THE ELIZABETHAN IMAGE OF ISLAM (*)

The following reflections are culled from the writings of travellers, historians, and publicists. The writings of the poets and playwrights were avoided lest the image get shrouded in poetic flights.

In their writings on Islam and Muhammad the Elizabethans were greatly subjective. They reported credulously the tales of their guides, and the fables of the Middle Ages. The Elizabethans lived in a transitional period. They were rooted in the Middle Ages and they reflected its credulity; but they were also on the verge of a progressive, commercial culture, and were therefore in part shrewd and cynical. Their writings on Islam reflected more the spirit of the Middle Ages than that of the Renaissance.

The Elizabethans knew Muhammad as Mahomet (also Mohammed, Muhammedes, Mahumet, Mohammetus and Machomed).

The date and place of his birth were obscure to our writers. Some dated Muhammad's birth 'from the Creation,' 4544, or 'from the Saviour,' 574 (1). Thomas Newton dated his birth by the important political events of Europe, i.e. by the time when Maurice was emperor and Gregory the First pope (2).

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For a thorough study of the image of Islam in the West, the reader should consult Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West; the Making of an Image* (Edinburgh University Press, 1960).

(1) Herbert, Thomas, *Some Years Travels Into Divers Parts of Africa, and Asia the Great, etc.* (London, 1665), p. 120.

(2) *A Notable Historie of the Saracens, etc.* (London, 1575), p. 130.
was reported to have been born in 551, 574, 591, 594, 596 and 597. As there was no agreement on the date of his birth, there was also no agreement on its place. Herbert relates that he was born in Yathrib of an Arabian father and a Jewish mother; and Lithgow reports his birth to have been in ‘Itraripia a beggarly village in Arabia.’ He mistakes Muhammad’s wife, Khadijah, for his mother, whom he calls ‘Cadiges a Jew’ (1). Coryat, who with all humility announced that he knew everything about Muhammad, informs us that he was born in Medina (2). Some found Muhammad’s birth conforming to Daniel’s prophecy and dreaded him as Daniel dreaded the beast — but it was dread tempered with hope for the victory of the Most High. The Elizabethans were anxious to show the prophet of Islam to be of mean, or worse, of unknown origin. His parents were of ‘diverse nations,’ writes Biddulph; and his heritage was so base that it was kept a secret until he became famous and secure (3). Moryson, otherwise well-informed, was completely ignorant of Muhammad’s origin and was not sure whether he was Arabian or Persian, but he knew that he wrote the Qur’an c. 622 at the age of 25 (4).

Of his early childhood the Elizabethans knew little. A popular story was that after the death of his father Muhammad was sold as a slave to a certain Palestinian merchant called Abdominoples, who sent the youth to Egypt on business expeditions (5). In business he proved to be shrewd and ambitious; and to better fulfil his ambitions he befriended a rich mistress whom he controlled through witchcraft. An opportunist, he

(1) Lithgow, William, A Most Delectable and True Discourse of an Admired and Painfull Peregrination from Scotland to the Most Famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia, and Affricke (London, printed by Nicholases Okes, and are to be sold by Thomas Arches at his shop in Popes head Place 1616), p. 52.
(2) Purchas His Pilgrimes by Samuel Purchas, first published in 1625. (The author used the Maclehose & Sons edition, published in Glasgow 1905.) Vol 10, p. 422. Hereafter referred to as P.H.P.
(3) Lavender, Theophilus, The Travels of Foure English Men and a Preacher, etc. (London, 1612), p. 40.
(5) Lithgow, p. 52.
organized a small Arabian band and joined Emperor Heraclius in his wars against Persia. But as he was of base origin and could not therefore maintain his leadership for long, he claimed legitimacy through divine appointment (1).

His youth, maintained the Elizabethans, was one of slavery, theft, robbery and conceit. His many travels in search of fortune and adventure brought him in contact with Jews, Christians and Gentiles (2). The Elizabethans were not acquainted with the Latin story which represented Muhammad as a citizen of Rome and a Cardinal from the family of Colonna who, frustrated because he was not elected Pope, became a rebel against the church.

The story of his 'falling sickness' was generally accepted by the Elizabethans. This story was popular in Europe during the Middle Ages and was intended to denigrate Islam. The falling sickness, writes Henry Smith, 'took him so extremely, that he grovelled along the ground and foamed piteously at his mouth' (3). When his wife discovered his sickness she bewailed her luck for 'matching with a beggarly rascal'; but Muhammad convinced her that this sickness was a manifestation of God's presence, a presence which he could not bear and was forced therefore to prostrate himself on the floor in a trance. Being a simple woman, she believed him and declared to her 'gossipy friends' that her husband was a prophet. From women it reached men until the news had pervaded Arabia. Muhammad, who was schooled in magic, 'observed the present opportunity' (4).

Since they rejected Muhammad's divine revelation, the Elizabethans attributed his doctrine to his political shrewdness and to the workings of the Devil. In Blount's opinion Muhammad might have innocently believed himself to be divinely inspired, for it is natural for all those who dwell in

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(1) Sandys, George, A Relation of a Journey begun An. Dom. 1610, Containing a description of the Turkish Empire, etc. (4 books in one, London, 1637), pp. 52 ff; Lavender's Travels, p. 40; Hughes, p. 1 ff.
(2) Lavender's Travels, p. 42; Newton's Saracens, p. 3.
(3) God's Arrow against Atheism and Irreligion (London, 1617), p. 44.
(4) Ibid., p. 44.
grottos to be so inclined. Muhammad, he states, spent two years in a grotto and was therefore driven into 'profound speculation' (1).

Our writers knew very little of the time and life of Muhammad and therefore were brief and repetitious in actual accounts of his life. They were fluent, however, in their subjective description of his character and of his religion. In their eyes Muhammad was not only fickle but ugly. This is characteristic of the Medieval mind, which represented the 'enemy' as devilish and weird-looking. Thus we read in Lithgow that the prophet of Islam was of mean feature, big-headed, of sanguinal complexion, 'possessing a desperate stomach' (2). Sandys informs us that he was of mean stature, evil proportioned, with a scald head (3).

Muhammad was called wicked, licentious, and fickle-minded. He was represented as a man who delighted in 'rapine, plunder and bloodshed', possessed of ambition and lust (4). To John Cartwright he was 'a sinner, an idolator and adulterer, and inclined to women above measure, and that in such uncivil terms, as I am ashamed to repeat' (5). He was represented as having encouraged all sorts of evil deeds (6).

Newton speaks of him as a 'counterfeiter and dissembler' but eloquent. His 'ambitious and haughty mind gaped without measure, after promotion and authority' (7). Muhammad was considered a curse sent by God to punish his people, the Christians, for their sins. Luther conceived of him as God-sent against lethargic Christendom. The prophet was in short a

(1) Blount, Henry, A Voyage Into the Levant, (London, 1636), p. 30. Blount's observations on the relations between grottos and Islam were deduced from his experience in the Island of Patmos where grottos and myths abound. He was so taken by his theory that he developed it into a universal account of the origin of all religions.


(6) Ibid., p. 104.

(7) Saracens, p. 4.
blasphemer, deceiver, impostor, seducer, inventor, and supreme juggler, and to top it all off a 'Mungrell born'.

Muhammad was accused by the Elizabethans as having 'fabricated' Islam with the connivance of three heretics: a Jewish magician, John of Antioch, and a monk called Sergius. The Jew was a man named Abdallah who was also an astronomer. John of Antioch was to the Elizabethans a name with little meaning. Sergius was described by Lithgow as a 'diverted Thalmudist' (1), by Th. Herbert as an Italian (2), by Whetstones as a monk from Constantinople (3), and by Sandys as a Nestorian monk (4). Prideaux believes that Sergius and Bahira 'are only two different names for the same person' (5). These three characters were believed to have 'patched up' the Qur'an, which Coryat maintained could not have been written by Muhammad, 'for he was of a dull wit' (6). When the Qur'an was made public, the Arabs opposed it and Muhammad was discouraged and decided to go back to business. Sergius, however, encouraged him, saying that all great works are met with opposition. Muhammad, the story goes, was convinced by Sergius's argument and thereupon returned to Yathrib and a cave where he stayed two years, thus emulating the eminent lawgivers Pythagoras, Zoroaster and Socrates (7). Sandys offers a slightly different version of the story by sending the Prophet to a cave near Mecca where he spent two years compiling 'his damnable doctrine' with the aid of Sergius and Abdallah the Jew (8).

All sorts of stories were fancifully woven and attributed to Muhammad. There was the story of the Dove which supposedly Muhammad had trained to eat from his 'dirty ear', and which

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(2) Travels, 1665 edition, p. 337.
(3) Whetstones, George; The English Myrror (London, 1586), p. 56.
(5) Imposture, p. 45.
(7) Herbert, Travels, 1665 edition, p. 337.
to his followers he claimed to be the spirit of the angel Gabriel delivering the Holy Qur'an. Wybarne refers to a golden plate decorating the Dove's neck and on this plate is written 'Let Mahomet be King' (1).

Another story has it that Muhammad trained a wild bull to take bread from his hand. With this bull Muhammad staged a conspiracy. After writing the Qur'an he tied it around the neck of the bull and left it in the desert. Having done this he went to the people and told them 'behold God hath sent you a law from heaven: go to such a desert there ye shall find an ass and a book tied about his neck'. The people went, saw and believed (2).

The story of the death and burial of Muhammad was perhaps the most fantastic. According to the story Muhammad drank a large quantity of wine poisoned by his companions, and under the pretence that he was about to confer with the angel Gabriel he went outside. Anticipating his 'falling sickness' he chose a soft dung-hill and lay in it 'foaming at the mouth, and gnashing his teeth'. The swine fell upon him and almost ate him but the corpse was saved by some of Muhammad's friends. Muhammad, continues the story, had previously instructed his followers not to bury him for he expected to rise from the dead (in imitation of Jesus) on the third day. His companions waited not only three but thirty days, and as the body began to smell badly they cast it away. Fearing disgrace, his companions put him in an iron coffin and took him with great solemnity to 'the famous temple of Mecca'. On the roof of the temple they put huge loadstones. 'They lift up the iron coffin, where the loadstone, according to their nature, draw to them the iron and hold it up, and there hangs Mahomet on high' (3). The Elizabethans accepted the fantastic and imagined all kinds of things hanging in mid-air, such as rocks, tombs, corpses,

(2) Smith, Arrow, p. 51.
(3) Smith, Arrow, pp. 45-46; Whetstones, English Myrror, p. 59; P.H.P., Vol. 8, p. 288; Parry, William, A New and Large Discourse of the Travels of Sir Anthony Sherley Knight, etc. (London, 1610), p. 36.
and spirits. Muhammad's story fitted into this fanciful pattern of thought.

As the Elizabethans confused the date of his birth, they also confused the date of his death. He was reported by Newton to have died in 637 and to be buried 'in Mecca a city of Persia' (1). Th. Herbert was not quite sure whether he died in 637 or in 666. He thought Muhammad 'whose name Arabically signified deceit' conformed to the number 666, the number of the Antichrist (2).

A comparatively sober account of Muhammad was written by Francis Osborne. He thought the man was 'no imbecile', for he understood the art of governing men through the agency of the supernatural. He fashioned a religion suitable to the Arab masses and manifested statecraft in adopting a universal message intended to pacify the Jews and the Christians, although he had no other design than the destruction of them both (3). In Cartwright's opinion, Muhammad built his religion not on miracles but on 'fire and sword' (4). When asked for a miracle, relates Blount, Muhammad supposedly drew his sword and declared that God, 'having had his miracles so long slighted by the incredibility of men, would now plant his laws with a strong hand'. He fashioned a religion based on hope and fear, thereby filling the hearts of his followers with courage (5).

The Elizabethans reserved their richest vituperative language for the description of the Qur'an. To them, the Qur'an consisted of fables, half-truths, prejudices and wilful malice. It was of course not revealed as the Muslims believe but 'patched up' with the aid of conspirators. Smith relates on the authority of the Devil that the Qur'an contains 12,000 lies and this number is to Smith 'by all likelihood very little.' (6). Th. Herbert finds the Qur'an so full of absurdities and contra-

(1) Saracens, p. 120; Newton dates the Hijrah in 593, p. 5.
(2) Travels, 1665 edition, pp. 337-338; also Newton, Saracens, p. 10.
(3) Politicall Reflections upon the Government of the Turks (London, 1656), pp. 4-8.
(4) The Preachers Travels, p. 104.
(5) Voyage, pp. 77 ff.
(6) Arrow, p. 51.
dictions as to drive the serious reader to laughter (1). Gabriel, he relates, carries 70,000 keys, each of them 7,000 miles long ' by which you may imagine the doors are no pigmy ones ' (2). The Muslims ' like the papists ' were ridiculed by the Reformed Christians for not being permitted to read their Holy Scripture. Burton was convinced that the Qur’an was the work of the ‘ devill ’, and wondered how men of the caliber of Averroes and Avicenna did subscribe to it (3). One cannot but view with compassion and humour the naive opinions of the learned men on the subject of Islam. In his Religio Medici Thomas Browne writes, immediately after assuring the reader that he is free of prejudice: « The Alcoran of the Turks ... is an illcomposed piece, containing in it vain and ridiculous errors in philosophy, impossibilities, factions, and vanities beyond laughter ’ (4). To Cartwright the Qur’an was a book of ‘ fables and falsities ’ consisting of 900 errors (5). To John Fryer it was a ‘ bastard brood ’ stuffed with idle and ridiculous errors, upheld by force, not by reason (6). Coryat, arguing with an Indian, derided the Qur’an as a book of weak matter ‘ that I myself, as meanly as thou dost see me attired now, have already written two better books ’; and it was no secret that thousands of English boys of sixteen years of age could write books superior to the Qur’an (7).

The majority of Elizabethan writers who attacked the Qur’an never saw it; and none of the writers quoted above knew enough Arabic to read it. Poor Latin translations of the Qur’an had existed in Europe since the middle of the 12th century. The Qur’an was then translated that it might be effectively attacked. Although the Latin translation was accompanied by a bitter attack on Islam, the translator and publisher were rebuked for disseminating such damnable material. Prior to 1649 there was no English translation of the Qur’an. A certain French

(1) Travels, p. 338. (2) Ibid., pp. 344 ff.
(5) The Preachers Travels, p. 103.
(7) From Agra, etc., D2.
gentleman named Andrew Du Ryer translated the Qur'an into French during his stay in Egypt, and published it in France in 1633. An Englishman who preferred the safety of anonymity translated Du Ryer's version into English. The translation appeared in 1649 showing no publisher, no printer and no seller; for none dared to be associated with so dangerous a venture. A certain Alexander Ross introduced the translation with a 'needed Caveat' to the reader, intended more for the protection of Ross's neck than for the enlightenment of the reader. We do not know if Ross wrote the introduction or translated the Qur'an, but his 'Caveat' gives us a picture of his own evaluation of the Qur'an. His general attitude is summed up in the following remarks:

' Good reader, the great Arabian impostor, now at last after a thousand years, is by the way of France arrived in England, and his Alcoran, or gallimaufry of errors (a brat as deformed as the parent, and as full of heresies, as his scald head was of scurf), hath learned to speak English. I suppose this piece is exposed by the translator to the public view, no otherwise than some monster brought out of Africa, for people to gaze, not to dote upon; and as the sight of a monster... should induce the beholder to praise god, who hath not made him such; so should the reading of this Alcoran excite us both to bless god's goodness towards us in this land, who enjoy the light of the gospel... as also to admire god's judgments who suffers so many countries to be blinded and enslaved with this misshapen issue of Mahomet's brain'.

Ross knew that the publishing of the Qur'an was 'dangerous' and 'scandalous', but it was dangerous only to those who 'like reeds are shaken, and like empty clouds carried about with every wind of doctrine'. But for the solid Christian it was no more dangerous than the heresies of a Tertullian. One need not have feared the seductive influence of the Qur'an because it was a 'misshapen and deformed piece'. In fact its ugliness enhanced the beauty of the Gospels. 'Who is so mad as to prefer the embraces of a filthy Baboon, to his beautiful mistress, or the braying of an ass to a concert of music?' (Ee2). The reader had no need to fear the prosely-
tizing influence of the Qur'an for no nation 'did voluntarily receive the Alcoran except the theevish saracens of Arabia' (Ee2).

The Qur'an, in Ross's exposition, like the three Roman ambassadors to Antiochus, was 'headless, heartless, and footless' — the first was maimed in the head, the second a fool, and the third lame. The Qur'an is in brief 'without head or tail ... being immethodical, and confused, contradictory in many things, written in rude language,' consisting 'of lies and useless follies' (Ee3).

In such language and in such spirit was the Qur'an introduced to the English world.

The Elizabethans were not really interested in knowing the doctrine of Islam; they had their own doctrine and had no interest in shaking their faith by investigating another. They were interested, however, in hearing of Islam's falsehood and of its doom; hence their fractured image of this religion. It is typical of the Elizabethan writer to undertake an elaborate refutation of Islam without stating beforehand what real Islam was. Islam was refuted by Henry Smith on seven grounds:

1) Islam is new. Nowhere is the coming of Muhammad announced. He therefore comes on his own; and as such cannot be received.

2) Muhammad did not make a miracle at his coming.

3) In his prophecying that he will come back to life after three days in the grave, he proved to be a false prophet.

4) Muhammad's religion is 'fleshly' which is enough proof of its mundane character. Its author is a man, not the Divine Spirit.

5) Islamic law is tyrannical; for disputing it is a capital offense.

6) Islam was established by force and through 'wiles, deceit, subtlety and lies'.

7) Islam was devised by a man and three other 'false conspirators' (1).

(1) Arrow, pp. 48-52.
Islam was refuted by most Christian writers of the time, for that was a scholarly obligation. Thus Burton refutes Islam and calls the Muslims 'superstitious idolaters' (1). The Reverend Joseph Hall (d. 1656) examines five religious — the Jewish, Turkish, Greekish, Popish and Reformed — and he refutes them all with the exception of the Reformed church, which he loads with praise (2).

Elizabethan interest in the Near East led eventually to greater and more accurate information on the Turks and on the religion of Islam. English Scholarship on the Near East began to take form at the end of the 17th century. As scholarship developed, the mythology of the East and of Islam faded gradually before the light of facts and experience.

In 1632 Sir Thomas Adams founded the first chair of Arabic at Cambridge, and four years later Archbishop Laud endowed a rival chair at Oxford. The Cambridge chair was occupied by Abraham Wheelock and later on by Simon Ockley (born 1678) who did more to further Arabic studies, than any of his contemporaries. It is interesting to note that Ockley's career was encouraged by Prideaux, the author of the famous work on imposture. Ockley urged his colleagues to read the Qur'an in the original and not to rely on the 1649 version.

William Bedwell, who served with the Levant Company in Aleppo from 1629 to 1636, joined Oxford University as Professor of Arabic. Edward Pococke studied under Bedwell and corrected many of the popular errors associated with Islam. Pococke spent five years in Aleppo collecting manuscripts, thus enriching Arabic studies in England. Good editions of the Qur'an were printed at Hamburg (1694) and at Padua (1698), and by the end of the 17th century therefore a good beginning had been made in Arabic studies. At the dawn of the 18th century Joseph Pitts who was captured and sold as a slave took advantage of his misfortune to observe Islam in Mecca and Medina. After his release he published an authentic account of Islam under the title of A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohamelans.

English knowledge of Islam was also furthered by the establishment in 1784 of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which took an active interest in the dissemination of factual information on the East, and by the authoritative translation of the Qur'an made by George Sale, in 1734.

The Elizabethans in their travel and curiosity intensified interest in Islam; and it was as a result of such interest that serious English study of Islam was undertaken in the succeeding generations. The Elizabethan image of Islam was a mixture of fact and fancy, and as such is exceedingly interesting.

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This study aims at investigating the image of Muslims as presented in Elizabethan drama. I- Introduction The view of the West regarding Islam falls within the domain of Orientalism. This study aims at revealing some of the writers who dealt with Islam with a prior prejudice, even more some of these writers have launched a critical onslaught on Islam (Adnan, 1985, 82) indeed, the image of Muslims as presented by the western scholars falls with the negative.