

“Une religion plus digne de la Divinité”:
A New Source for Carlyle’s Essay on Mahomet

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PERHAPS NO PHRASE SUMMARIZES CARLYLE’S PRESCIENCE AS AN historian more succinctly than “the conflux of two Eternities.” He employed it frequently in his writings to express the mystery of existence and the effort to “decipher . . . what wonders lie in every Day” (*French Revolution* [1837], *Works* 2: 134). Alert to the ways in which the present was pregnant with the consequences of the past and the possibilities of the future, Carlyle always gave priority to the spiritual dimension of history. Understanding the past was paramount to him because it was an instance of “Natural Supernaturalism” (*Sartor Resartus* [1833–34] 187–95), a record of man’s visible as well as his invisible strivings. In richly variegated ways, Carlyle the historian realized the argument later advanced by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) “that Religion, occupying herself with personal destinies and keeping thus in contact with the only absolute realities which we know, must necessarily play an eternal part in human history” (503). For Carlyle, religion operated as a “prime influence” on human affairs, uniting the “outward condition of . . . life” with “the inward and spiritual” (“On History” [1830] 11). History was not only the “essence of innumerable Biographies” (“Biography” [1832], *Works* 28: 46) but also the “essence” of what James called “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s] . . . in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*” (*Varieties* 31). In Carlyle’s view, to ignore or to discount religion as a primary shaping force in

history is to misconceive reality itself, as he explains in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841):

[T]he thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough *without* asserting it even to himself, much less to others); the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest. (4)

If the “Prophetic Manuscript” of history is decipherable, it is through the study of religion that its “letters” became “legible” (“On History” 8). Were he alive today is safe to assume that Carlyle would have regarded the emergence of radical Islam as a threat to civilization, both eastern and western. He might have also have identified a striking “conflux” between his time and our own. In “an Age of Scepticism” at the very moment when a group of twenty-first century apostles of “Benthamee Utility” (*Heroes* 39, 65) confidently predicted the “End of History” and the global triumph of democracy, secularism, and liberalism, religion suddenly and violently reiterated its demand to be regarded as a primary historical “Fact.”¹ Carlyle would not have been surprised by this turn of events. In his own era, he challenged the Utilitarian view that the French Revolution was a pivotal phase in the global advancement of democracy, science, technology, laissez-faire, and secularism. Carlyle pursued a sharply divergent approach by taking the cue given to him by his primary sources. In *The French Revolution* he represented the social and political upheaval as a spiritual crisis. The defining element of the “new Political Evangel” (*Works* 2: 128) was its appeal to a purified future, which was celebrated and sanctified in popular public rituals, symbols, and liturgies. In his 1906 edition of the work, John Holland Rose shrewdly pinpointed Carlyle’s achievement: “[He] asserted that no visible and finite object had ever spurred men on to truly great and far-reaching movements. Only the invisible and the infinite could do that” (xiv). Utilitarians responded by dismissing the work as “picturesque” history. Reviewing it in 1837, Carlyle’s rival and antagonist John Stuart Mill observed that the book was marred by two notable defects—the author’s aversion to generalization and his lack of a coherent political philosophy.

He forgot that “[w]ithout a hypothesis to commence with, we do not even know what end to begin at, what points to enquire in.” Carlyle’s concern with re-creating the event distracted him from its “universal” significance (161–62).² Mill had earlier declared in 1833 that “it must be the shallowest view of the French Revolution, which can *now* consider it as any thing but a mere *incident* in a great change in man himself . . . a change which is but half completed, and which is now in a state of more rapid progress here in England” (118). The “unphilosophical” Carlyle had failed to gauge the true purpose of history, which was to confirm the existence of the permanent laws of human advancement.

Preoccupied with a rational future, Utilitarians and liberals were disinclined to dwell in an irrational past. Yet Carlyle continued to believe that history was a “true fountain of knowledge; by whose light alone, consciously or unconsciously employed, can the Present and the Future be interpreted or guessed at” (“On History” 8). When he delivered his lecture on Mahomet on 8 May 1840, he was as much concerned with reinvigorating what he called “religiosity” (*Heroes* 42) as he was with redeeming “the rude message” (*Heroes* 40) of Islam. In his analysis the social and spiritual condition of English society overlapped. Religion had been enervated by double-talk, hypocrisy, bigotry, and a stifling orthodoxy. It had disintegrated into an unholy squabble of spirit-numbing dogmas. Pious English Christians debated the integrity of the Thirty-nine Articles, while their world succumbed complacently to the soul-denying forces of mechanism and materialism. Bentham and his disciples had rendered history a science of progress, philosophy a justification of self-interest, and faith a matter of social convenience. The “infinite celestial Soul of Man” was reduced to “a kind of Hay-balance for weighing hay and thistles on, pleasures and pains on” (*Heroes* 65). The questions that Mahomet posed while wandering among the “grim rocks of Mount Hara”—“What is Life; what is Death! What am I to believe? What am I to do?” (*Heroes* 47)—no longer mattered. Religion had become irrelevant in English society.

Though he hoped his essay on Mahomet was historically accurate, Carlyle was less confident that he had persuaded his audience—“bishops and all kinds of people” he reported

to his mother (*CL* 12: 138; 9 May 1840)—to reflect seriously about their beliefs. He informed Emerson in a letter of 2 July 1840:

The Lecture on Mahomet . . . astonished my worthy friends beyond measure. It seems that this Mahomet was not a quack? Not a bit of him! That he is a better Christian, with his “bastard Christianity,” than most of us shovel-hatted? . . . On the whole, I fear I did little but confuse my esteemed audience: I was amazed after all their reading of me, to be understood so ill. . . . Withal I regretted that I had not six months of preaching, whereby to learn to preach, and explain things fully! (*CL* 12: 183–84)

But the confusion was mutual, and Carlyle was too honest to ignore his own religious doubts. In the first lecture he had stated that “a man’s religion is the chief fact with regard to him” (*Heroes* 4). As a lapsed Christian, he was in an awkward position to probe the interior of Islam. He concedes at the outset of his lecture that “We have chosen Mahomet not as the most eminent Prophet: but as the one we are freest to speak of.” For both personal and professional reasons, Carlyle knew that he could not transgress these limits. He had rejected the dogma of Christianity because he could never reconcile the “natural” Jesus with his “supernatural” incarnation. If he wrote the life of Christ, he knew he would have to expose the “rude gross error” of the Son of God’s divinity, and lift the veil of theological “quackery” (*Heroes* 37, 39) behind which the Savior lived, moved, and breathed. Mahomet offered him a safer subject, he wryly conceded, since “there is no danger of our becoming, any of us, Mahometans” (*Heroes* 38). Under his breath he may have been tempted to add, “or Christians, for that matter.”

For Carlyle, the way in which belief guides action in this world constitutes “the question of questions.” Arguments about liturgy, dogma, ritual, and symbolism bored and irritated him, as did most of the “Hebrew Old-clothes” of the Bible with the exception of the Book of Job, the “oldest statement of the never-ending Problem,—man’s destiny, and God’s ways with him here in this earth” (*Life of Sterling* [1851], *Works* 11: 3; *Heroes* 43). He would have passionately endorsed James’s opinion:

What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine, of which I have shown you so many instances, renewing themselves *in sæcula sæculorum* in the lives of humble private men. (447)

Carlyle was emotionally gripped by the effort to reconcile faith with everyday life. Religion was a perpetual struggle to make sense of the relation between the seen and the unseen: “Is not a man’s walking, in truth, always that: ‘a succession of falls’? . . . In this wild element of a Life, he has to struggle onwards; now fallen, deep-abased; and ever, with tears, repentance, with bleeding heart, he has to rise again, with tears, repentance, with bleeding heart, he has to rise again, struggle again still onwards” (*Heroes* 41). In the Mahomet essay, as in all of his historical and biographical writings, he immersed himself in his subject’s psychological “habitation” (*Heroes* 41). Here as elsewhere, Carlyle’s religious confusion paradoxically served as an advantage to him. The intensity of his agnostic yearnings, with his fierce desire for certitude battling with his equally vigorous doubt, made him peculiarly susceptible to the spiritual “struggles” of those removed from him in time and space. His later friend William Lecky (1838–1903), another historian with skeptical inclinations, outlined in *The Religious Tendencies of the Age* (1860) a process of imaginative communion that sheds light on Carlyle’s methods:

Do not imagine . . . that you can understand a religious system because you have mastered its history and can explain its doctrines. Your mind should be so imbued with its spirit that you can realise the feelings of those who believe in it; you should endeavour to throw yourself into their position, to ascertain what doctrines they chiefly dwell upon, what points fascinate the most, what present the greatest difficulty to their minds. You should try to divest yourself for a time of your previous notions and to assume the feelings of others. (Elisabeth Lecky, *Memoir* 20)

Carlyle similarly “assume[s] the feelings of others” by attending to the details of their life and by re-creating their “position.” Typically, in *Heroes* he interprets Islam through a study of Mahomet’s personal history rather than through his doctrines.

Carlyle’s spiritual transmigration in the essay on Mahomet deeply impressed his contemporaries. Twenty years after he delivered the lecture, a commentary in the radical journal *The Leader* concluded, “For a long period it had been the custom for Jewish and Christian writers to regard Mohammed as an imposter;—but the philosophical minds of this century have formed a more favourable opinion of his character. For the most part, they seem disposed to recognise his mission; at any rate, they are not prepared to dispute that it was accomplished. This, undoubtedly, is a great fact in his favour, and to Mr. Thos. Carlyle in particular conclusive of his claims” (*Leader* 165). At a personal level, some of his friends acknowledged this influence while others preferred to adopt the “gospel of silence,” including his wife Jane Welsh Carlyle.³ The author and politician Richard Monckton Milnes (1818–94) dedicated a volume of poems to him entitled *Palm Leaves* (1844), which was occasioned by his travels in the Middle East. In the preface Milnes insisted, “It is . . . of primary importance for every European traveller in the East to comprehend, or at least not to misapprehend, the character and history of that Mohammed, whose word has now lasted twelve hundred years, and is the life-guidance of one hundred and eighty millions of men.” Milnes added in a footnote, “There can be no better introduction to this course of thought than Mr. Carlyle’s lecture, ‘The Hero as Prophet,’ one of the boldest and most convincing vindications of the worth of a great man ever uttered or penned” (xxii). Ironically, Carlyle may have unwittingly contributed to James Anthony Froude’s dour conception of him as a “Calvinist without the theology” in the *Life*. In an address on “Calvinism” to the students of St. Andrew’s in 1871, Froude merged Carlyle’s voice with Mahomet’s in his summary of the Prophet’s religious creed:

To the question, “What right have you to interfere with us?” there is in exceptional times of convulsion but one answer: “We must. . . . The moral laws of your Maker are written in your consciences as well as in

ours. If you disobey them you bring disaster not only on your own wretched selves, but on all around you. It is our common concern, and if you will not submit, in the name of our Master we will compel you." (*Life* 2: 2; *Short Studies* 2: 45)

In Froude's imagination, the prophets of Chelsea and Medina were spiritual twins.⁴

In the twentieth century, Carlyle's reputation as a champion of Islam has survived, though it coexists awkwardly with the undeserved and misguided caricature of him as a forerunner of Hitler and National Socialism. The most notable defense of his credentials as an Islamic scholar was launched from Edinburgh. In an address to the Carlyle Society on 24 October 1953, W. Montgomery Watt, future Emeritus Professor of Arabic at Edinburgh University, asserted that Carlyle's essay on Mahomet marked "an important step forward in the process of reversing the medieval world-picture of Islam as the great enemy, and rehabilitating its founder, Muhammad" (254). Watt's assessment was corroborated by Geoffrey Tillotson, who argued in *A View of Victorian Literature* (1978) that Carlyle's Mahomet lecture "stimulated if it did not create the interest in 'comparative' religion," and by Ruth apRoberts, who perceptively remarked in *The Ancient Dialect* (1988) that Carlyle "laid the groundwork for James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, and Mircea Eliade" (Tillotson 63; apRoberts 101). In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said criticized Carlyle for "overlooking the historical and cultural circumstances of the Prophet's own time and place," but he too acknowledged that his "attitude is salutary: Mohammed is no legend, no shameful sensualist, no laughable petty sorcerer who trained pigeons to pick peas out of his ear. Rather he is a man of real vision and self-conviction" (152). In *Muhammad in Europe* (2000), Minou Reeves singled out Carlyle as a persuasive advocate who "condemned the hostile attitudes of Europeans towards Muhammad and his religion, by celebrating the Prophet of Islam as an upright, sincere and great man of history" (5). Muhammed A. Al-Da'mi, in a study of nineteenth-century literary approaches to Islam, concurred with Reeves: "[The essay] is a rare document of great literary merit which attempts a revaluation of established attitudes" (84). Not all commentators have been convinced of the sincerity of Carlyle's intentions. In a series of lectures

delivered at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1965, reissued as *The Roots of Romanticism* (1999), Isaiah Berlin cited Carlyle's lecture on Mahomet as an example of the perversity of romantic vitalism. Carlyle, "a highly characteristic, if somewhat exaggerated, representative of the romantic movement," had no interest in the thought or content of Mahomet's faith: "[H]e does not begin to suppose that the Koran contains anything which he, Carlyle, could be expected to believe. What he admires Mahomet for is that he is an elemental force, that he lives an intense life. . . . The question of whether what Mahomet believed was true or false would have appeared to Carlyle perfectly irrelevant" (10).⁵

Carlyle would have been both baffled and flattered by the claims of his defenders and detractors. His intention had never been to counter the false European impression of Mahomet with genuflecting hagiography. The germ of the essay in *Heroes* lay in *Lectures on the History of Literature*, which had been delivered between April and July 1838. Carlyle's attitude to Mahomet was a cautious mixture of admiration and skepticism:

The nation, ever since the time of their probable founders (Hagar and Ishmael), had been a nation of great energy, but living alone in their deserts, and entirely obscure in that way of life, until Mahomet, the Prophet of Arabia, appeared. This was in the seventh century. I must say that I regard this man as no imposter at all, and I am glad to think so for the honour of our human nature, but, as an enthusiastic man, who had by the powers of his own mind gained a flash of the truth, living a quiet simple life till the age of forty, then striking out into a new path altogether, deeply impressed with the heinousness of Arabian idolatry, and full of the great truth, that God was one; in other respects a poor inferior mortal, full of sensuality, corruption, and ignorance, as he showed by the rewards he promised the Arabs when he spoke out his system to them. (106–07)

Mahomet lacked the breadth of vision and free play of mind that Carlyle associated with Shakespeare, with whom "there are always the noblest sympathies, no sectarianism, no cruelty, no narrowness, no vain egotism" (150). Carlyle did not abandon this calibrated perspective in the essay on Mahomet in *Heroes*. But there he exhibited an altogether deeper quality of insight

into the Prophet's spirituality, the force and originality of which was cogently summarized by Montgomery Watt:

[Carlyle] was the first writer in either east or west to attempt to fathom the inner experience of the founder of Islam. Others in Europe had seen in Muhammad's ideas an expression of the essence of all true religion. Even Goethe seems to have been concerned mainly with Muhammad's historical achievement. Carlyle alone was interested in the man, the human person, grappling with the problems of human life and destiny that are common to all men. (253)

Oddly, neither the defenders nor the detractors of Carlyle's essay on Mahomet have explored his use of sources in any detail. Exactly which ones enabled him to "fathom the inner experience of the founder of Islam?"

apRoberts has rightly stressed Carlyle's general indebtedness to Goethe, from whose *West-östlichen Diwan* (1819) he takes the verse, "Wenn Islam Gott ergeben heißt, / Im Islam leben und sterben wir alle" ["If Islam means devoted to God, we all live and die in Islam"] (*Heroes* 49; *Werke* 7: 2). Goethe expanded Carlyle's understanding of Islam by poetically disclosing the "Organic Filaments" (*Sartor* 180) that united East and West. Carlyle's interest may have been reinforced by his reading of Scott's novel *The Talisman* (1832), the hero of which was the twelfth-century Ayyubid Sultan Saladin, who possessed "the look and manners of one on whose brow Nature had written, This is a King!" (*Talisman* 38: 492).⁶ According to the editors of the Strouse edition of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Carlyle's two primary sources for the essay on Mahomet were George Sale's *The Koran, Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed . . . to which is Prefixed A Preliminary Discourse* (1734) and Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88). Yet Carlyle had thoughtful reservations about relying too heavily on either of these works. Sale (1697?–1736) was a London solicitor who had worked at one point for the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, and who "regarded the Arabs as the scourge of God visited on the Christians for their errors and schisms" (Irwin 121). He candidly acknowledged in his "Preliminary Discourse" that the "protestants alone are able to attack the Koran with success; and for them, I trust,

Providence has reserved the glory of its overthrow" (iv).⁷ Gibbon, who relied heavily on Sale's work, was more familiar to Carlyle as the withering prosecutor of Christianity. His attitude to Islam was only slightly less critical. He cautioned that the "talents of Mahomet are entitled to our applause, but his success has perhaps too strongly attracted our admiration. Are we surprised that a multitude of proselytes should embrace the doctrine and the passions of an eloquent fanatic?" (5: 394). Notwithstanding his accomplishments, the founder of Islam was a "victorious impostor" driven by the "ruling passion" of "ambition" (5: 377).

From their respective vantage points, Sale and Gibbon each provided Carlyle with a clear view of the social and political context of Islam, yet neither threw much light on the religion of Mahomet. Employing a tactic that neatly absolved him of having to offer his own opinions, Sale refers to the estimate of the "eastern historians" that the Prophet was "a man of excellent judgment, and a happy memory . . . a person of few words, of an equal chearful temper and familiar in conversation, of inoffensive behaviour towards his friends, and of great condescension towards his inferiors. . . . To all which were joined a comely agreeable person and a polite address" (42). His synopsis of Mahomet's "personal qualifications" is similarly grudging: "[H]e was a man of at least tolerable morals, and not such a monster of wickedness as he is usually represented. And indeed it is scarce possible to conceive, that a wretch of so profligate a character should ever have succeeded in an enterprize of this nature; a little hypocrisy and saving of appearances, at least, must have been absolutely necessary; and the sincerity of his intentions is what I pretend not to inquire into" (41). Sale's assessment of the Arab character is an orderly juxtaposition of virtues and vices. On the one hand, the Arabs exhibit "Eloquence, and a perfect skill in their own tongue . . . Expertness in the use of arms, and horsemanship . . . and . . . Hospitality." On the other hand, the Arabs "like other nations" had "their defects and vices," the most notable of which, according to "[t]heir own writers," was "a natural disposition to war, bloodshed, cruelty, and rapine" (30). Though he notes their propensity for robbery, he also concedes that "[w]e must not . . . imagine that they are the less honest for this among themselves, or towards those whom they receive as

friends; on the contrary, the strictest probity is observed in their camp, where every thing is open, and nothing every known to be stolen” (31).

Gibbon’s tendency to treat spiritual matters as political conflicts in disguise was appealing to Carlyle on one level. He valued the contrast that the author of the *Decline and Fall* established between seventh-century Christianity, riven by increasingly arcane and mystical theological disputes, and Islam, strengthened by a resolutely non-miraculous faith in one God and His apostle Mahomet. Gibbon reinforced Carlyle’s conviction that theology had little to do with true “religiosity,” a conviction that had been strengthened by his distaste for the controversies of the Oxford movement.⁸ With cool acerbity, Gibbon unravels the fourth- and fifth-century disputes about the Incarnation, which were “scandalous to the church, alike pernicious to the state, still more minute in their origin, still more durable in their effects” (5: 96). The division between “homoiousians” and “homoousian” (2: 352) or “those “who were most apprehensive of confounding, and those who were most fearful of separating, the divinity and the humanity of Christ” (5: 106) eviscerated Christian teaching and paralyzed the minds of its adherents. Gibbon observes that in “the long night of superstition, the Christians had wandered far away from the simplicity of the gospel. . . . The worship of images was inseparably blended, at least to a pious fancy, with the Cross, the Virgin, the saints and their relics; the holy ground was involved in a cloud of miracles and visions; and the nerves of the mind, curiosity and scepticism, were benumbed by the habits of obedience and belief” (5: 253). Gibbon contrasts this picture of a divided and demoralized group of warring sects with the fiercely committed and determined Muslims. The Arab’s military triumphs mirror the austerity of their religion:

The cities of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, had been fortified with the images of Christ, his mother, and his saints; and each city presumed on the hope or promise of miraculous defence. In a rapid conquest of ten years, the Arabs subdued those cities and these images; and, in their opinion, the Lord of Hosts pronounced a decisive judgment between the adoration and contempt of these mute and inanimate idols. (6: 250)

For Gibbon, Mahomet embodies the worldly practicality and the independent bent of the Arab nature. He resists the tendency to deify himself, and instead forges a creed that is austere both in form and substance:

The creed of Mohammed is free from suspicion or ambiguity; and the Koran is a glorious testimony to the unity of God. The prophet of Mecca rejected the worship of idols and men, of stars and planets, on the rational principle that whatever rises must set, that whatever is born must die, that whatever is corruptible must decay and perish. In the Author of the universe his rational enthusiasm confessed and adored an infinite and eternal being, without form or place, without issue or similitude, present to our most secret thoughts, existing by the necessity of his own nature, and deriving from himself all moral and intellectual perfection. (5: 339)

Echoing Sale's analysis, Gibbon opposes the rationalism and simplicity of the creed to the gaudy sacraments and degenerate rituals of medieval Christianity. Yet the danger of Islam lay in the Prophet's failure to define the limits of his own authority. If the belief of God is inseparable from that of Mohammed, then his injunctions are invested with divine sanction and cannot be debated or revised: "A philosopher will observe that [his followers'] cruelty and [Mahomet's] success would tend more strongly to fortify the assurance of his divine mission . . . and that his conscience would be soothed by the persuasion that he alone was absolved by the Deity from the obligation of positive and moral laws" (5: 377). Following the flight to Medina, Mahomet became preoccupied with the expulsion of idolaters and unbelievers: "From his establishment at Medina, Mahomet assumed the exercise of the regal and sacerdotal office; and it was impious to appeal from a judge whose decrees were inspired by the divine wisdom" (5: 358). In Gibbon's view the Prophet's injunctions to punish the infidels transformed the creed into a militant doctrine of punishment and submission, informed by a fatalistic resignation to the will of Allah. Mahomet himself was gradually corrupted by his power: "Of his last years, ambition was the ruling passion; and a politician will suspect that he secretly smiled . . . at the enthusiasm of his youth and the credulity of his proselyte" (5: 377). The "sword of Islam" henceforth became a prescription for war, violence, and imperialism.⁹

Without the accounts of Sale and Gibbon, Carlyle's essay would have lacked the historical specificity that enhances his biography of the Prophet. Yet neither Sale nor Gibbon provided him with what he needed most—an intimate narrative of Mahomet's personal and spiritual development. Carlyle's most important source, unknown to his twentieth-century defenders and detractors, and perhaps more surprisingly, to the editors of the Strouse edition of *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, had been written by Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), “the most distinguished scholar of classical Arabic in the early nineteenth century” (Irwin 7). In a letter dated 8 June 1867, now held by the University of Edinburgh Rare Books Library, Carlyle replied to the painter George Frederic Watts (1817–1904), who had queried him about the sources for his essay on Mahomet in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. The subject was of particular interest to Watts because he had included Mahomet in the large mural that he had completed in the Great Hall at Lincoln's Inn between 1854 and 1859, entitled *Justice—A Hemicycle of Lawgivers*.¹⁰ Carlyle had been sitting for a portrait by him, and the two had been debating the issue of accuracy in historical painting. The discussion turned to the color of Mahomet's eyes, and “whether the brown eye or grey eye denoted the man of action, Carlyle maintaining that the brown eye belonged of necessity to the active temperament, and the grey eye to the contemplative” (Watts, *Annals* 248). In the letter Carlyle writes: “Mahomet's ‘eyes were large, black and full of fire’ (*Biographie Universelle*, tome 26, p. 206; by Silvestre de Sacy): for its excellence, and clearness from *wh* you might paint, I have had the whole Descriptn copied for you; and send it, revised,—with my compts” (MS: EUL Gen. 1730–78). In “The Hero as Prophet” Carlyle refers to Sacy only once—“Silvestre de Sacy says there is some likelihood that the Black Stone [of the Caabah at Mecca] is an aerolite” (*Heroes* 43)—but the profound impact that his article had on Carlyle's conception of the Prophet is evident throughout the essay.

Sacy's article on Mahomet was co-signed by Henrid' Audiffret, a regular contributor to the *Biographie Universelle* who probably played a part in editing the piece. But it is substantially the work of Sacy, and it curiously contradicts the image of him propounded by twentieth-century Orientalists and their opponents.¹¹ In

the essay, Carlyle discovered a powerful refutation of the arguments advanced by Sale and Gibbon that Mahomet was an ambitious charlatan consumed by a lust for worldly power. Sacy showed that the personal life of the Prophet demonstrated a quite contrary reality, namely that Islam flourished because of the moral and spiritual honesty of its founder. Throughout the essay, Sacy underscores Mahomet's role as an inspired leader, governor, and administrator. He abstracts the Prophet of his miraculous aspects, while highlighting the humanity and the basic decency of his religious vision. From the outset, Sacy is determined to separate Mahomet from the accretions of legend and myth: "We have tried to resist using the accounts of the Prophet's life that have been transmitted in the writings of his most fervent disciples, accounts in which the Muslims have embellished both his public and private life" (187). Instead, Sacy concentrates on the steady growth of Mahomet's abilities. He treats the story of Mahomet's early encounter with Sergius, a Nestorian monk, with wariness: "[The disciples] pretend that this encounter was a prophecy of Mahomet's glorious future, and that the monk had exhorted Abu Thaleb to watch over the boy so that he would not fall into the hands of the Jews" (187). Carlyle echoes Sacy's opinion: "I know not what to make of that 'Sergius, the Nestorian Monk,' whom Abu Thaleb and he are said to have lodged with; or how much any monk could have taught one still so young" (*Heroes* 45). According to Sacy, there is nothing miraculous about the young Mahomet's talents: "He was noticed because of his measured answers, by the force and wisdom of his expressions, the probity of his conduct, the sincerity of his words and actions, which won him the name 'Amin, the Faithful,' given to him by his compatriots" (187). Echoing Sacy's narrative, Carlyle conceives Mahomet as a "man of truth and fidelity . . . rather taciturn in speech; silent when there was nothing to be said; but pertinent, wise, sincere, when he did speak; always throwing light on the matter" (*Heroes* 46).

In his handling of Mahomet's conversion in his fortieth year, Sacy gives prominence to the Prophet's social and political objectives, yet he never underestimates the autonomy and the integrity of the founder's faith. Unlike Sale and Gibbon, Sacy refuses to treat the doctrines of Islam primarily as political maneuvers. Sacy agrees with Gibbon that Mahomet's world

was torn apart by religious and tribal factionalism: “The Arabs, divided by many tribal rivalries, were plunged into the most grotesque idolatries. . . . The eastern Christians were broken up into an infinite number of sects, who persecuted one another with fanatical fervor. . . . Persia itself had for a long period been wracked by civil war and by conquest” (188). But there was nothing cynical or self-serving about Mahomet’s aim to unify the Arabs under one coherent faith, which he hoped would form the basis of a new civil society. Sacy observes, “It was in these circumstances that Mahomet sought the inspiration of God to serve as a prophet and apostle, and to establish a religion that would unify heathens, Jews, and even lapsed Christians” (188). Drawing from this thesis, Carlyle sets the Prophet’s spiritual education in the context of the “Arab idolatries, argumentative theologies, traditions, subtleties, rumours and hypotheses of Greeks and Jews.” Mahomet’s heroism lies in his capacity to look “through the shews of things into *things*” (*Heroes* 48). Sacy’s article offered Carlyle vivid testimony of the Prophet’s intellectual abilities. Mahomet possesses “a penetrating spirit, a capacious memory, an alert and lively eloquence, a rare presence of person, a tenacious strength and courage, a robust and strong temperament, a grave and imposing demeanor, a deep knowledge of men, an art of dissimulation that was necessary to harness the passions and conscience of men, and that was crucial to the success of his mission” (188–89). Sacy effectively refutes the “impostor-hypothesis” (*Heroes* 48) by showing that the Prophet’s use of artifice was self-defensive and necessary. Without well-practiced cunning, Mahomet could not have survived, let alone prevailed, in the dangerously fractious and violent atmosphere of his times.

In the *Biographie Universelle* Sacy pays close attention to Mahomet’s domestic domain because it clearly reveals the personal qualities that will later distinguish him as a ruler: “The private sphere was where he revealed the leading traits of his character. He would demonstrate his quickness of perception, his prudence, his steady devotion to the one true God, the sweetness of his character, the reliability of his finances; his noble and exquisite manners in the company of strangers, his vivacity and jocularly with his friends,

his kindness and patience with servants" (206).¹² Sacy uses anecdotes throughout their essay to highlight the formidable challenges that the Prophet confronts in attempting to realize his goals. When Mahomet appoints Ali his lieutenant in front of family members, "A universal laughter erupted, and everyone said that Abu-Thaleb, from now on, had better obey the injunctions of his nephew" (199). Carlyle includes the story, but counsels his readers that "it proved not a laughable thing; it was a very serious thing!" (*Heroes* 51). Mahomet's growing fame eventually frightens his enemies and they warn his Uncle to curb the young man's preaching. Sacy's report of the conversation between Abu-Thaleb and Mahomet stresses the Prophet's tender emotions: "Abu-Thaleb thought he would warn his nephew about the dangers to which he was exposing his friends. The Prophet, who was fearless, told his Uncle that even if he placed the sun on his right shoulder and the moon on his left, he could not renounce his enterprise; at the same time, his eyes filled with tears" (190).

Sacy's version contrasts pointedly with that of Gibbon, who regarded Mahomet's reply as the utterance of "an intrepid fanatic" (5: 353). For Carlyle, the episode yields insight into the inner struggle of Mahomet, who "felt that Abu Thaleb was good to him; that the task he had got was no soft, but a stern and great one" (*Heroes* 52). Sacy complements this sketch of Mahomet's character with a vivid physical description of him:

[He] was of medium height with a ruddy temperament; he had a large head, a tanned complexion, which was animated by bright colors, and physical traits that were regular yet strongly pronounced; wide eyes, black and fiery, with a forehead slightly projected, an acquiline nose, full cheeks, and the shape of his jaw exquisitely curved; his large mouth, white teeth, slightly crooked; he had a little black mole below his bottom lip, and between his eyebrows, a vein that tended to color when he became angry. His physiognomy was graceful and majestic, and his gait was relaxed despite his stoutness. (205–06)

For Carlyle, Mahomet's features betray the depth and intensity of his character: "One hears of [his] beauty: his fine sagacious honest face, brown florid complexion, beaming black eyes;—I somehow like too that vein on the brow, which swelled up black, when he was in anger" (*Heroes* 46).

Sacy's essay prompted Carlyle to reconsider Sale and Gibbon's argument that might and right were synonymous in Mahomet's religion. Sale believed that it "is certainly one of the most convincing proofs that Mohammedism was no other than a human invention, that it owed its progress and establishment almost entirely to the sword" (49). Gibbon's analysis was more subtle but he arrived at a similar conclusion. Islam survived because it shaped itself in response to human needs while maintaining strict limits to its supernatural claims:

The Mohammedans have uniformly withstood the temptation of reducing the object of their faith and devotion to a level with the senses and imagination of man. "I believe in one God, and Mohammed the apostle of God," is the simple and invariable profession of Islam. The intellectual image of the Deity has never been degraded by any visible idol; the honours of the prophet have never transgressed the measure of human virtue. (5: 394)

Such a creed was conducive to fanaticism because it checked dissent among the faithful and promoted "a spirit of charity and friendship," while at the same time it encouraged enmity towards unbelievers: "The hostile tribes were united in faith and obedience, and the valour which had been idly spent in domestic quarrels was vigorously directed against a foreign enemy" (5: 396). Sacy set the issue of the Muslim's penchant for conflict in another context. More emphatically than Gibbon, Sacy insists on the humane aspect of Mahomet's desire for a religion stripped of miracles. His aim was to "substitute idolatrous cults with a more dignified Divinity that conformed to the interests of human nature and society" (207). In defending Mahomet against the accusation that he transformed himself into a cult, Sacy insists that "he abolished a large number of brutal and inhuman rituals that were revolting to reason, that had been sanctioned by the traditions of the Arabs" (207).

Carlyle follows Sacy in denying that Mahomet was guilty of "propagating his Religion by the sword" (*Heroes* 53). Islam succeeded because of the truthfulness of its teachings, rather than because of the strength of its battalions. The Prophet's message could not have endured for long if it were rooted in violence. It triumphed and prospered because it fulfilled an

eternal human desire for peace, order, beauty, conduct, and purpose. Gibbon mentions Mahomet's mild character, but adds that "the clemency of the prophet was decided by his interest" (5: 360). Sacy points out that in comparison with most rulers of the time, Mahomet was a mild and tolerant governor, who rarely resorted to bloodlust: "His leniency was denied very rarely, and he seldom demanded the sort of horrible and bloody punishments that have polluted the annals of history" (206). Islam progressed in compliance with the genius of its founder, and the aspirations of his followers: "The impartial judgment of history will assign a distinguished place to this extraordinary man, who through the force of his genius began one of the most shocking and astonishing revolutions of all times. Despite the errors and imperfections of his doctrine, it is one that conveys a noble idea of Divinity, and summons men to a realization of their own highest nature and final destination" (206–07). Carlyle shares this evolutionary notion of the triumph of Islam: "I care little about the sword: I will allow a thing to struggle for itself in this world, with any sword or tongue or implement it has, or can lay hold of. . . . In this great Duel, Nature herself is umpire, and can do no wrong: the thing which is deepest-rooted in Nature, what we call *truest*, that thing and not the other will be found growing at last" (*Heroes* 53). The later opponent of Darwin had arrived at a quasi-Darwinian conception of the way in which truth vanquished falsity in the spread of Islam.¹³

Sacy's admonitions about the impenetrable and confusing content of the Koran were also helpful to Carlyle, who struggled mightily with Sale's translation, a "wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, longwindedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite;—insupportable stupidity, in short!" (*Heroes* 56). Sacy understood these frustrations: "One only has to open the Koran to be overwhelmed by its incoherence, lack of unity, repetitiveness, vaguenesses, not to mention the contradictions that seem to occur on every page" (209). But the haphazard manner in which the book was composed did not undermine its unique merits: "We can assure our readers that there is much that is good, beautiful, profound, and graceful in this book of Mahomet's teachings; and that the errors are largely attributable to the manner in

which it was composed" (210). Carlyle overcame "discrepancies of national taste" far enough to admit that "natural stupidity is by no means the character of Mahomet's Book; it is natural uncultivation rather. The man has not studied speaking; in the haste and pressure of continual fighting, he has not time to mature himself into fit speech. . . . The panting breathless haste and vehemence of a man struggling in the thick of battle for life and salvation . . . this is the Koran." Carlyle regards the book as a reflex of the Prophet's own predicament, which places him at "the centre of a world wholly in conflict" (*Heroes* 57). Sacy repeatedly stresses Mahomet's reluctance to identify himself with miracles. In Carlyle's view, the Koran explains why. Mahomet's visions rests on the miraculousness of the natural world, and the awe, wonder, and worship that it inspires: "That this so solid-looking material world is, at bottom, in very deed, Nothing; is a visual and tactual Manifestation of God's power and presence;—a shadow hung out by Him on the bosom of the void Infinite" (*Heroes* 60). The Prophet's response to those who demand miracles of him majestically illustrates his authority: "Mahomet can work no miracles; he often answers impatiently: I can work no miracles. I? 'I am a Public Preacher'; appointed to preach this doctrine to all creatures. Yet the world, as we can see, had really from of old been all one great miracle to him" (*Heroes* 59). The natural world marks both the finite limits of human knowledge and the infinite possibilities of God's wisdom. And in turn, the Koran defines the boundaries of Mahomet's vision, and in its maddening intricacy, exemplifies the eternal truth that "to get into the truth of anything, is ever a mystic act" (*Heroes* 50). Carlyle himself had reached the boundaries of his own faith in trying to comprehend Islam.

It is Sacy, rather than Sale or Gibbon, who persuaded him that Mahomet's religion "is a kind of Christianity; has a genuine element of what is spiritually highest looking through it, not to be hidden by all its imperfections" (*Heroes* 65). Through the narrow lens of postcolonial theory, this remark can easily be construed as symptomatic of Carlyle's "Orientalist" prejudice.¹⁴ But it, and the subsequent discussion of Mahomet's "quackery" in the essay on Shakespeare, cannot be separated from central issue of Carlyle's own spiritual crisis. Islam intrigued and repelled him in the same tormenting manner as the Scottish

Calvinism of his parents.¹⁵ Both creeds were distinguished by the bedrock piety of their adherents: "Above all things, it has been a religion heartily *believed*. These Arabs believe their religion, and try to live by it! No Christians, since the early ages, or only perhaps the English Puritans in modern times, have ever stood by their Faith as the Moslem do by theirs,—believing it wholly, fronting Time with it, and Eternity with it" (*Heroes* 66).¹⁶ But the dark side of this wholehearted devotion was the latent possibility of fanaticism and the obliteration of judgment. The barriers that separated the private and public realms of thought and action seemed fragile and tenuous in both religions.¹⁷ Their "naked formlessness" (*Heroes* 177) appealed to and disturbed Carlyle, who abhorred theological and doctrinal debate. Having witnessed the demise of his close friend and mentor Edward Irving (1792–1834), he was nervously suspicious of prophets, even those with "the life-guidance now of one hundred and eighty millions of men these twelve hundred years" (*Heroes* 39). His abrupt condemnation of the Koran in the essay on Shakespeare as "a stupid piece of prolix absurdity" (*Heroes* 96) is part of the volcanic ebb and flow of his skepticism. Conversely, it is Shakespeare's stubborn resistance to prophecy that consoles Carlyle in periods of doubt: "[W] as it not perhaps far better that this Shakspeare, every way an unconscious man, was *conscious* of no Heavenly message? He did not feel, like Mahomet, because he saw into those internal Splendours, that he was specially the 'Prophet of God:' and was he not greater than Mahomet in that? Greater" (*Heroes* 95).

The Arabian prophet was not alone in being relegated beneath Shakespeare. Cromwell himself, "a Christian heroic man," came short of the poet's perfection: "We will not assert that Cromwell was an immaculate man; that he fell into no faults, no insincerities among the rest" (*Heroes* 196). In the retrospect of the 1850s, Carlyle's denunciation of Mahomet the "Babbler" in *Heroes* (95) was consistent with his vitriolic attacks against the "rubbishing Puritanism" of dissenters and the "beggarly Twaddle" (Wilson 372) of Victorian Christianity. More pertinently, in his later reflection on "Spiritual Optics" (1852), he denounces the Old Testament and declares, "If we had any veracity of soul and could get the old Hebrew spectacles off our nose, should we run to Judæa or Houndsditch to look

at the doings of the Supreme? Who conquered anarchy and chained it everywhere under their feet? Not the *Jews*, with their morbid imaginations and foolish sheepskin Targums” (Fielding, “Optics” 232). John Tulloch rightly argued in *Movements of Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (1884) that Carlyle’s refusal “to look steadily at spiritual as distinct from natural life” (203) vitiated his outlook. In Tulloch’s view, the result of this fatal schism was that he could not imagine being created “save by a being who had a moral sense like his own. . . . [H]e refused to acknowledge a Personal Life above his own life, a Life pitiful as well as just, Love as well as Law. And so his idea of the Divine reality sank into the idea of Supreme Force” (204). This is a simplification—in neither *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (1845) nor *The History of Frederick the Great* (1858–65) does Carlyle consistently exalt raw power at the expense of conscience—but Tulloch’s charge cannot be dismissed entirely.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James sketched a spiritual condition that seems oddly pertinent to Carlyle the historian, rather than Carlyle the believer:

There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety. . . . The time for tension in the soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. (47)

In the essay on Mahomet, Carlyle found this “eternal present” by imaginatively intersecting with the Prophet’s spiritual awakening. The catalyst for this “conflux” was Sacy’s essay in the *Biographie Universelle*, which enabled him to glean the “natural supernatural” essence of Islam and to unlock the secrets of its enduring attractiveness. It allowed him to free himself from his own struggle long enough to capture the distinctive characteristics of the great Arab prophet and his faith. With his customary astuteness, Kenneth J. Fielding has commented that “[p]erhaps, at best Carlyle held to a religion of humanity” (“Skeptical Elegy” 255), and the essay on Mahomet amply vindicates this judgment. The spirit that Carlyle brings

to his life of the Prophet is the antithesis of that embodied by radical Islam in the twenty-first century—one that violates the sacred distinction between the will of the finite and the infinite. Such a “[c]ondemnable Idolatry” contradicts the teachings of Mahomet, who enjoins his faithful to “love one another freely; for each of you, in the eyes of his brothers, there will be Heaven enough!” (*Heroes* 105, 64). In his portrait of the Prophet, Carlyle illuminates Sacy’s verdict that Islam is a religion that is “plus digne de la Divinité et plus conforme à l’intérêt de la société et à la nature de l’homme.”

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Notes

1. This “conflux” extends to contemporary debates about the universality of progress. Francis Fukuyama’s certitude that “there is a fundamental process at work that dictates a common evolutionary pattern for all human societies—in short, something like a Universal History of mankind in the direction of liberal democracy” (48) has been challenged by John Gray, who remarks that “the criticisms of commercial society mounted not only by Disraeli but by Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, by Carlyle and Ruskin, are noteworthy by their complete absence in New Right political thought” (5).

2. Duncan Forbes has noted that for Mill, as well as many other Utilitarians, “Progress . . . did not mean the evolution of the special concrete mind of a particular people, but an abstract process of development which applied equally to all peoples” (398). He also remarked on the curious situation of the “authoritarian” Carlyle challenging Mill’s illiberal philosophy of history. Maurice Cowling has rightly stressed the depth of Mill’s commitment to a scientific view of human progress: “In few nineteenth-century writers (except Marx) . . . does interpretation of history so completely dominate the fundamental assumptions about the function of philosophical doctrine” (3). Gray observes that Mill “spent much of his life trying to reconcile his Enlightenment project of a universal civilization with his post-Romantic suspicion that it endangered freedom and diversity” (29).

3. It is tempting to suppose that the essay on Mahomet had an impact on Henry Edward John Stanley (1827-1903), the eldest son of the Carlyles’ close friends Lord and Lady Stanley of Alderley. Henry Stanley, pilloried

in the press as “*The English Mohemedan*,” was rumored to have converted to Islam in 1859. Lord Stanley’s response to the news in a letter to his wife probably explains why Carlyle tactfully applied “the gospel of silence” in regard to the matter: “There is a paragraph in the Morning Post about that wretched fool Henry, saying he was at Penang living entirely with Mahometans & dressed in their dress. He was, it is said, living with a certain Sheikh Salim Bangadie, speaking Arabic perfectly & avoiding the society of Europeans. Is he mad or what is he? . . . He has never, through his life, lived with his equals or sought the society of those he ought to associate with. His love of travel is merely a desire to escape from European society—he has no object, no view, in travelling, he does not care for countries in connection with their former state or historical interest. I believe he never saw a place in Greece or in Turkey except in connection with those brutal & beastly Turks. As for contradicting what is said I do not know how it can be done. He must have seen these statements in the papers, but he can neither feel the disgrace of his position nor its degradation” (4 September 1859; Mitford 264). For a valuable study of Victorian pro-Islamic and anti-Imperialist voices, see Geoffrey Nash’s *From Empire to Orient*.

4. In a timely commentary distinguished by its feel for the nuances of Carlyle’s spiritual outlook, Fielding notes, “[He] was a remarkable mixture of liberalism and illiberalism, and it is a pity that some of Carlyle’s biographers, such as Froude, have been happiest when they thought they found him reverting to type—or their idea of his type” (“Skeptical Elegy” 255).

5. Seillière had argued in similar terms in 1939: “The chapter devoted to Mahomet in the study of heroes furnishes us again with a precise example of this terribly confused Carlylean conviction. History decides, claims the author, that this Hero-Prophet has converted by the sword: but why does he attach such importance to this? When an idea struggles to triumph in this world, we leave it to make its impact, assured that it will not prevail in the long term unless it deserves to prevail. . . . In this grand duel, Nature is the sole arbitrator. . . . That which is most profoundly established in nature, he insists, what we call the truest or the most just, it is this alone that determines greatness in the final reckoning” (208).

6. The influence of Scott’s novel extended far beyond Carlyle. Robert Irwin notes that the Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, Sir Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb (1895-1971) “shaped his future portrait of Saladin, the leader of the Muslim counter-crusade” (241) on his reading of *The Talisman*.

7. Said qualifies his criticism of Sale’s Orientalist attitudes by emphasizing that he “tried to deal with Arab history in terms of Arab

sources" (117), but Irwin notes that "Sale's translation [of the Qur'an] relied quite heavily on [Ludovico] Marracci's Latin version" (120). For an antidote to Said's monochromatic approach, see Linda Colley's brilliantly quirky and original account of the British response to Islam in the eighteenth century, *Captives* 99–134.

8. In an unpublished notebook included among his papers at Trinity College Dublin, William Lecky described Carlyle's antipathy to theological debates in general, and the Oxford movement in particular: "He cared nothing for the compromises & half [truths] wh are so popular in our age, having come to the clear conviction that Christianity considered as a supposition or miraculous story & revelation was incredible. . . . [H]e never read a theological book or attended to a theological controversy his mind became on this field a complete blank. Tractarianism & all the broad church & other controversies of his time, whose things in wh as he said 'he had no manner of concern'" (c. 1870; Lecky Papers, Trinity College Dublin Library; reprinted by the kind permission of the trustees).

9. Gibbon's analysis here remains relevant to recent scholarly controversies. For example, Efraim Karsh has argued, "The birth of Islam, by contrast, was inextricably linked with the creation of a world empire and its universalism was inherently imperialist. It did not distinguish between temporal and religious powers, which were combined in the person of Muhammad, who derived his authority directly from Allah and acted at one and the same time as head of the state and head of the church" (5).

10. Mary Seton Watts (1849-1938), the painter's second wife, gives a concise description of the mural at Lincoln's Inn and of Watts's treatment of Mahomet: "To him the subject appeared to be a great one, bound up with the evolution of civilisation—'that evolution in which our religion takes its place,' he explained—and it is noticeable that Moses in the central place is head and shoulders above the others; and not only this, but he alone amongst the law-givers has the uplifted head and face, as if listening to something higher than human argument—the 'practical mystic' who receives his orders direct from Heaven. Mahomet also turns with something of the same action, but he looks towards Moses rather than to the Invisible. He is one of the four singled out with intention to stand somewhat apart; the others being Alfred, Charlemagne, and Justinian" (1: 151).

11. From sharply opposing points of view, both Edward Said and Robert Irwin question Sacy's interpretation of Islam. Said admits that his "heroism as a scholar was to have dealt successfully with insurmountable difficulties; he acquired the means to present a field

to his students where there was none. He *made* the books, the precepts, the examples. . . . The result was the production of material about the Orient, methods for studying it, and exempla that even Orientals did not have” (127). Yet these Carlylean efforts were designed to “supply [the Orient] as Oriental presence to the West” (130), while Sacy’s numerous anthologies acted to “submerge and cover the censorship of the Orient exercised by the Orientalist” (129). Though he pillories Said’s loose theoretical assumptions and slipshod errors of fact painstakingly and mercilessly, Irwin tacitly agrees with the author of *Orientalism* about Sacy, whom he characterizes as “a sombre, severe and polemical figure” (142). Sacy never visited the Middle East, and his strong Jansenist prejudices inclined him to regard Mahomet “as a skilled impostor” (145). Irwin’s praise is measured but fair: “Although he was hardly the first Orientalist. . . it was de Sacy more than any other who created Orientalism as a sustained discipline” (146). Neither Said nor Irwin refers to the *Biographie Universelle* article, and Said rather casually dismisses the notion that Carlyle was influenced by the French scholar: “Although Carlyle quotes Sacy, his essay is clearly the product of someone arguing for some general idea on sincerity, heroism, and prophethood” (152).

12. It is also significant that Carlyle follows Sacy, rather than Gibbon, with respect to the controversy surrounding Mahomet’s personal morality. Sacy carefully refutes the suggestion that the Prophet’s life was “dominated by vice” (210). In *The French Revolution*, still under the spell of Gibbon, Carlyle compares Mahomet to Mirabeau: “For indeed hardly since the Arabian Prophet lay dead to Ali’s admiration, was there seen such a Love-hero, with the strength of thirty men” (*Works* 2: 139). The source of this allusion was in a footnote in the *Decline and Fall*, of the type that Carlyle had warned Jane Baillie Welsh *not* to read in a letter of 14 April 1823: “The volume which treats of Mahomet is a splendid piece of writing. Never look at the notes, if you can help it; they are often quite abominable” (*CL* 2: 330). Carlyle may even have had this particular note of Gibbon’s in mind: “Perhaps the incontinence of Mahomet may be palliated by the tradition of his natural or preternatural gifts: he united the manly virtue of thirty of the children of Adam,” based on an anecdote in Alulfeda’s biography, which records the reaction of Ali, “who washed [Mahomet’s] body after his death, ‘O propheta, certe penis tuus cælum versus erectus est’” [“O prophet, undoubtedly your penis points straight towards heaven”] (*Vit. Mohammed.* p. 140)” (5: 380, 175n).

13. In his frequent discussions with Carlyle about Darwin in the 1870s, the scientist John Tyndall (1820–93) observed that his friend objected to Darwin’s doctrine of evolution primarily on moral rather than scientific

grounds: “It was not the absence of scientific power and precision, so much as the overwhelming importance which Carlyle ascribed to ethical considerations and influences, that determined his attitude toward natural science. The fear that moral strength might be diminished by Darwin’s doctrine accounts for such hostility as he showed to the ‘Origin of Species.’ We had many calm and reasonable conversations on this and kindred subjects; and I could see that his real protest was against being hemmed in. He demanded a larger area than that offered by science for speculative action and its associated emotion. . . . It was the illegitimate science which, in its claims, overstepped its warrant—professing to explain everything, and to sweep the universe clear of mystery—that was really repugnant to Carlyle (*New Fragments* 386–87).

14. In his otherwise admirable attempt to collate Carlyle’s various allusions to Islam in his works, Albert D. Pionke ignores his religious predicament and echoes Said by claiming that Carlyle’s “thinking remains limited by and vulnerable to the prejudices of his period. Islam never becomes . . . an object worthy of study on its own merits for Carlyle” (“Survey of Images” 509). Perhaps only postcolonialists escape the unfortunate fate of limited thinking in their lives, but the evidence in recent volumes of *The Collected Letters*, particularly in relation to the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, indicates that Carlyle’s attitudes to Islam in particular and to colonialism in general are far more unpredictable than Pionke assumes.

15. Kenneth J. Fielding memorably affirms in the introduction to *Reminiscences*, “We cannot understand any of Carlyle’s work unless we recognize that he uses the language of the Bible to express a state of ‘belief’ which has moved to doubt, and which the anxiety is intensified by his use of an idiom which he and his more inward readers knew belonged to the past whose beliefs he continually declared to have been outgrown” (xvi).

16. Milnes eloquently testified to the natural intensity of this belief in his preface to *Palm Leaves*: “I never experienced a stronger impression than the first day I spent in a Mohammedan country: it is like returning, at one leap, to the old dispensation—to the condition of mankind standing, without mediation, without sympathy, alone, beneath the will and might of God. There the whole of life goes on in the distinct presence of the Invisible; there prayer is no special mental process, but a plain act of dutiful service, a mere obedience of the laws and conditions of existence; there reverence is the distinction between man and the inferior animals, and the scoffer and scorner would be rebels against the common sense and decency of mankind” (xxv).

17. It is useful in this context to mention Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), whose writings have “had a vast influence on Muslim fundamentalist

activism in recent decades” (Irwin 318). In *Social Justice and Islam*, Qutb declares, “Islam grew up in an independent country owing allegiance to no empire and to no king, in a form of society never again achieved. It had to embody this society in itself, had to order, encourage, and promote it. It had to order and regulate this society, adopting from the beginning its principles and its spirit along with its methods of life and work. It had to join together the world and the faith by its exhortations and laws. So Islam chose to unite earth and Heaven in one spiritual organization, and one which recognized no difference between worldly zeal and religious coercion” (7). In his analysis of the roots of radical Islam, Gilles Kepel contrasts Muslim attitudes to the sacred and profane with Roman-Christian ones: “Islam, on the contrary, is marked by *tawhid*, or fundamental unity. The distinction between *din* and *dawla*, the spiritual and the temporal, is meaningless in Muslim doctrine, since one and the same text, the Qur’an, revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad, contains both the rules regulating relations between man and God and the principles governing social life. No system of secular law was ever articulated with Islam as Roman law was with Christian doctrine” (237).

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