

Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today

John Tolan

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Passions flare over the founder of Islam. He is variously considered the supreme prophet, the “embodiment of Islam,” a visionary leader, a reformer come to offer an alternative to the corruption of the Christian church, and a genius military strategist and role model for Napoleon. To others, he was a religious fanatic, an impostor, and a heretic who performed “false miracles” to lure Arabs away from Christianity. But who was he, really? While Christians can look to the gospels to learn about the life of Jesus, no such information about Muhammad is given in the Qur’an.

According to Tolan, much European writing on Muhammad has taken a hostile stance; his own book presents a comprehensive and surprising history of the positive side of Muhammad’s character and deeds, from his childhood as an orphan brought up by his uncle to his recognition as the prophet whose arrival was predicted in the Christian scriptures. Married at twenty-five, at forty he went into seclusion to meditate and received the Qur’an from the Archangel Gabriel. He preached in Mecca, rose to leadership in Medina, and fought to destroy idols and defeat his pagan and Jewish opponents.

With so much at stake these days, it seems wise to discover the facts about this charismatic and controversial figure. Tolan’s book examines the roots of the hostility, fear, and even admiration Europeans have had for Muhammad, or “Mahomet,” and how these attitudes have been expressed from the twelfth through the twenty-first centuries. His search for the truth about the seventh-century Arab distinguishes historical facts from pious legends to create a biography that reveals as much about the lens through which the Western world has viewed Muhammad as it does about the man Muslims believe to be God’s messenger. Instead of encouraging illusions of otherness and separation, Tolan presents a vision that sees Muhammad and Islam as “integral elements of European culture.”

KRISTINE MORRIS (March/April 2019)

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