

# Reasons for Orientalists' Hostility Towards Prophet Muhammad (SAW)

Zafar Ali Qureshi

There is an unbridgeable gulf between the viewpoints of Christians and Muslims about the personality of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). For Muslims, he is the Prophet par excellence, an exponent of strict monotheism, a sublime and superb model of virtues - honesty, purity, and uprightness. For Christians, he is the target of most hostile, bitter, and venomous attacks on various counts.

For knowing this differential evaluation of the character and personality of the Prophet (SAW), a knowledge of the background and perspective of history is called for, in order to clarify and elucidate as to how far the Christians are justified in their subjective approach to the personality of the Prophet (SAW) and how much biased, prejudiced and wholly topsy-turvy their approach is in this matter.

The first point to be noted is that it was the Christians who first started fighting against the Muslims, and it is they who are still carrying their Crusade mentality in all its bitterness and vehemence, with all its sordid and ignoble motives, devoid of all historical reality and objectivity. We touch upon the subject briefly.

In accordance with the universality of the message of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) sent one of his envoys, Harith Ibn Umair Azdi (RAA), to the governor of Busra, inviting him to Islam. On the way, a Christian chief - Shurahbil Ibn Amr - intercepted and murdered the Prophet's envoy. With a view to avenge the foul murder, the Prophet (SAW) dispatched a small army of some 3,000 men under the command of Zayd Ibn Haritha (RAA). The Muslims were confronted by a formidable host of regular Byzantine troops aided by their Arab auxiliaries. Not daunted by the formidable number of the enemy, the Muslims gave fight at the battle of Muthah but suffered grievous hurt. The position was retrieved with great difficulty by Khalid Ibn Walid (RAA), who took over the command after he previous commanders had fallen fighting.

Before his death, the Prophet (SAW) had given orders to avenge the disaster of Muthah. After his death, the Christians began to fish in troubled waters and wanted to unsettle the nascent Muslim state. Perforce Caliph Abu Bakr (RAA) took up the gauntlet and war against the Christians was taken up and carried on by Umar the Great (RAA), the Umayyads and their successors.

The capture by the Muslims of the fairest provinces of the Byzantine Empire like Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, which were the strongholds of the Eastern Church, the conquest of North Africa, Sicily, and Spain by the Arabs, and their victorious advances up to the gates of Rome, the rise of the Turks, their brilliant conquests in Eastern and Central Europe, their knocking at the very heart of Christendom, the launching of the Crusades by the West and their dismal failure, the new phase of Western imperialism, its onward march, rout and retrogression, the hopeless failure of the Christian missionaries in evangelizing the Middle East - all these have combined together to engender, foster, and leave behind a legacy of bitterness, hatred, and enmity in the hearts of the people of the West against Islam and its Prophet (SAW).

## Religious Aspect of the Conflict:

One of the other main reasons for Christian hostility towards Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and Islam is the religious aspect of the conflict. There has been a clash of ideology between the two religions.

Christians claim that Christianity is the final and perfect form of religion. George Fisher says:

We say that Christianity is the perfect form of religion. In other words, it is the absolute religion. It is the final outcome of this long process of growth. Rather it is the culminating point in the progress of revelation fulfilling or filling out to perfection, that which preceded. 2

Rev. W. Montgomery Watt declares emphatically:

The Christians claim that in Jesus what was wrong with the world has been set right.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Speer avers dogmatically that Christ is absolute and final Savior. There can be no revelation displacing or supplementing the revelation in Him.<sup>4</sup>

Islam came challenging three claims of Christianity. Sir Hamilton Gibb puts it as follows:

Thus Islam appeared not as a new religion but a revival of pure Abrahmic monotheism, purified at once of the accretions of Judaism and Christianity and superseding them as a final revelation.<sup>5</sup>

Rev. T. P. Huges gives vent to Christian animosity to the advent of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in these words:

In forming the estimate of Muhammad's prophetic pretensions it must be remembered that he did not claim to be the founder of a new religion, but merely of a new covenant. He is the last and greatest of God's prophets. He is sent to convert the world to the one true religion which God had before revealed to the five great law-givers - Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus! It is here that we take our stand! We give Muhammad credit as a warrior, as a legislator, as a poet, as a man of uncommon genius, raising himself amidst great opposition to a pinnacle of renown; we admit he is, without doubt, one of the great heroes the world has ever seen; but when we consider his claim to supersede the mission of the Divine Jesus, we strip him of his borrowed plumes, and reduce him to the condition of an impostor!... He has attempted to rob Christianity of every distinctive truth it possesses... its Divine Saviour, its Heavenly Comforter...<sup>6</sup>

Some Christians assert that Islam is "the arch-foe of Christianity."<sup>7</sup>

Stephen Neill acknowledges that Christian approaches to the Muslims, with certain notable exceptions, have been carried out on the basis and in the spirit of polemic.<sup>8</sup>

So this clash of arms and onslaught of words on polemic grounds, and the consequent legacy of hatred, spite, and rancor, inherited by the modern West from their forbears of the Middle Ages, has conditioned, warped and clouded the thinking of Western scholars in their writings about Islam in general and the Prophet of Islam (SAW) in particular. And, according to the conscious or unconscious working of their minds, it is the Prophet of Islam (SAW) who is to be blamed primarily - nay, wholly and solely - for the debacle of Christendom in the East, and hence to be held up to obloquy and derision, and to be blamed for all the sins of omission or commission of Muslims in their dealings with the West through the ages. And in spite of their vociferous protestations of "objective historiography", they have miserably failed to judge and evaluate the Prophet of Islam (SAW) in an objective, impartial, and realistic manner, free from pre-conceived biases.

### **Impact of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) on the East**

(Whether early Arab conquests have been harmful or beneficial to the Christians of the East?)

George Sale says in his "Preliminary Discourse" to his Translation of the Holy Qur'an into English as to why Christian writers intentionally vilify the Prophet of Islam (SAW). He writes:

The terrible destruction of the Eastern Churches, once so glorious and flourishing, by the sudden spreading of Mohammedanism, and the great success of its professors against the Christians, necessarily inspire a horror of that religion to those to whom it has been so fatal, and, no wonder, if they endeavour to set the character of the founder and its doctrines in the most infamous light.<sup>9</sup>

Sale makes out as if the Eastern Churches were annihilated by the early Arab victories and Islam spread therein at the cost of Christianity at the point of the sword, as the story runs in the West.

The story of these Eastern Churches as unfolded by history is quite different from that made out by Sale. The Greek Orthodox Church, which had the full backing of the Byzantine Government, tyrannized over the Churches belonging to other Christian denominations, and left no stone unturned to harm them to their heart's content. The Arab conquerors were, therefore, hailed as "liberators" by these persecuted Christians and others.

We touch upon the subject very briefly.

In his *History of the Byzantine Empire*, George Finlay has made the following pertinent observations which bring out the role of Arab conquerors as "liberators":

In almost every case in which the Saracens conquered Christian nations, history unfortunately reveals that they owed their success chiefly to the favour with which their progress was regarded by the masses of the people. To the disgrace of most Christian governments, it will be found that their administration was more oppressive than that of the Arabian conquerors... The inhabitants of Syria welcomed the first followers of Mahomet; the Copts of Egypt contributed to place their country under the domination of the Arabs; the

Christian Berbers aided in the conquest of Africa. All these nations were induced, by the hatred of the government at Constantinople, to place themselves under the sway of the Mohammedans. The treachery of the nobles and the indifference of the people made the south of France an easy prey to the Saracens. The conquest of Crete and Sicily must be traced to the same causes..."<sup>10</sup>

The authors of *The History of Western Civilization* corroborate these views when they write:

... there were thousands of Roman Byzantine subjects in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine - Jews and heretical Christians especially - who were only too glad to exchange Byzantine masters for Mohammedans. For the latter promised them religious tolerance and imposed upon them a smaller tribute than the Byzantine tax. Egyptian Coptic monks, for example, sang chants of rejoicing at the downfall of Byzantine "heretics."<sup>11</sup>

### **Impact of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) on the West, etc.**

(Whether Islam is the "enemy" of Christianity and Western Civilization?)

Referring to the early Muslims and their brilliant conquests, the Italian orientalist Leone Caetani writes ruefully in his noted *Annali dell' Islam*:

Who were these warriors? Who urged them out of their barren deserts to conquer the world? Why were the advantages they gained in a few years so great and complete that thirteen centuries of struggle and powerful weapons of our superior civilization have not availed to beat back the great enemy of faith and civilization? Is it that we lack something where our enemies possess some undeniable superiority, so lasting and stalwart, that with all our progress we have been unable to neutralize it?<sup>12</sup>

It will be seen from these scurrilous remarks of Caetani that he considers Islam to be "the great enemy" of Christianity and Western Civilization, and with this attitude of mind and pre-conceived notions and ideas no objective approach to the personality of the Prophet (SAW) and Islam can be expected from such persons. And Caetani has done his worst to present a highly distorted picture of the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

The irony of the situation is that, as against the scurrilous and obnoxious fulmination and vituperations of the Jews against the character and person of Prophet Isa (AS) and his mother Maryum (SA), which we have not the heart to reproduce, the Holy Qur'an refuted the wild allegations of the Jews in this respect and restored the fair names and characters of these two august and sublime personalities. But, in return, the Christendom, instead of expressing any sense of gratitude for righting the wrong done to Jesus Christ and Mary, have opened the flood-gates of baseless, hostile, and venomous propaganda campaign against Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and Islam, and is still continuing this crusade of the pen with full fury and zeal. Et tu Brutus!

### **Impact of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) on the West**

(Muslim Contribution to the Advancement of European Civilization)

Posing the question "What would have meant for the Arabs and the world at large if Muhammad had died by the sword of the Quraysh?", R. Bosworth Smith replies to it himself and brings out the impact of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) on the world in these words:

The practices that Muhammad forbade and not forbade only but abolished human sacrifices and the murder of female infants, and blood feuds, and unlimited polygamy, and wanton cruelty to slaves, and drunkenness, and gambling would have gone on unchecked in Arabia and the adjoining countries... The dark ages of Europe would have been doubly, nay trebly, dark; for the Arabs who alone by their art and sciences, by their agriculture, their philosophy, and their virtues, shone out amidst the universal gloom of ignorance and crime, who gave to Spain and to Europe an Averroes and an Avicenna, the Alhambra and the Al-Kazr, would have been wandering over their native deserts. As to religion, a Christianity which, in the East, had long become a corrupt superstition, would have become yet more corrupt, and would have sunk to the condition in which it is in Abyssinia now. Over a seventh part of the earth's surface the Star-worshippers might have been worshipping stars, and the Fetish-worshippers Fetishes to this very day...<sup>13</sup>

At the advent of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) darkness held sway all around and ignorance pervaded the world. By the force of his personality and the message of the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) broke the spell of darkness and brought humanity from the depths of darkness and ignorance to the light of knowledge and mastery over the forces of nature. In the Qur'an, he has been called "the Luminous Lamp" (33:46) whose role is to bring people out of the depths of darkness into light with the aid of Divine guidance. (Al-Talaq 65:11)

The most significant aspect of the influence of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) on human history is the launching of a revolution in thought and letters, and, through the momentum created by him, Muslims became the torch-bearers of knowledge in the world, and remained so for a number of centuries. Indeed, all the achievements of modern science and rationalism - the twin pillars of Western civilization - owe their origin and growth to the personality and teaching of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

We bring out this role of the Prophet (SAW) very briefly:

Syed Ameer Ali says in his work *The Spirit of Islam*:

His voice quickened the dead into life, revived the dying, and made the pulse of humanity beat with the accumulated force of ages. The exodus of the Saracens under this mighty impulse, its magnitude and far-reaching effects, form the most marvelous phenomenon of modern times. They issued from their desert fastness as the preceptors of humanity.<sup>14</sup>

But for the Prophet (SAW) and Muslims there would have been no Renaissance, no Reformation, no Rationalism, and no Enlightenment in the West. The German scholar Deutsch enthusiastically declares:

But it was again - "a Book by the aid of which the Arabs conquered a world greater than that of Alexander the Great, greater than that of Rome, and in as many tens of years as the latter had wanted hundreds to accomplish her conquests; by the aid of which they alone of all the Shemites came to Europe as kings, whither the Phoenicians had come as tradesmen, and the Jews as fugitives or captives; came to Europe to hold up, together with these fugitives, the light to humanity; - they alone, while darkness lay around, to raise up the wisdom and knowledge of Hellas from the dead, to teach philosophy, medicine, astronomy and the golden art of song to the West as to the East, to stand at the cradle of modern science, and to cause us late epigoni for ever to weep over the day when Granada fell."<sup>15</sup>

The celebrated scholar, George Sarton, author of the monumental work *Introduction to the History of Science*, has been so much impressed by the works of Muslim scholars that he declares enthusiastically:

The main task of mankind was accomplished by Muslims. The greatest philosopher, al-Farabi, was a Muslim; the greatest mathematician, Abu-Kamil and Ibrahim Ibn Sinan, were Muslims; the greatest geographer and encyclopaedist, al-Mas'udi, was a Muslim; the greatest historian, al-Tabari, was still a Muslim.<sup>16</sup>

It is due to the impact of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) on the intellectual advancement of Europe and the World civilization that William Draper stated correctly:

Four years after the death of Justinian was born the man who, of all men, has exercised the greatest influence upon the human race - Muhammad.<sup>17</sup>

## **Western Prejudiced and Distorted Delineation of the Character of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and Islam**

Instead of being grateful to the Prophet of Islam (SAW) for ameliorating the lot of the Christians of the East by relieving them from the tyranny and thralldom of the Byzantine Church and cultural advancement of the Christians of the West in various realms of thought, and the general advancement of science and civilization in the world, Christians and Western writers have reacted to by presenting the personality of the Prophet of Islam (SAW) in a highly distorted manner. Phillip K. Hitti, for instance, writes in his book *Islam and the West*:

Memories of Crusades past and hopes for others to come lingered for generations. Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and other less highly developed religions were never subjected to such a barrage of abuse and condemnation.

It was primarily fear, hostility, and prejudice that coloured the Western views of Islam, and conditioned their attitude. Islamic beliefs were enemy's beliefs, and, as such, suspect, if not false.<sup>18</sup>

W. Cantwell Smith writes in a similar strain in his work *Islam in Modern History*:

History has been such that the West's relations with the Islamic world have from the first radically different from those with any other civilization. These two have throughout shared a common frontier, which has meant that they have been constantly in conflict and often in open conflict. Europe has known Islam for thirteen centuries mostly as an enemy and a threat... It is no wonder that Mohammad more than any other of the world's great religious leaders has had a "poor press" in the West, and that Islam is the least appreciated there of any of the world's outside faith. Until Karl Marx and the rise of Communism the Prophet organized and launched the only serious challenge to Western civilization that it has faced in the whole history.<sup>19</sup>

J. J. Saunderson tells us:

... yet it would be idle to deny that the Arab prophet has never been viewed with sympathy and favour by Christians whose ideal has naturally been the milder and purer figure of Jesus. The losses which Islam inflicted on Christendom and the propaganda disseminated during the Crusades were not conducive to an impartial judgement, and down almost to recent times Muhammad has been portrayed in controversial literature as ... Absurd stories circulated and long believed.<sup>20</sup>

R. W. Southern writes in a similar strain:

But from about 1120 every one in the West had some picture of what Islam meant, and who Mahomet was. The picture was brilliantly clear, but it was not knowledge, and its details were only accidentally true. Its authors luxuriated in the ignorance of triumphant imagination.<sup>21</sup>

Rev. W. Montgomery Watt states in his book *What is Islam?*:

The difficulty is that we are heirs of a deep seated prejudice which goes back to the war-propaganda of medieval times. This is now to be widely acknowledged... From about the eighth century A.D., Christian Europe began to be conscious of ISLAM, HER GREAT ENEMY, threatening her both in the military and spiritual sphere. In deadly fear Christendom had to bolster confidence by placing the enemy in the most unfavourable light possible, consistent with some genuine basis in fact. The image created in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries continued to dominate European thinking about Islam, and even in the second half of the twentieth century has some vestigial influence.<sup>22</sup>

Prof. Bernard Lewis speaks about persistent Western theological bias against Islam in these words:

The last traces of Western theological prejudice may still be discerned in the work of some modern scholars, lurking behind footnotes of the academic apparatus. <sup>23</sup>

Even a somewhat balanced writer like Sir Hamilton Gibb admits that it is *almost impossible to avoid being subjective* in the matter of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his work. He writes:

... Consequently there are almost as many theories about Muhammad as there are biographers. He has, for example, been portrayed as an epileptic, as a social agitator, as a proto-Mormon. All such extreme subjective views are generally repudiated by the main body of scholars, yet it remains almost impossible to avoid importing some subjective element into any account of his life and work.<sup>24</sup>

The noted American historian, S. P. Scott, boldly lashes out at the willfully distorted picture of the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) drawn by Christian writers and controversialists. He writes:

As a result of *inherited prejudices* the principles of every religion always appear heterodox, false, and absurd to sincere believers in other forms of faith. Of all the theological dogmas, none have suffered more from the effects of ignorance and injustice than those of Islamism. The name of its founder has for thirteen centuries been a synonym of impostor. His motives have been impugned, his sincerity denied. His character has been branded with every vice which degrades or afflicts mankind. The greatest absurdities, the grossest inhumanity, have been attributed to his teachings. Ecclesiastical malice has exhausted its resources to blacken his memory. <sup>25</sup>

Sydney Cave records:

No life has been so variously characterised as Muhammad's. The menace of Islam for long made Christian writers ready to believe the worst about him, and to judge him not only harshly but unjustly. This man, who endured ten years of hardships in the interests of his mission, was not a mere impostor. An entirely false man could not have become the founder of a religion. Carlyle was right there. By his incommunicable genius, by his religious fervour and his cool wisdom, he made a nation of severed tribes. His place in history is secure...26

It will be seen from the foregoing admissions of Western writers themselves that their approach to the personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW) has been vitiated by prejudice, hatred, and bigotry, and they have presented a highly distorted picture of his life and teachings to suit their vested interests. The late Justice S. A. Rehman correctly wrote at one place:

... others blinded by religious bigotry or ingrained prejudice have been motivated by the partisan desire to belittle the personality of the Prophet and his historical stature, and, consequently, they have subjected his life and work to malicious carping criticism.<sup>27</sup>

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### Endnotes

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- 9 Wherry, Rev. E. M., *A Comprehensive Commentary of the Qur'an comprising Sale's Translation and Preliminary Discourse* (London: 1896) vol. 1, pp. 70-71
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- 15 op.cit. p. 394
- 16 Sarton, George., *Introduction to the History of Science* (Baltimore: 1927) vol. 1, p. 624; Hitti, Philip K., *The History of the Arabs* (Macmillan, 1968, Ninth Edition) p. 392
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- 22 Watt, W. Montgomery., *What is Islam?* (London: 1968) pp. 1-2
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The author is former Asstt. Professor (Islamic Studies) Islamia College, Civil Lines, Lahore. He is the author of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his Western Critics.