Re-evaluation of Prophet Mohammed’s Image in Victorian Literature

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Abstract
The following study is about the re-evaluation and reconsideration of the Prophet Mohammed’s life in the Victorian literature. Prior to the nineteenth century, when Islam constituted a threat to Europe, westerners perpetuated many stereotypes about the Prophet. However, during the Victorian era, some writers did not only abandon the old misconceptions, they even went further by denouncing and correcting them. Hence, from the impostor, anti-Christ, subjugator of women, and a heretic, Muhammed became a hero and a model leader in the writings of Carlyle, Bosworth Smith and others.

Introduction
The Victorian Era is particularly a crucial period in Western understandings of Islam. More specifically, its image of Prophet Mohammed has known some radical changes. From a heretic, antichrist and impostor, he has become a heroic figure in the works of some remarkable British writers such as Thomas Carlyle, Bosworth Smith and others. Though the old negatives remained, a considerable effort has been made to reconsider and represent him in more positive terms. Indeed, in addition to the view that portrayed him as an impostor, heretic, self-indulgent, forger of revelation…, according to Frederick Quinn, “a new school of thought on Islam emerged” (Quinn F. 2008: 162). This new school tended to give a more moderate and less biased view of the Prophet and Islam. Accordingly, the hostility towards both Islam and the Prophet which was carried on during centuries began to subside during this period. In his book, The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam in Western Thought, Frederick Quinn states that “The centuries old measuring filters by which Islam was held to the light and found to be a false religion increasingly lost their impact” (Ibid :91). This shift in the representation was, in part, due to the growing knowledge about
Mohammed and the origin of Islam during that period. It was also the result of the reversal of the balance of power after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the British colonization of many Muslim countries. Furthermore, the period has known an outpouring of new details about Muslim countries, cultures and languages, in addition to a wealth of new detailed information with a more tolerant perspective. Outstanding authors of the time made an attempt to correct some of the existing misconceptions. Accordingly, Frederick Quinn claims that though during the nineteenth century Mohammed like Islam was considered as being ethically inadequate by a number of writers; others however, regarded him as a hero and a caster of a main world religion which was also a political power. (Quinn F. 2008: 91)

**The Attempt to Correct and Refute the Old Misconceptions**

The popular writer- lecturer Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) highly marked the period by his work *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, a series of lectures about heroic figures. One of these lectures under the title “The Hero as Prophet, Mahomet, Islam” is devoted to prophet Mohammed. The lecture earned a place in history as the “first public presentation of its kind unqualifiedly supportive of Islam and the Prophet.” (Ibid: 105) Carlyle’s approach to Mohammed’s Life is with no doubt a positive one. He clearly claims this by saying: “I mean to say all the good of him I justly can”. Throughout the lecture, he rejects the widespread western beliefs and lies about the Prophet. He was among the first Europeans to proclaim the sincerity of the latter and the truthfulness of Islam. More than this, he stresses the inner aspect of Islam and its common features with Christianity. Thomas Carlyle starts his lecture by denouncing the widespread misconceptions about the Prophet in western writings and societies: Our current hypothesis about Muhammad that he was a scheming impostor, a false-hood incarnate, his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity begins really to be now untenable to anyone. The lies which well-meaning zeal has heaped round this man are disgraceful to us only...A greater number of God’s creatures believe in Muhammad’s word at this hour then in any other word whatever. Are we to suppose that it was a miserable piece of spiritual legerdemain,... I, for my part, cannot form any such supposition. (Carlyle, 2001: 53) In this quotation, Carlyle expresses also his difficulty to believe how millions of people were mislead and deceived by such a “fraud”. After refuting the old misconceptions, Carlyle calls into question and abandonment of the latter arguing that they were the product of an age of ignorance; “…let us disbelieve them wholly. They are the
product of an Age of Scepticism: they indicate the saddest spiritual paralysis and mere death-life of the souls of men” (Ibid: 53) Carlyle carries on by denying the fact that the Prophet is a false man, as many western writers claim. He wonders how a false man may found a religion: “A false man founded a religion! A false man cannot build a brick-house” (Ibid: 54). His representation of the Prophet differs from that of his time. He sees him as an honest and sincere man who delivered a message not wholly different from the messages of the previous prophets. Because of the high qualities which distinguished him, the Prophet was called “Al Amin” by his companions. (Ibid: 63) Carlyle names him as a “man of truth and fidelity…silent when there is nothing to be said; but pertinent, wise, sincere, when he did speak; always throwing light on the matter” (Ibid: 63). The author continues by saying: “Through life we find him to have been regarded as an altogether solid, brotherly, genuine man. A serious, sincere character; yet amiable, cordial, companionable…” (Ibid: 63) For the sensuality of the Prophet’s religion, Carlyle claims that much has been said about it, “more than was just” (Ibid: 83). He argues that Mohammed curtailed and restricted many of the old practiced indulgences that are seen as criminal to Christians. The author further argues that Islam is not an easy religion with its “vigorous fasts, lavations, strict complex formulas, prayers five times a day and abstinence from wine” (Ibid: 83) From isolated, ignorant, warlike, desert roaming people, the coming of the ‘hero prophet’ changed the life of the scattered enemy tribes to a unified great nation: To the Arab nation it was as a birth from darkness into light; Arabia first became alive by means of it. A poor shepherd people, roaming unnoticed in its deserts… a Hero-Prophet was sent down to them with a word they could believe: see, the unnoticed becomes world notable, the small has grown world-great; within one century … Arabia shines through long ages over a great section of the world… the Great Man was always as lightning out of heaven.

(Carlyle, T. 2001: 91)

Carlyle also stresses the equality established by Mohammed among all people regardless of their color, and wealth. He regards Islam as “a perfect equalizer of men” (Ibid: 87), a religion that teaches that “the soul of one believer outweighs all earthly kingships” (87). In addition to the establishment of equality, the Prophet instituted alms giving and made of this a necessity to enliven the poor. Moreover, Carlyle gives considerable consideration to the Prophet’s modesty. Exemplifying by details from Mohammed’s daily life, the lecturer presents to his audience the striking ideal of a modest
leader: We shall err widely if we consider this man as a common voluptuary, intent mainly on base enjoyments – nay on enjoyments of any kind. His household was of the frugal; his common diet barely-bread and water: sometimes for months there was not a fire once lighted on his hearth. They record with just pride that he would mend his own shoes, patch his own cloak. A poor, hard-toiling, ill-provided man; careless of what vulgar men toil for. (Ibid: 84) This very simple way of life, Carlyle argues, led to the rise and growth of a great nation that was once a group of scattered tribes. He gained millions of followers who were not only loyal but also ready to sacrifice everything, including their own lives, for the cause of their faith which is Islam. Hence, Carlyle’s fascination is again expressed when he says about the Arabs that they were: Fighting and jostling three and twenty years at his hand, in close contact with him always[...]. They were wild men, bursting ever and anon into quarrel, into all kinds of fierce sincerity; without right worth and manhood, no man could have commanded them. They called him Prophet, you say? Why, he stood there face to face with them; bare, not enshrined in any mystery; visibly clouting his own cloak [...], fighting, counseling, ordering in the midst of them: they must have seen what kind of a man he was, let him be called what you like! No emperor with his tiaras was obeyed as this man. (Carlyle, T. 2001: 84)

This ideal leader, according to A. Al-Dami stands in sharp contrast to the Victorian Royalty and Church. (Al-Dami, A: 2002: 84). In other words, Carlyle’s aim in giving such a positive image of the Prophet was not for only claiming the nobleness of Mohammed’s qualities and the truthfulness of his religion, but also for denouncing what was going wrong in Victorian society. Thus, the Prophet may stand, according to him, as a model for the political and religious leaders of the British society. Along with Thomas Carlyle, another Victorian author, Bosworth Smith, denounced and tried to correct the existing misconceptions about Mohammed. In his work *Mohammed and Mohammedanism* (1889), he makes reference to many slanders against the Prophet in world history. As a man, Bosworth Smith says that Muhammad was trustworthy to the extent that people “call him ‘Al-Amin, or the trusty’” (Smith, 1889: 95). While many western writers argue against his sincerity to discredit his prophet-hood and accuse him with imposture and deceit, Smith denies all these charges and regards him to be sincere. To him (Smith), it is with a firm conviction that he (the Prophet) reacted to the difficulties that faced him during his mission, and this, undoubtedly proves that he is a hero. At first, he has been scorned with bitter sneers and faced with rejection. Since this failed, the leaders of
‘Quraysh’ tried to bribe him. The author does not hide his extreme admiration for the manner by which the Prophet stood against these temptations. On this, he says: Abu Taleb […] expostulated kindly with his nephew. ‘Should they array against me the sun on my right hand and the moon on my left’, said Mohammed, ‘yet while God should commend me, I would not renounce my purpose.’ These are not the words, nor the course, of an impostor (Smith, 1889: 101) A number of western scholars, like Sir William Muir stress on the moral declension which they assert occurred in Mohammed’s character while in Medina. Smith rejects this thesis and considers it to be a misconception since the Prophet, according to him, resisted the temptations of power in Medina. Indeed, the author says: “On the whole the wonder is to me not how much, but how little, under different circumstances, Mohammed differed from himself” (Ibid: 119) With his conquest of Mecca, Mohammed, the ‘victorious’, did not ill-treat his persecutors. He neither avenged nor humiliated the Meccans. On the contrary, he was wonderfully tolerant. Smith regards this glorious moment as the Prophet’s alibi from several western charges. He affirms: There was now nothing left in Mecca that could thwart his pleasure. If ever he had worn a mask at all, he would now at all events have thrown it off; if lower aims had gradually sapped the higher, as Gibbon supposes, by his selfish interests, we should now have seen the effect. (Smith, 1889: 120) In addition to all these positive qualities, B. Smith sees in Mohammed the “type of inspired reformer” (Bennett, 1992: 84). From polytheist people blinded with idolatry and superstitions, the coming of the ‘religious reformer’ made of the people of Arabia monotheists and freed them from all kinds of superstitions by guiding them to the eternal truth. He even went further by putting an end to some widespread social phenomenon, like wine, addiction, usury and gambling. He forbade these evils along with the burial of female children after their birth and taught his followers to avoid them. Just as Carlyle, Bosworth Smith regards the Prophet to be different from the Arabs of his nation. He supports his view by the political and religious achievements of Mohammed. During a short period of time, he succeeded to unify his followers and to bring them under one nation that believed in the same God. Consequently, he led them politically and religiously as well: Head of the State as well as of the church, he was Caesar and Pope in one; but he was Pope without Pope’s pretentions and Caesar without the legions of Caesar. Without a standing army, without a bodyguard, without a palace, without a fixed revenue, if ever any man had the right to say that he ruled by a right Divine, it was Mohammed; for he had all the power without its instruments and
without its supports (Smith, 1889: 228-289). During the previous centuries, Mohammed was seen as a great subjugator of women. Since the medieval era, westerners accused him of polygamy and ambition since he married more than one woman. Smith denies this and affirms that the Prophet urged the Muslims to be kind with their wives as he put an end to the unchecked polygamy that prevailed during the times of ignorance. Furthermore, he contributed in raising the position of women as the author states: “Mohammed gave women a great advance on their previous position” (Ibid: 205). As for Carlyle, these western accusations are baseless. According to him, at the age of forty when the Prophet announced his message, he was already married to Khadijah. His later marriage do not justify a “career of ambition” since “he was already getting old, the prurient heat of life all burnt out”. Accordingly, it’s not natural to assume that he was running behind life enjoyments; “For my share”, Carlyle announces “I have no faith whatever in that” (Carlyle, T. 2001: 54) In addition to freeing and protecting women, the Prophet, according to Smith, stressed the equality of all human beings before God. This, according to Smith, is crucial in any great reformer. He encouraged people to free their slaves and established equality between people regardless of color, race and ancestry. As an example, Smith illustrates with “Zeid, the Prophet’s freedman” who led armies in war and with Bilal, “a blind Negro” who became the first Muezzin. (Smith, B. 189: 211). Moreover, the author believes that the Prophet demonstrated his high morality as an eminent reformer with the orphan and the poor. Much of his teachings was devoted to protecting and securing for them an ordinary and dignified life. He encompassed the poor and the orphan with great protection and heed, as he taught also his followers to be generous with them. Indeed, Smith affirms that “the orphan was […] the object of the Prophet’s peculiar care, the poor were always present with him, and their condition never absent from his mind” (Ibid: 212) It was common among western writers to accuse the Prophet with obscurantism, relying on his illiteracy as their favorite argument. Yet, B. Smith opposed this and his position toward this charge is very clear. For him, Mohammed urged his followers to study with eagerness. The author gives the example of the Meccan prisoners allowed to be free as soon as they taught some Muslims how to read and write Arabic (Ibid: 183). Moreover, he ordered his disciples to acquire and transmit knowledge because to “impart knowledge to others was in Muhammad’s view as imperative a duty as to acquire it” (Ibid: 182) Mohammed was for long seen as the embodiment of the Anti-Christ who came to contradict the teachings of the founder
of Christianity. However, Bosworth Smith along with Thomas Carlyle believe that there are many common points between Christianity and Islam and that the Prophet did not come to oppose Christ. To smith, the teachings of Jesus and Mohammed are very similar: Can anyone then who recollects what the Arabian Prophet did for women, and the slave and the orphan, for the poor, and the sick, and the lower animals […] deny what I hinted above, that […] Mohammed was really doing Christ’s work (219) Throughout this brief analysis of the western portrayal of the Prophet during the Victorian area, one may deduce that this period, in fact, has known a great shift and a huge step towards a more positive opinion and portrayal of the Prophet. This is due mainly, as mentioned before, to the change in the balance of power in favor of the western imperial forces after the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, there was no more fear from the once great force of Islam. There was rather a desire to know more about the Muslim countries for the sake of conquering them. Both Reginald Bosworth Smith and Thomas Carlyle gave a much more moderate image of the Prophet and Islam. They signaled many western stereotypes and denounced them as being misconceptions. The image of the Anti-Christ, subjugator of women, and impostor was replaced by a sincere man, hero, protector of the poor and women, reformer and an exemplar leader who changed the situation of the Arabs to the best. However, both writers had other motives behind this positive portrayal. First, according to Muhammed A. Al- Da’mi, in “the Hero as Prophet” Prophet Mohammed as a “humble hard working leader” was used as an ideal from the past to serve as an example for the present growing aristocracy in Victorian Britain. In other words, “the Prophet’s character is recalled as a lesson to the sterile aristocrats and the ‘the Captains of Industry’ of contemporary Britain” (Al- Da’mi, A,2002: 83). In short, Carlyle’s admiration for the Arabs and the Prophet was not for their own sake, but rather “as an antidote that might cure the malady of the sham-heroism presented by the supply and demand principle of Victorian England” (Ibid: 85). Furthermore, the precursor of orientalism, Edward Said in his book Covering Islam (1981) observed that even Carlyle was unable to modify the western concepts of the Prophet (Said. E. 1981: 13) Bosworth Smith’s first concern too was not the appraisal of the Prophet. His somehow objective approach to the life of the latter was mainly in the aim of introducing a much more correct image of him to understand better the Muslim people who believe in his teachings and this for the sake of submitting them. Thus, though he made many concessions in his portrayal of Mohammed and represented him as a hero, his book is still marked with that
western superiority and the Prophet is still represented as the Other.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, Victorian writers like Bosworth Smith and Thomas Carlyle departed from the already existing stereotypes about the Prophet and reported him in more positive terms. Without a doubt, all along their works, Mohammed is seen as an exemplar political and social leader, a reformer and a hero. They undoubtedly succeeded in re-evaluating and reconsidering the life of the Prophet in more positive terms, making, thus, a break from the prevailing negative image which lasted for centuries. This change in the way Victorians viewed the Prophet, is, on the one hand, due to the decline of the Ottoman Empire’s power and the emergence of the western countries, among them great Britain, as colonial powers subjugating mainly Muslim countries. This ended the threat of the latter as it also increased the amount of information available about Islam and its Prophet. On the other hand, the two authors made use of the Prophet’s life to criticize their own societies.
Endnotes


Quinn Frederick. The Sum of All Heresies; New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 2008