

## The Representation of Islam in Medieval Western Narratives

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**Abstract:** *The representation of Islam and Muslims in medieval Western narratives draws heavily on the tradition established by the Christian polemicists which sought to construct Islam as the negation of Christianity; the Prophet as an impostor, an evil sensualist, and an anti-Christ; and Muslims as violent and barbaric.*

*It was in this spirit of religious hostility that imaginative European narratives cultivated this polemical tradition in constructing a negative image of Islam and Muslims that was relevant to the purpose of their representations. Two outstanding themes emerge from these representations: namely that the Islamic East is the realm of lascivious sensuality and inherent violence. Nevertheless, some authors were able to transcend the limitations of such crude representations to question their culture or to articulate their individual positions or both.*

Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussions about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians. (Said, 1997: xii)

The relation between Islam and the Christian West is a relation between two civilizations generally characterized by centuries of confrontation and conflict. From the early days of Islam, Christianity, represented by the Byzantines, had reacted with hostility, as did Judaism to Christianity, towards a religion it deemed a threat and a rival. To Christians, Islam represented 'a double scandal, the catastrophic bastardization of both Christian universalism -- through the seductive danger of the Islamic world mission -- and Jewish particularism, represented by Muslim allegiance to ritual laws and to an Abrahamic monotheism without Christ' (Lupton, 1977: 74). Given the universal nature of both religions, and given the geographical proximity of Islam to Christendom, conflict and

hostility become predictable. And given the Islamic conquests at the expense of Christians in Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Sicily, Spain, even some parts of southern Italy and France, the Crusades and the reconquests, and the rise into central Europe of the Muslim Ottoman Empire, that hostility could only have deepened and strengthened with the passing centuries.

In an article entitled "Western Attitudes Towards Islam," Marshal W. Baldwin (1942, 403) remarked that Islam was the only religion "subsequent in time to Christianity", which had "taken from it large territories and inflicted upon it major military defeats." Such a fact continued to nurture and augment the feeling of hostility towards Islam long after the Islamic threat was finally contained. For in 1683 the Ottomans were driven back from the walls of Vienna, and "were obliged to sue for peace and to accept the hard terms of the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699" (Coles, 1968: 160). Nevertheless, the West continued to view Islam as a rival and a possible threat even in the age of colonialism where most Muslim lands were directly controlled by Western powers. For in its quest to master the world, the West was able to tame and, sometimes, incorporate other civilizations but not Islam, which remained actively defiant. "Indeed," argues Toynbee (1948, 204-5), "under the impact of the West, the great deeps of Islam are already stirring" creating a state of affairs "which might awaken echoes of a heroic age" (ibid: 212). This pronouncement by one of the leading intellectual figures of the Western civilization lends background and legitimacy to the current vogue of reinventing Islam (albeit synonymous with terrorism) as the new danger for the "civilized" world especially after 9/11, 2001. This new vogue is led by a group of American Orientalists, mostly pro-Israeli, parading as neutral and scholarly pundits. As far as these experts are concerned Islam "calls up images of bearded clerics and mad suicidal bombers" (Said, 1988: 47), motivated by envy and hatred and whose sole aim is the destruction of the "civilized" world.

This construct of the Muslim 'other' persists even when globalization and the mixing of cultures produced a different situation in which such an image should have improved. But alarmingly enough, the dominant powers of the West -- the United States in particular -- still seem to react inimically. The religious aspects of this hostility might be said to be inconspicuous since Islam is now reinvented anew as an assault on the West's "secular and social organization" (Leveau, 1990:108).

In representing Islam, the West employs a set of "images and image-making devices that are accumulated, 'banked,' as it were, in books, archives, collections, cultured storehouses, until such time as these

representations are called upon to generate new representations" (Greenblatt, 1992: 6). Rarely a day passes without reference being made in the Western media by polemical pundits to the violent, irrational and fundamentalist Islam. In the process, the religion of more than a billion people of so many different cultures was reduced to a "handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalization about the faith, its founder, and all of its people" (Said, 1997: xvi).

As mentioned above, Christianity reacted with hostility to Islam. Norman Daniel (1966: 3) observes that when Islam overwhelmed the lands of Christendom in the East, and a great multitude of Christians converted to the new religion, it was very natural for the Christian communities to develop a "polemic that would help confirm their members in their faith." So it was in the spirit of fear, shrouded in ignorance, and defensiveness that Christianity first reacted to Islam. It created a polemic in which the "beliefs of the opponent had to be made to seem not only wrong, but so repugnant as to make conversion unthinkable" (ibid: 4). In fact, this polemic was directed at the Christians who were particularly vulnerable to conversion rather than to their Muslim enemies, and the polemicists developed a discourse of a double-sided approach to this problem:

1. If Christianity was to be defended against Islam, then Islam must be attacked as false and immoral through attacking its teachings and the character of its Prophet, and
2. If the character of the Prophet could be proved to be incompatible with the accepted definition of prophethood, then Islam and its teachings could be easily disproved and dismissed, and Christianity be reinstated as the one true religion.

Adopting this kind of discourse, the Byzantine Christian polemicists presented a picture of Islam that could be described as "viciously caricaturic" (Watt, 1991: 83). In this tradition, Islam was portrayed as a Christian heresy, as a "false religion tending towards idolatry," and a negation of Christianity; the Prophet Muhammad was viewed as an impostor; the Quran was regarded as a manufactured scripture (ibid).

John of Damascus, who was born less than fifty years after the death of the Prophet, is credited as the founder of this tradition (Daniel, 1993: 13). In AD 743 he wrote a treatise, known in English as the *Fount of Knowledge*, in which he attacked Islam as a heresy, and described it as the 'deceptive superstition of the Ishmaelites, the fore-runners of the Antichrist' (cited in J. Sahas Daniel, 1972: 54-55; 133). He asserted that

the Prophet concocted the Quran from bits of the Old Testament and the New Testament, with the help of a renegade monk, and gave credibility to his concoction by claiming that it "was brought down to him from heaven" (ibid:73). John of Damascus was the first Christian polemicist to recount the story of Zeinab, wife of Zaid, Muhammad's adopted son, whom the Prophet married after Zaid had divorced her. He attacked the Prophet for what he deemed a scandalous and almost incestuous marriage and perceived it as a proof of his promiscuity and lasciviousness. As far as Islam is concerned, the whole episode and the law promulgated by it were designed to deny "consanguinity in an adoptive relationship" (Daniel, 1993: 120).

The tradition established by John of Damascus of delivering *ad hominem* attacks on the Prophet became a standard for all succeeding Christian polemicists. It is best illustrated by a discourse written in AD 830 by a Christian Arab, entitled *Risalah*, or *The Apology of Al Kindy* as it is known in the West. The author, Abdul Masih ibn Ishaq al Kindy, took on the responsibility of argumentatively repudiating the tenets of Islam and disproving the authority of its Prophet. With a strange and a blend of fact and fiction he provided medieval Christian polemicists with almost all the material they used in their attempts to discredit Islam through disproving the prophethood of Muhammad. He claimed that the Prophet's orphanage and humble life did not foretell his prophethood; that he showed none of the signs that marked out real Prophets, such as their ability to 'unfold the unseen;' that his impurity was a disproof of his prophethood; that he performed no miracles; that Islam was spread by violence and the use of the sword; that the Prophet's message was satanic; and that the Quran was manufactured with the help of the schismatic Sergius, the renegade Nestorian monk (*The Apology*, 1882: 4-30).

Al Kindy was also the first polemicist to propagate the legend of the suspended coffin, a story which has no foundation in Islam and seems to be based on the Christian tradition of Christ's resurrection and ascension. Al Kindy claimed that the Prophet predicted he would rise three days after his death, whereupon his followers put him in a coffin in Medina. When the Prophet Muhammad failed to rise after four days, some of his closest advisors took the coffin to Mecca where it remained suspended from the roof of the temple. In the meantime, they falsely claimed that the angels took him there (ibid: 17). The legend was to become in the West a primary proof of the Prophet's inability to work miracles as Christ did. This legend also demonstrates that the polemicists will go to any length in their bid to discredit the Prophet regardless of the historical and

geographical facts. For a single visit to either Mecca or Medina would have proven the falsity of Al Kindy's claim.

Other legends invented later include the legend of the dove. The Prophet was alleged to have trained a dove to eat from his ear in order to convince his followers that he was receiving divine revelation. Clearly this legend has no basis in the Islamic tradition. In the Bible (Matthew III. 16; Luke III. 22), however, there are a few references to the Holy Ghost as a dove. And as is the human nature of dealing with the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, Christian polemicists, having been confronted by Islam, tried to interpret it in terms they understand with little or no regard to its independent if not different nature. This could explain the origin of the legends of the dove and the suspended coffin. It could also explain the legend of the Prophet as a renegade Cardinal. Faced with elements in the Quran that could not be dismissed as lies as some extremist Christians contend, some polemicists alleged that the Prophet Muhammad was a Cardinal in Rome who led the Arabs into a schismatic mutiny to destroy the Church when he was overlooked as the choice of Pope (Bishti, 1990: 7). Some writers, like Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, dwelled on such legend.

In keeping with the tradition of *ad hominem* attacks on the character of the Muhammad, the death of the Prophet received much attention from Christian polemicists and legends were invented to suit the anti-Islam polemic. He was rumoured to have died in an epileptic fit, and was also said to have died of poison administered by a cunning Jewess (Daniel, 1993: 127). But Matthew Paris (1195?-1229) contends that while suffering from the effects of poison, Muhammad fell into a pigsty and was devoured by swine (cited in *ibid*: 127).

In spite of the availability in Europe of more direct and accurate information about Islam through Spain and through the Crusades, these legends continued to gain currency. And most, if not all, Muslims found and still find these discredited legends absurd and cannot even understand why they were promulgated in the first place. Furthermore, they are still puzzled by the inability or/and unwillingness of some people in the West to exorcise them despite advances in the field of knowledge and information.

Even as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we find D. B. Macdonald (1863-1943), in his book *Aspects of Islam*, repeating almost all the legends relating to the Prophet's life: his orphanage, his trickery, and his "trances and fits during which he heard strange things" (1911: 64). Macdonald could barely conceal his enthusiasm when he declares that

Unless all signs deceive, there lies before Muslim peoples a terrible religious collapse. [...] It is then for the Christian schools and preachers to save these peoples, not only for Christianity but for any religion at all; to vindicate to them the claims upon their lives of religion in the broadest sense (ibid: 12-13).

This zealous missionary, with his declaration of the great task of saving Muslims in the name of true religion, echoes the concept of Islam as a Christian heresy, the legend of the Prophet as a renegade Cardinal, and Muslims as apostate Christians not far from salvation. Such a view was firmly held by William of Tripoli, a Dominican at Acre in the 1270s, who encouraged Muslims to think that "Islam and Christianity had much in common and that they themselves were in a fair way to becoming Christians" (Daniel, 1993: 294).

Peter the Venerable, elected the Abbot of Cluny in 1122, in his turn considered Islam to be a great Christian heresy (Kritzlocaleck, 1964: 141). To him Muslims were the enemies of Christ only in the sense that they rejected his salvation (ibid: 21). However, he opined that they could easily be converted, since they believed that Christ was born of a virgin and actually venerated both Christ and His mother Mary. In order to achieve their conversion, their heresy had to be refuted, which could only be done if accurate information about Islam was made available. To this end Peter the Venerable commissioned the translation of the Quran into Latin, thereby initiating the scholarly study of Islam in Europe (ibid: 14). In contrast to the prevailing attitudes of the time Peter the Venerable held the firm conviction that Muslims were not to be approached by "arms, but words; not by force, but by reason; not in hatred, but in love" (ibid: 47). Unfortunately, this charitable view is a tribute to the man's enlightened mind and does not necessarily reflect a general change in attitudes toward Islam and Muslims among his contemporaries.

In their eagerness to discredit Islam through discrediting the Prophet, the medieval Christian polemicists readily adopted the material provided by Al Kindy in order to set up for themselves a universal standard "against which all prophethood might be tested and Muhammad's be dismissed" ( Daniel, 1993: 88). The entire medieval polemic could be summed up in the following three principles: (i) Prophets must manifest probity of life; (ii) Prophets must have the ability to work miracles; and (iii) The sayings of the prophet must encapsulate universal truths. Obviously, the intention of this polemic was to demonstrate that Muhammad's failure to meet any of these criteria was proof enough of the falsity of his claim. When facts of the Prophet's life worked against

the purpose of the polemic, they were easily discarded and others were interpreted and embellished in order to illustrate the theme. Often as not, when facts that supported their polemic purpose were lacking, the Christian Western writers tended to fabricate their own because they thought that "whatever tended to harm the enemies of truth was likely itself to be true" (ibid: 271). Once these facts had been manufactured and embellished, they tended to assume a life of their own (Southe, 1962: 29). A deliberate selecting and editing of source material and a reliance on hearsay was the rule with regard to Islam.

Continental Christian writers, Guibert of Nogent among them, unashamedly admitted that they relied heavily on the *plebia opinio* for their sources on Islam and Muslims. He even declared: "it is safe to speak evil of one whose malignity exceeds whatever ill can be spoken" (qtd. in ibid: 31). Within this context, the practice of misrepresenting and misinterpreting Islam can be easily understood: faced with a choice between informative accuracy on the one hand and polemical utility on the other, almost all Western Christian writers opted for the latter.

Following the same type of discourse invented by earlier Christians, the medieval Christian polemicists, with very few exceptions, represented Islam in the darkest and most negative terms. Even the knowledge available was invariably used to confirm prejudices about Islam and Muslims that bore no relation to reality. Instead, the Christian West "decided for itself what Islam was, and formed a view materially different from anything Muslims would recognize" (Daniel, 1993: 301). Islam was convicted of every kind of error, to distinguish it from the universal truth possessed by Europe, an attitude which more or less served to confirm Europe's image of itself. To Europe, Islam was an entity which represented whatever Christianity was not; an entity that was, and to a certain extent still is, Christianity's antithesis, its negative 'other'. It was perceived as the enemy of Christendom which denied the Trinity, the Divinity of Christ, and the Crucifixion, and sought through violence and impurity to destroy the Christian faith. As the chief adversaries of Christendom, Islam and Muslims were subjected to the most extravagant excesses of the Western imagination. The result was a universal and a popular negative image which "outlived the rise and fall of many better systems" (Southern, 1962: 28). According to this popular image, Muslims were viewed to represent whatever most despised by and repellent to a Christian. They were regarded with contempt and thought to be pagans, infidels, unchaste, treacherous, and aggressive barbarians. Islam itself was painted as a violent, false, and promiscuous religion that had no merits in its own right. The Quran, the holy book of Islam, was merely a strange

collection of incoherent and blatant lies. The Prophet was an accomplished liar, an idol, and an anti-Christ. In short, the new religion was the repulsive and feared enemy that had to be not only denounced and checked but also totally destroyed.

These negative and, basically, distorted images were readily cultivated in works of imaginative fiction and works of non-fiction, throughout the Middle Ages. All is evident, from the "Song of Roland," Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to the "Songs of Geste;" from Matthew Paris's (1195-1259) *Chronica Majoria*, and Mandeville's highly derivative *Travels* (c.1357), to John Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes*, Book IX (1440).

It could be argued, however, that, as far as the medieval West is concerned, there are two ways of viewing Islam and Muslims. The more widespread is the one which

exaggerates the theological differences from Christianity, with its notions of idolatry, the unblest trinity, Mahound, Apollin, Tervagant, and the like; and is the popular view, found in romances, ill-informed chronicles and elsewhere. There is much of it even in the Crusade chronicles (Tatlock, 1932: 187).

To this view belong the "Song of Roland," the English romances and mystery plays, Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes* (1440), and generally speaking, all popular literature. Then there is the more learned view which is

based on better knowledge; it tends to be biographical and historical, and to show more of the true relation of Mohammed and his religion to Christianity, but usually with little as to his theology. At times it is intelligent and comparatively unprejudiced; in most writers it is garbled and bitterly hostile, sometimes the offspring of crusading zeal (Ibid., 187-88).

To the latter tradition belongs Dante, William of Tripoli, and Peter the Venerable.

In the Western medieval imaginative works, the freedom to embellish the picture of Islam and Muslims was even less restricted than in polemical ones. The Muslims in these works were uniformly idolatrous, violent, and barbaric. The Prophet was an impostor and an idol. French epic poetry, for example, traditionally represents Muslims in the following ways: they are, observes Jones (1942):

[...] evil people, they spend their lives in hating and mocking at Christ and in destroying his churches. They are the children of the author of all evil,

the Devil; like their ancestor, they hate God and are constantly placing themselves under the protection of Satan. [...] many of them are giants, whole tribes have horns on their heads, others are black as devils. They rush into battle making weird noises comparable to the barking of dogs. They are intensely emotional and excitable people, readily giving way to tears of joy and anger, always going from one emotional extreme to another. Socially, they are the embodiment of all foul practices, simply because they lack the one thing necessary in Christian eyes for perfection- belief in Christianity. Thus they use slaves, they eat their prisoners, they buy and sell their womenfolk; and they practice polygamy, which later, of course they did in reality. The poets invent for them a host of insulting epithets and periphrases -- which are little more than conventional epic phrases -- to emphasize the unbelief which is the secret of all their wickedness (205).

Jones confirms that the medieval Christian writer's conception of Islam and Muslims was not based on factual knowledge but on "ecclesiastical authorities, in whose interest it was to disfigure the beliefs and the customs of the infidels" (ibid: 203). Under such circumstances neither the writer nor readers and hearers were much concerned with the accuracy of representation. Furthermore, the medieval Western Christians were not prepared to accept any evidence that contradicted with their prejudiced and hate-inspired image of Islam and Muslims.

Nearly all the traditional characteristics given by Christians to Islam and Muslims are reflected in the "Chanson de Roland," or "Song of Roland," an epic poem written about A.D. 1100 by an unknown French author. The work may have been based on an actual event in A.D. 778. Charlemagne was returning from an expedition in Spain when the Basques ambushed and wiped out his rear guard. In the poem, however, the ambushers were Muslims. Marsile, the Muslim king of Saragossa, for example, is one "who does not love God," and ultimately "serves Mohammed and prays to Apollo" (*The Song of Roland*, 1978: 3). He is a pagan who worships a number of idols of which Mohammed is only the most important. As well as Apollo, these idols include Tarmagant and sometimes even the Quran :

Marsile has a book brought forward,  
It contained the scriptures of Mohammed and Tarmagant. (47.11.610-11)

When the pagans prepare for battle they raise the Prophet's coffin to assist them:

They hoist Mohammed up to the highest tower,

Every single pagan prays to him and adores him. (68.ll.853-4)

In the heat of battle, Marsile's men implore 'Mohammed,' their god, for help, but he deserts them in their hour of need as the devil always deserts his followers. In typical medieval fashion, where Muslims invariably turn against their gods, the defeated Marsile flees to Saragossa with his men where

They run to an idol of Apollo in a crypt,  
They rail at it, they abuse it in vile fashion:

.....  
They beat it and smash it to pieces with big sticks.  
They snatch Travagant's carbuncle,  
Throw the idol of Mohammed into a ditch,  
And pigs and dogs bite and trample it. (187.ll.2580-91)

The last two lines obviously refer to the legend of the Prophet's death mentioned: it resembles, in fact, a demonic parody of the re-enactment of Christ's death. As expected, 'Mohammed' fails his followers and king Marsile dies after he hears of the defeat of the Arabian Emir (264.ll.3644-47). It is totally ironic that the most monotheistic religion in the world should be accused of polytheism and its Prophet, who destroyed all idols in Mecca, should become an idol himself. And it is not difficult to understand the inimical representation of Muslims in the "Song of Roland" when we bear in mind that it is a celebration of Charlemagne's perceived heroism against Muslims in Spain.

John Lydgate (1370-1451) follows a similar discourse in his treatment of the Prophet in *The Fall of Princes*, Book IX, where he gives an extensive account of the Prophet's life and teachings. He remarkably incorporates in this account almost all the legends about the Prophet current at the time: his falsehood, magic skills, deceit, low birth, epilepsy, and sensuality. He begins the account by describing the Prophet as follows:

A false prophete and a magicien,  
As bookis olde weel reherse can.  
Born in Arabia but of low kynreede,  
Al his lyue an idolastre in deede. (*Fall of Princes*, Book IX, ll.53-56)

Lydgate repeats the legend that the Prophet had Judaic and Christian schooling and background (IX, ll.60-63), that he wooed Khadejah, his first wife, "through his sotil fals[e] daliaunce" (IX, l.69), and that he falsely claimed to be a 'Messie'. As Lydgate tells it, the Prophet

explained away his epileptic fits by claiming he was in receipt of Divine revelation (IX, ll.86-9). He also repeats the legend of the tame dove (IX, ll.92-98), and the legend of Sergius, the Nestorian monk, as the co-author of the Quran (IX, ll.113-14). He accuses the Prophet of being an idolater who "made Sarsyns to worship the Friday" (IX, l.134), which may have arisen from the setting, by Muslims, of Friday as a special day for worship. Lydgate also accuses the Prophet of moral duplicity for allegedly demanding his followers to do one thing, only to do the opposite himself on account of special privileges granted him by God (IX, 139-40). The manner of the Prophet's death receives a special attention from Lydgate. He favours the undignified legend relating to the Prophet as being intoxicated when he suffered an epileptic fit, fell into a pigsty and was eaten by its occupants. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is another example of how medieval European literature elaborated on the topics of the Christian polemicists with enthusiasm and vigour. In it we find a close reciprocity between literature and the Church in its representation of Islam and Muslims. The punishment Dante reserves for the Prophet in 'Canto 28' of *The inferno* reflects the Church's view on him as a schismatic seeking to destroy the true Church -- a view which had its origin in the legend of the renegade Cardinal. Consequently, his punishment is to be constantly split in two from his chin to "where the haunches bend" (*The Divine Comedy* 1872, 113). The savage nature of the Prophet's punishment, which, as Dante sees it, fits his crime, is intensified by the vile description of his 'entrails' and their contents dangling between his legs, and the horrific account of his tearing himself apart seemingly exalted in his torment:

Between his legs the entrails hung; meanwhile  
 The midriff and the paunch were seen confest-  
 Receptacle of what is foul and vile.  
 While, all intent, on him my sight I bend,  
 He eyed me, opening with his hand his breast,  
 And said, 'Behold how I my bosom rend!  
 Behold how Mahomet is rent in twain!  
 Before me, cloven upward from the chin  
 E'en to the brow, walks Ali, racked with pain:  
 And all the others, whom thou seest forlorn,  
 On earth sowed seeds of sandal, and the sin  
 Of schism incurred, and therefore thus are torn.  
 (*The Inferno*, Canto 28, ll.25-36)

Dante clearly identifies the Prophet "with the intestines that turn food into faeces, as the false prophet turned the truth into error" (D'Amico, 1991: 77). The punishment of the Prophet in the Ninth circle of Hell "is not only the most hideous mutilation of all in this valley; it is hardly equalled anywhere else in the *Inferno* for repulsiveness, certainly not for ignoble bodily exposure and grotesqueness of description" (Tatlock, 1932: 192). The savagery of the Prophet's punishment suggests how seriously Dante took the threat posed by Islam and Muslims to the Christian Church. As Dante sees it, the Church lost its unity and stability through the Prophet and in the *Purgatorio* (Canto 32.ll.130-35) he makes it clear that "the breaking away of the floor of the church's chariot by a dragon seems to symbolize the loss" (ibid: 186). The punishment of Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, is less horrific than the Prophet's (he is split from the chin up to the brows) simply because he, like many others, is an unhappy victim of the master deceiver.

Strikingly enough, Dante places three Muslims in Limbo in the First Circle of Hell (*The Inferno*, Canto: 9) among the virtuous pagans and men of genius. Two of them, Avicenna and Averroes, are men of science and philosophy of the Aristotelian school; the third, Saladin, is the famous antagonist of the Crusaders who was celebrated for his chivalric qualities. The inclusion of the first two is not an example of religious tolerance but a reluctant acknowledgement of the fact that Islamic culture had preserved some of the most important works of the classical tradition -- a point that sometimes seems to be largely ignored by the Christian West. The inclusion of Saladin is recognition of the qualities of the noble pagan who though not baptized, deserves respect and honour. He is one of a number of honorable Muslims who emerge from time to time in Western literature and provide an interesting variation on the theme of intransigent hostility that dominates Christian representations of Muslim leaders.

Even though the negative image of Islam and Muslims was almost universal in the Middle Ages, there were, however, a few instances where this negativity was less pronounced. William of Tripoli, mentioned above, found much in common between Islam and Christianity, enough in his view for Christians to encourage Muslims to convert (Daniel 1993: 294).

This same sentiment is expressed by the author of *Mandeville's Travels* (c.1357) who, apart from repeating the legends of Sergius, presents an influential and not inaccurate picture of Islam. He also argues that since Muslims honour and revere Jesus and his mother Mary, then it should not prove difficult to convert them,

because [th]at [th]ei gon so ny ourew feyth [th]ei ben lyghtly conuerted to cristene lawe whan men preche hem and shewen hem distynctly the lawe of Ihesu crist' (*Mandeville's Travels* 1919: 87).

Furthermore, the author, reversing the trend, praises the virtues of Muslims and their obedience to their law, if only to condemn and reproach his fellow Christians who seem to have neglected the law of Christ. The Muslims are "gode [and] feythful, for [th]ei kepen entirely the commandment of the holy book Alkaron, [th]at god sente hem be his messenger Machomet" (ibid:91). As such, the Muslims are granted a "rightful place in God's creation and in His plan for history," they are credited with "a capacity for salvation," and it is conceded to them that "in the Koran they already possessed a portion of the truth" (Schwoebel 1965: 181).

However, the praise for the Muslims by these writers was probably motivated by Christian self-interest – converting Muslims or using them as a form of criticism of unacceptable Christian practices. By making the Muslims appear more devout the author's condemnation of his fellow Christians becomes more emphatic and he has a better chance to prod them into shape. In general, however, the representations of Islam and Muslims continued to be shaped by entrenched religious hostility more than by tolerance.

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