MYTHOLOGIES OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH CULTURE

The figure of 'Mahomet' was widely known in early modern England. A grotesque version of the Prophet Muhammad, Mahomet was a product of vilification, caricature and misinformation placed at the centre of Christian conceptions of Islam. In *Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture*, Matthew Dimmock draws on an eclectic range of early modern sources – literary, historical and visual – to explore the nature and use of Mahomet in a period bounded by the beginnings of print and the early Enlightenment. This fabricated figure and his spurious biography were endlessly recycled, but also challenged and vindicated, and the tales the English told about him offer new perspectives on their sense of the world – its geographies and religions, near and far – and their place within it. This book explores the role played by Mahomet in the making of Englishness, and reflects on what this might reveal about England's present circumstances.

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Dedicated to the memory of William Frederick Edwards:
artist, raconteur, publican, grandfather

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> The subject calls for more extended treatment; for the calumnies so long current in the West, false as they obviously are, have done great mischief to Muslims. These calumnies contain the early germs of the prejudices which, like a nightmare, still haunt the imagination of Europeans […]
>
> Hafiz Mahmud Khan Shairani (1911)[1]

In twenty-first-century Britain, as in the wider 'West', the Prophet Muhammad is more widely known than at any time in the past two centuries. His prominence has generated some strikingly contradictory assessments: ex–prime ministerial endorsement as 'an enormously civilising force', Papal reference to his supposed use of religious violence and the range of responses to the infamous and destructive Danish cartoon controversy are just a few examples.[2] In March 2011, the Florida pastor Terry Jones's burning of the Qur'ān and declared intent to 'stage a trial on the life of Muhammad' for 'crimes against humanity' briefly saturated worldwide press coverage and elicited reactions that included horror and indifference as well as, in some cases, support.[3] Yet despite Jones's opportunist claims to the contrary, Muhammad's recent prominence is nothing new. For a period of more than 250 years, from the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth century, he was a similarly familiar presence in the lives of English men and women.

This book is concerned with the life of the Prophet as it was imagined in early modern England from the beginnings of print to the stirrings of Enlightenment, but it is not a biography of the Prophet Muhammad. It is something quite different. In his recent overview of the *Sīra*, which (alongside the Qur'ān and the *Hadīth*) is the primary source of biographical traditions surrounding the Prophet, Tarif Khalidi sought to offer 'a kind of map of a literary tradition'.[4] Here I attempt something similar, but in mapping early English views, the terrain I seek to chart is instead scarred

by vilification, caricature and misinformation whose nature and extent I seek to clarify and analyse. Muslim biographical traditions thus play only a tangential role in this study, because English writers twisted them for polemical ends in a dominant medieval approach before unevenly reinstating them as a more self-consciously authentic 'Mahomet' surfaces in the early modern and Enlightenment periods. What follows is a study of the misrepresentation of a biography or, perhaps, the biography of a misrepresentation.

There can be no doubt that this material is controversial. Muhammad continues to have a vital presence in the lives of Muslims across the world as 'comforter, friend, intercessor' and 'family member'.[5] His life 'reminds the faithful of God's presence'.[6] Muhammad's denigration in the Christian traditions that concern this book depends on an assumption of his centrality within Islam. So Muhammad was reimagined as 'Mahomet', as an inversion of Christ, and 'Mahomet' became an evangelical tool, 'an essential disproof of the Islamic claim to revelation'.[7] In broader terms, the narrative of the life, whether as prophet, saint, warrior or monarch, had long been a primary conduit for the articulation of history and cultural value. Of all non-Christian lives known to late medieval English men and women, Mahomet's was by far the most familiar. It was almost continuously told and retold, often in wildly different circumstances. In a very different way, it was a vital presence in *their* lives.

The incendiary import of this life, its centrality to a vision of the wider world and the cultural assumptions that it carried – then as now – thus necessitate detailed study, the 'more extended treatment' demanded by Hafiz Mahmud Khan Shairani in my epigraph. What remains in the books, images, libraries and archives of these earlier periods testifies to the multifaceted history of Anglo-Muslim encounter. This book explores one of its central elements, often overlooked in recent critical studies, and does so in the hope that it will augment Khalidi's work and assist scholars interested in understanding 'Western', and particularly British, fabrications of Islam and how that history resonates today. This book is thus concerned with the uses of Mahomet in early modern England: how this fabricated figure was created, recycled and contested. I want to explore what this tells us of the British in the making, and how it might help us to understand our present circumstances.

Those readers requiring a detailed biography of the Prophet are referred to some important recent examples, and to scholarly work on the sources of Muhammad's biographical tradition and the role of myth within it.[8] There are, however, some elements of the classical account of

Muhammad's life that will appear repeatedly in different forms in the following pages as pivotal points in a Christian tradition of confutation. It seems useful to highlight them here. Born into an eminent but not prosperous family around 570, Muhammad's first few years were unsettled, and by the age of eight he had lost both his mother and his grandfather, his father Abdulla dying six months before Muhammad was born.[9] Sent to live with his uncle Abu Taleb, a merchant, the young Muhammad travelled widely, and some traditions suggest that at a point between the ages of nine and thirteen his future as a prophet was predicted by Bahira, a monk or hermit. He married a wealthy widow, Khadijah, at the age of twenty-five, and lived in Mecca for the next fifteen years before receiving the first of many revelations in a cave on nearby Mount Hira. Once he began preaching in Mecca he suffered at the hands of various tribal factions, and entered self-imposed exile in Medina in 622 (a flight known as the *Hijra*). Here he gathered followers and united various tribes before returning to Mecca as conqueror. He died in Medina in 632.[10]

The most regularly reproduced life of the Prophet circulating in medieval Christendom took these elements and distorted them to create a grotesque. The result – Mahomet – had been largely generated in the polarised circumstances of the eleventh and twelfth centuries by a potent combination of Muslim converts to Christianity, Christian travellers to Muslim lands and zealous propagandising clergy. The life that emerged was then represented as truth to early Christian audiences.[11] A necessary distinction is maintained throughout this book between the Prophet Muhammad of Muslim biographical traditions and Mahomet, the composite figure of Christian mythology. Many different forms of the transliterated name Muhammad had been used by Christian writers, including the medieval 'Mahun', 'Mahound' and 'Macomete', 'Machomete' in the earliest printed texts and 'Mahumet' in the mid-sixteenth century. The newly standardised Mahomet, introduced in the late sixteenth century, would remain in common use into the early twentieth century. As a clear signal of the fabricated nature of Mahomet in English writing of the early modern period, this name will be used throughout. If this book is in any way biographical, it is concerned with the multiple lives of Mahomet, this Christian construction of the Prophet Muhammad.

The period between the arrival of William Caxton's printing press in Westminster in 1476 and the publication of George Sale's monumental translation of the Qur'ān in London in 1734 encompasses decisive religious, political and social change in England, with the origins of modernity and the beginnings of empire. All this was experienced in dynamic

interchange with Islamic empires, as recent critics have demonstrated.[12] Yet there was no Islam for most English men and women in this influential period, nor was there any Muhammad.[13] There was only Mahomet and Mahometanism. It is an important distinction to make, and it is with Mahomet that this book is concerned.

Throughout the book, quotations from primary sources have remained unchanged (aside from the silent regularisation of the long, or medial, s). When quoting from the Qur'ān or the Bible, specific editions are cited in the notes.

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