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Between Sanctity and Liberty

1. Introduction

Our world today is facing many conflicts, but the worst of all are the continuous ones. For instance, portraying the image of Prophet Muhammad in non-Muslim countries seems to be one of these sources of continuous conflicts.

Recently, waves of protests caused the death of the American ambassador in Libya John Stevens¹. Some argue that It has been a reaction to the broadcasting of *Innocence of Muslims*, a humiliating anti-Islam movie depicting the Prophet Muhammad in addition to the offensive caricatures that were published by the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on September 19th, 2012 that have inflamed the global tension against the anti-Islam movie.

While to some people the issue here might be the freedom of speech and expression, to some others the issue is respect to the others and religious freedom.

This paper aims at showing the historical side of the conflict, and the inefficient way of dealing with this problem historically by studying non Muslim sources of the western translation that tackles the image of the prophet of Islam into Arabic, specifically *The divine comedy* of Dante Alighieri.

2. Historical background

Since the Middle Ages, and even today, Islam has been regarded as a heresy of Christianity. This interpretation, however, has not derived from political reasons such as wars, attacks, or conquests; rather, it was the immediate result of the presence of some theological elements

in the Koran that have been generally considered to be in direct contrast with some of the Christian theology².

Actually Muhammad gave Christians special dignity amongst other religions, branding them as *Ahl al-Kitâb* (People of the Book)³, that is, holders of their sacred scriptures and people with whom he could disclose great understanding and agreement.

In the year 628 CE, the charter of privileges was sent by the Prophet Muhammad to the monks of Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai⁴. It consisted of several clauses covering certain aspects of human rights including such topics as the protection of Christians living under Islamic rule, freedom of worship and movement, freedom to appoint their own judges and to own and maintain their property, exemption from military service, and the right to protection in war.

In contrast with the Islamic understanding of Muhammad, the Western image of him remained strongly negative for over a millennium and just recently started to change due to the numerous clashes that happened because of the offensive portrayal of the character of Prophet Muhammad. Many western people felt the need to dig deeper into his biography and personal history.

According to many legendary versions, Muhammad was typically depicted as an impostor, a charlatan, and a fraud and Islam was the religion of the sword. This fictional portrait of *Mahound*⁵ persisted at a popular level for a long time. Islam also raised a troubling theological question for the Christians. The period of legends diffusion started in the early days of Islamic expansion (*Futuhât*), where the relations between the Islamic and the Christian world were characterized by a long history of ideological disputes, theological hatred and mutual incomprehension.

Consequently, the vision of the Prophet in the Muslim countries was the sum of all moral virtues: patience, modesty, mercy and generosity towards the poor, the weak, the endowment from goodness to humanity, while the Western world held an opposite point of view according to the traditions that are spread there: one of the most damning versions of this legend pictures him as a dead corpse devoured by pigs. However shocking and provocative this might

seem, such visualization can be better understood within the context of the argument offered by W. Watt⁶.

At the time when the positive myths of King Arthur, Robin Hood, and Charlemagne were evolving in the West, the negative legend of *Mahound*, the enemy, was already firmly established. The creation of an evil myth may have been necessary in order to define the myth of the *noble* Christian⁷.

3. The Arabic translation of the *Divine Comedy*

Unprecedented and incomparable by all means, Dante surpassed all his contemporaries in terms of his literary knowledge or his capacity for expressing deep sentiments. He is not only a religious poet; his *Comedy* presents marvelous inner experiences, from pain and misery to his progressive approach to the divine throne. His intellectual messages influenced not just Italians of his period but also Europeans for whom the *Comedy* was also easily attainable⁸.

There is no doubt that finding different translations of a masterpiece like the *Divine Comedy* plays an essential part in the sharing of one of the richest sources of human heritage, as it is well known that this piece of work cannot be limited to its literary achievement. It is, in fact, an encyclopedia of knowledge of the medieval ages, where Dante expresses his political and religious thoughts, his assessment as regards the political situation of Italy, and particularly the situation of Florence in the XIV century. His comments master a variety of concerns such as the papacy, the empire, religious institutions, literatures and arts.

In the last 80 years there were several attempts to translate the *Divine Comedy* into Arabic language. The first attempt was by Qustákî al-Himsî (1858-1941) who was a prominent figure in the Arabic literature of the 19th and 20th centuries and one of the first reformers of the traditional Arabic poetry. The Syrian writer published in 1927-1928 a series of nine articles related to the *Divine Comedy* and its relation with Al-Ma'arrî's⁹ famous book *The Epistle of*

Forgiveness (Risâlat al-ghufrân). Then, Abboud Abû Rashîd followed him by trying to translate the *Divine Comedy*¹⁰.

In 1938 the Jordanian lawyer Amîn Abû al-Sahaâr managed to translate merely the *Inferno*¹¹. Later, the Egyptian professor Hassân Othmân published another version¹². The latest version of the Arabic translated *Divine Comedy* was done by Jihâd Kazem¹³ sponsored and published by the UNESCO.

Despite the huge efforts made to get this work done, it was a real surprise not to find Prophet Muhammad in the 28th sphere (*canto*) of the *Inferno*. Obviously it was preferred not to mention such episode in order to avoid possible intercultural clashes¹⁴.

Dante condemns the Prophet of Islam, allocating him in the twenty-eighth sphere of the *Inferno*¹⁵, split from head down to waist. Muhammad stands holding his detached breast with his own hands. Demonstrating the grave sin of bringing schism into religion, Muhammad represents the chief among the damned souls with his adoption of a fake religion.

Dante condemns the prophet of Islam as a founder of a religion that, for a Christian like him, cannot be more than an ideologically unacceptable schism of Christianity; therefore Muhammad is considered schismatic and deserving of this offensive punishment with all its terrible details. And as a result of this supposed schism, Dante considers Muhammad not just a sinner, but also a creator of discord, and that is why he places his soul in the ninth sphere of hell (*Nona bolgia*)¹⁶, where he demonstrates an exceptional arrogance in front of the punishment.

The placement of the Prophet in the sphere of the schismatic and founders of discord is the result of numerous ancient traditions that widely spread in the West and survived for a long time.

Arab readers, especially those who read only Arabic, even those who study literature, are not aware of the existence of Muhammad in the *Inferno*, while for the rest of the world Muhammad appears in the *Divine Comedy* with an explanation for his status and why he is found in this condition. Such a reading will definitely influence readers in shaping an image of this fraud and schismatic character, who were located in this sphere¹⁷.

In Arts the *Divine Comedy* has been a source of inspiration for many artists for almost seven centuries, as one of the most popular and greatest artistic works in the Western tradition, and its influence on culture cannot be overstated. This shows the centrality of such a work in the formation of the western perception of Islam even though not all agreed with this view. But this influence still exists especially as we take into consideration the quantity of literary works inspired¹⁸ by the *Divine Comedy*.

The gap might keep expanding between the eastern culture and the western one when it comes to the vision of the Prophet. If western readers kept reading these works with medieval comments, eastern readers were maintained absent from the real scene. Such gap might influence other aspects of life, way of thinking, living, seeing things and above all the perspective from which we conceive the other.

The concealment of the name of Muhammad from the work will not help in avoiding the clashes, because it will continue to be a latent conflict that soon will emerge to the surface and be an open one, a possibility that could be a resultant of a slightly simple act of religious incitement. Undoubtedly, half-concealment is never a proper solution. It is only through the encouragement of an open and civilized debate where programs at academic levels and public organizations can raise and discuss controversial issues.

This should be considered as a recall to start a constructive dialogue that can build a strong platform of intercultural relations based on respect, compromise and truth. Reconciliation will start by fighting ignorance, which eliminates tolerance. This of course needs a big effort from intellectuals who believe in building better intercultural relations, thus regularly face to face relations should be the bridge of better communication. It is not enough to stop on the State to State relations: meetings are highly important and needed as well as workshops, conferences and youth exchange programs.

4. Between the liberty of criticism and accepting the other

The issue around the relationship between freedom of expression and defamation was raised again in 2005 after the Danish Magazine Jylland-Posten published twelve editorial cartoons most of them depicted the prophet of Islam. It reignited the following year, in 2006, during the discourse of Pope Benedetto XVI the *lectio magistralis*, at Regensburg. On that occasion the Pope explores the theme of the relationship between violence and religion since the Hellenistic era until the modern times. Inevitably, he reported a rhetorical speech held by a Byzantine emperor over the question of violence in Islam, where the concept of *jihād* and Mohammad have been criticized. Immediately that discourse has been subject of many protests and public manifestations within the worldwide Muslim community¹⁹.

In 2008, the European Union approved the so-called *Council Framework Decision on combating Racism and Xenophobia*, a policy highly criticized by the member of the Dutch Parliament Geert Wilders in his article published by the *Wall Street Journal* on February 26th, 2011²⁰. As an attempt to solve this paradox, also the UN General Assembly in 2010 presented and approved an important resolution entitled *Combating Defamation of Religions* which aimed to limit criticisms and religious provocations and prevent, therefore, violent reactions from any religious communities²¹.

The way in which the EU, the UN Generally Assembly, and, broadly, the International community tried to solve this delicate issue does not help in finding an effective solution to the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

Nowadays, the question could be raised of the capacity of Arabs and Muslims to practice free speech or liberal dialogue itself. It is worth relating the remark of B. Lewis as regards freedom in modern Islamic thought: *In traditional Islam usage of freedom was a legal, not a political concept*²².

K. Armstrong argues that modern Western society has lost the sense of myths and enshrined logo as its foundation. Mythical narratives and the rituals and meanings attached to them have ceded

authority to that which is rational, pragmatic and scientific, but which does not assuage human pain or sorrow, and cannot answer questions about the ultimate value of human life. However, far from embarking on a wholesale rejection of the modern emphasis in favor of the old balance, the author contends religious fundamentalists unwittingly turn the myths of their faith into logos. Fundamentalism is a child of modernity, and fundamentalists are fundamentally modern²³.

The solution should start with a simple question: are we capable of understanding others or not? Clashes do not come out of nothing, nor do they prosper overnight. As such, a careful study of cultural backgrounds and sources of stereotypes and misrepresentations is highly recommended. The evaluation of the contradiction of the image of Prophet Muhammad, for example, in the West and East, can easily address the origin of the conflict, which will be more effective than dealing with the surface conflict for the aim of a temporary turnoff.

5. Religious power and the lost of liberty of thought

Due to theocratic and political impulses, civilization is facing today real threatens of a cultural disintegration. Liberty doesn't start with limited governments and individual rights because these are the fruits of a specific cultural, ideological evolution having its genesis in Ancient Greece and reaching the summit of philosophical maturity in the Anglo-American Enlightenment.

Bearing in mind that free speech clearly has its restrictions and several people today are in prisons for questioning the literal dogma of the Holocaust for example, the only way out of the tunnel seems to be through a rational reality-based philosophy, respect, compromise, tolerance and power of mind can secure liberty. Between religious precept and the practices of freedom there is always a supposed clash.

Reconsidering the image of Muhammad as the embodiment of an essential difference between the problem of the liberty of thought, speech and open mindedness from one side, and religious preservation, sanctity and holiness from the other, T. Andrae illustrates:

The concept of the period of Enlightenment permitted a more just estimate of Mohammed's personality. In their naïve fashion the thinkers of this period often evaluated the outstanding wisdom and virtue of ancient lawgivers and founder of religions, and stressed the reasonable alien faiths, praising them at the expense of Christianity. They extended to Islam this benevolent evaluation of the non-Christian religion.²⁴

Arabs and Muslim historians should take the initiatives of studying history and philosophy that always missed from their studies, whether because they use little of non-Muslim sources or because they always refused the other opinion. B. Lewis assures:

The external interests of Islamic historiography were thus limited to the prehistory of the Islamic community itself and were moreover confined to the earlier period. With few and rare exceptions, they did not extend to the history of alien peoples or cultures, or even to the pre-Islamic history of the peoples and countries brought into Islam. In other words, Muslim historians were concerned only with their own civilization and its immediate ancestors and in this they resembled the historians of most other human communities, including, until comparatively recent times, our own.²⁵

The Western ontological and theological perception of the Prophet Muhammad as the antithesis of Jesus, or the Antichrist, appeared also in Voltaire's work, *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète*, a play in five acts written in 1736. Voltaire composed and staged this tragedy in order to counter what the author viewed as the hypocrisies of organized religion and its associated ills: superstition, dogma and fanaticism as practiced in Catholicism in particular.

However, Voltaire targeted not only the Papacy. He challenged the theological and metaphysical basis of all organized religions, counter posing his own *natural* religion basis in part on the skeptical rationalism of Hume, Shaftesbury and Leibniz. Voltaire's tragic vision of the Prophet embodies previous Western biases against Muhammad and Islam, while updating these cultural preconceptions in the then-

current dramaturgical codes. Voltaire's opinion became fashionable and found a strong echo in his period.

Bringing the image of Prophet Muhammad within the western literature as a case study, this analysis, has shown briefly some aspect of the western mentality over the issue under investigation. Thus, just having a look at its literary heritage, the today's western thought has been influenced and shaped accordingly to particular interests during the ages. Thus, it would be useless to try solving a historical problem without dealing with its roots.

Therefore, to conclude, this kind of conflict should urge us to work hardly to re-portrait many of the historically manipulated images, in a way that conflicts of the past don't influence negatively our present.

6. Conclusion

Diversity is one of the sources of life's beauty. Actually, the holy Koran advocates this as a source of vitality for human being:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).³⁶

Dialogue between cultures is the essential and the only way to avoid clashes and create a democratic conversation. This will be the appropriate message of rejection to violence that would ultimately enable us to live in a peaceful constructive multicultural world. The application of dialogue will not only lead to harmony but also to better integrating systems for all member of society, where the dominant atmosphere will be full of tolerance, respect, solidarity, compromising and understanding.

The west and the east should take into consideration cultural diversity and not limit itself to a one-sided western viewpoint; rather it

should attempt to be inclusive of a multiplicity of various perspectives.

Western and Eastern historians should also start taking initiatives in search for similarities and historical accounts that can help in bringing both cultures towards an advanced level of mutual understanding with the help of the international communication systems today available to resolve the problems of yesterday. Muslims should not stereotype the west because of certain comments here and there or a number of books of some writer. Voltaire's negative stereotype of Prophet Muhammad can always be countered by George Bernard Shaw's confidence that *if a man like Muhammad were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world, he would succeed in solving its problems that would bring it the much needed peace and happiness*²⁶.

As a major requirement in dealing with skeptics, one should always address their concerns. Indifference or underestimation of a counterargument is not only ethically inappropriate but can ultimately make one a victim of his own device, doubly enhancing what he initially intended to refute!

Though always easier said than done, it is still healthier and more mature to try crossing the border line of differences and seeing for oneself what and how people view on the other front and to accept at the end that it is just possible and very much human for two people to stare at the exact one thing and, still, to see two different versions.

Talking about intercultural problems, this is essential in order to solve it; the lack of dialogue is the real problem that should be solved by focusing light on not by hiding it.

In conclusion, hiding facts is not a solution, because any conflict can be solved in its primary phase, while if it turned to be a latent conflict, there will be a time that dealing with problems would be impossible, simply because it will be turned to rooted conflicts.

Therefore, people who do translations should have the courage to face the conflict and working in the direction of solving it, instead of hiding it. Otherwise, it will work on expanding the gap of understanding and create more future conflicts.

Note

- 1 J.C. Stevens (1960-2012) was an American diplomat and lawyer who served as the U.S. Ambassador to Libya from June 2012 to September 2012. Stevens was killed when the U.S. consulate was attacked in Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012.
- 2 See Q (19: 19-36); A.H. Eliyasee, A.Y. Ali, I. Sloan (eds), *The Holy Quran*, Ishi Press International, Japan 2011.
- 3 *Ibidem*.
- 4 The English translated text of the Charter of Privileges was extracted from A. Zahoor, Z. Haq, *Muslim History: 570-1950 C.E*, ZMD Corporation, Gaithersburg 2000, p. 167. A. Atiya Suryal, *The Monastery of St. Catherine and the Mount Sinai Expedition*, American philosophical society, Philadelphia 1952, p. 578.
- 5 The name of the prophet was corrupted to be Mahound regarded as a name of the devil. In Latin the name is Malchomet, in Italia is Maometto, the most probable origin of the name is the one who commits the evil acts.
- 6 W.M. Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, Oxford University Press, London 1961, p. 2.
- 7 As most of these epic poems have the aim of glorifying the nobles and their strength in defending the country from the Islamic danger. As W. Lippmann, the notable columnist and social scientist, speculates that we tend to define *self* by first stereotyping *the other*.
- 8 The importance of this issue can be noticed from the huge number of the languages to which the *Divine Comedy* was translated, and the enormous request on this book till nowadays.
- 9 Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî (973-1058) was a blind Arab philosopher, poet and writer.
- 10 Abboud Abû Rashîd, *Dante's trip in the divine kingdoms* published in three chapter (Hell, Purgatory and Heaven), Tripoli-Libya 1930–1933.

- 11 Amîn Abû al Shâr, *Dante's inferno*, Terra Santa, Jerusalem 1938.
- 12 Hassân Othmân, *Aljahim Danti*, 3 voll., Dâr Al-Mareef, Cairo 1959-69.
- 13 Iraqi poet, born on 1955, since 1976 resident in Paris.
- 14 See Arabic Translation of the *Divine Comedy* by J. Kathem, *al-Kûmîdya al-'Ilhya*, Mo'sasa Al-Arabya li al- dirasât, Beirut 2002, p.368.
- 15 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Oxford University Press, London 1939, Inf. XXVIII, vv. 40-66.
- 16 *Ibidem*.
- 17 The work was not always so well regarded. After being recognized as a masterpiece in the first centuries after its publication, the work was largely ignored during the Enlightenment, only to be *rediscovered* by William Blake and the romantic writers of the 19th century. Later authors such as T.S. Eliot, E. Pound, S. Beckett, and J. Joyce have drawn on it for inspiration. The poet H.W. Longfellow was its first American translator, and modern poets, including S. Heaney, R. Pinsky, and W. Merwin, have also given translations of all or parts of the book.
- 18 Many are the writings that tackle the image of the prophet such as: P. Levi quotes Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the chapter called *Canto of Ulysses* in his novel *Se questo è un uomo*, published in the United States as *Survival in Auschwitz*, and in other parts of this book. C. Charles' book *The Log* includes a piece of prose entitled *The London Inferno* which describes the darker aspects of London and the way they parallel the nine circles of Hell witnessed in the *Divine Comedy*. Author M. Lowry paralleled Dante's descent into hell with G. Firmin's descent into alcoholism in his *Under the Volcano* (1947). In contrast to the original, Lowry's character explicitly refuses grace and chooses hell. Authors L. Niven and J. Pournelle wrote a modern sequel, *Inferno* (published in 1978), in which a book author dies during a fan convention and finds himself in Hell. He escapes with the aid of various characters he meets along the way (including some historical figures). *The Dante Club* is a 2003 novel by M. Pearl which tells the story of various American poets translating the *Divine Comedy* in post-civil war Boston. At the same time, a killer takes inspiration from the punishments in Dante's *Inferno*.

- 19 P. Branca (a cura), *Il Sorriso della Mezzaluna: Umoreismo, Ironia e Satira nella Cultura Araba*, Carocci, Roma 2010, p. 183.
- 20 G. Wilders, *European Free Speech Under Attack*, "The Wall Street Journal", February 26th, 2011 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704409004576146332536459942.html> (accessed on 18/12/2011).
- 21 UN General Assembly resolution: *Combating defamation of religions* A/HRC/RES/13/16 - 15/04/2010 - EN http://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/it/database/Database-dei-documenti-dellAnnuario/645?f_attivitaId=645&f_annuario_diritti_umani_page=11&
- 22 B. Lewis, *Islam in History*, Alcove Press Limited, London 1973, p. 267.
- 23 For further reading see K. Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, Harper, San Francisco 1992.
- 24 T. Andrae, *Mohammed: the Man and His Faith*, translated from German by T. Menzel, Barnes and Noble, New York 1957, vol. VII, p. 173.
- 25 B. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- 26 D.H. Laurence (ed.), *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1926-1950*, Trustees of the British Museum, London 1988, pp. 305-6.