's reformist struggle was a projection of the *philosophe's* own battle against the institutional intolerance of the Catholic church (pp. 168-176). Tolan also ultimately shares Said's assessment of Christian admirers of Islam like Louis Massignon—that Massignon projected a Christian understanding of spirituality onto the Sufi mystics he studied.[1] Tolan calls the Catholic Orientalist "patronizing" towards Islam and seems to agree with Swiss theologian Hans Küng that interreligious dialogue must completely renounce any hope for the Other's eventual conversion, or else it remains "conquest by hugging" at best (pp. 247, 258).

One criticism: the further Tolan ventures out of his medieval expertise and into the modern era, the more narrowly focused on texts and ideas, the more ahistorical and decontextualized his analysis becomes. The final chapter is about the twentieth-century advent of ecumenism—Islam's elevation to the status of an "Abrahamic religion," coequal with Judaism and Christianity—and focuses on such advocates of Muslim-Christian dialogue as Louis Massignon, Hans Küng, and Montgomery Watt. There is also a brief discussion of the Catholic Church's pivot towards dialogue with Islam at Vatican II ("The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims" [in Tolan, p. 242]). For Massignon and his fellow advocates of interreligious dialogue, Islam offers

a true revelation of God's character--to be taken seriously by Christians--yet incomplete. Muhammad's reform was a "preparation" for Muslims' eventual encounter with Christ (p. 240). But whereas Tolan carefully placed earlier, medieval images of Islam in the context of the Crusades, the *Reconquista*, and longstanding traditions of Christian apologetics, Massignon--Tolan writes--was simply "unique" in his time (p. 238). Indeed, the reader would be forgiven for coming away with the impression that Massignon, Küng, and Vatican II's sympathetic pronouncements arose *ex nihilo* and disembodied. There is no wider explanation of where the impetus for dialogue came from--no real account of decolonization, the rise of Arab nationalism, or concerns about the "decline of the West"; no mention of the indispensable role played by missionary congregations like the Dominicans in Egypt or the "White Fathers" in Tunisia; no mention of the Church's guilt over the Holocaust, or of the extent to which Muslim dialogue was only a footnote to the much more pressing question of Jewish-Christian relations.[2] A more contextualized, more social history of ideas--attentive to missionary encounters, colonial politics, and backroom theological debates--would be welcome here.

Still, this is a book that will be an indispensable reference for students and teachers of Muslim-Christian encounter. Tolan has compiled a near-comprehensive inventory of more than a millennium's worth of European uses and abuses of Muhammad. In the process, he convincingly demonstrates the Prophet's longstanding importance to European history and identity, and the "richness, variety, and ambiguity" of the faces Europeans have given him over the centuries (p. 262).

NOTES

[1] Edward Said famously accused Massignon of reading Christian themes into Islam: of overemphasizing the Sufi/Iranian mystic Al-Hallaj, because such Sufi figures are outside the Muslim mainstream, are more amenable to comparison with Christian understandings of spirituality, and are more "Aryan." See Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1978]), pp. 268-272.

[2] Cp. John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, "Le Vatican II des catholiques égyptiens: Au temps de Nasser, l'espoir d'un monde meilleur," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* no. 175 (juillet-septembre 2016): 361-386; John Borelli, "The Origins and Early Development of Interreligious Relations during the Century of the Church (1910-2010)," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 28, no. 2, Ecumenism (Spring 2010): 93; and Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 193-226, at <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvckq5r1.10> (accessed 6/17/2020).

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