

## Enhancing Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Debunking Misconceptions About the Prophet Muhammad PBUH

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### Abstract:

Despite being the noblest person, the prophet Muhammad PBUH faced the worst kinds of insult and ridicule. Many published books, in the West, have played a pivotal role in perpetuating the groundless stereotypes that demonize Islam. In addition to the scornful description of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH in multifarious texts and books, alternative means of blasphemy, like cartoons and caricatures, have been used to taint the reputation of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH who is a paragon of virtues. The misrepresentation of the prophet PBBUH is shrouded in the so-called freedom of expression, but the latter is used to the extreme to vent their islamophobia and discrimination. It evinces some Westerners' disrespect for others' religions and value systems. In fact, insulting the prophet PBBUH and defaming the sacred in an extremely violent and painful act, and it is likely to widen the chasm between "Us" and "Them." And result in a tragic civilizational clash. The misrepresentation of the prophet PBBUH in (neo) orientalist discourse and in libelous and blasphemous drawings and cartoons stems partly from non-Muslims' ignorance of the reality of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH. Hence, this paper aspires to correct misconceptions and misperceptions about the prophet Muhammad PBBUH to enhance civilizational dialogue and cement peaceful co-existence.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Understanding ; Misconceptions ; Prophet Mohammad PBBUH ; Orientalism ; Neo-Orientalism ; Islam.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION:

In the West, the prophet Muhammad PBUH has been misrepresented and insulted in different ways through literary texts, movies, newspapers, and the like. Media has also contributed much to maligning the prophet PBBUH. The West uses media to impose its hegemonic version of reality and propagate the view that Islam is a threat to the West's security. Significantly, Western (neo) orientalist discourse plays an important role in exacerbating conflicts and fuelling the clash of civilizations. It serves some people's aim of dividing the world into two poles, thus making the world sink in endless wars and conflicts. Vlcek states that Western orientalist discourse can be vicious and deadly. According to him, its "main goal is to hurt, to destroy, and not to inform"(Vlcek, p.47). So, to promote cultural understanding and dialogue, it is important to debunk Westerners' erroneous views of Islam and the prophet Muhammad PBBUH.

### 1. Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism:

In fact, hatred of Muslims is abundant in Western scholarship. By large, the majority of books on Islam that are published in the West do not reveal the reality of this religion and its messenger PBUH. The German politician Thilo Sarrazin's book, *Hostile Takeover – How Islam Impairs Progress and Threatens Society*, sparks hatred towards Muslims and Africans, and it led to the formation of "Freedom", a party that was against the Islamization of Europe. Similarly, The Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn who wrote *Against the Islamization of our Culture*, hates and denigrates Islam and Muslims . He was opposed to immigration and multiculturalism in the Netherlands. He associates Islam with backwardness and primitivism.

In Orientalist discourse, Muslims are represented as religious fundamentalists who are opposed to civilization and modernity, Edward Said in " The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations " states that

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“in today’s Europe, and the United States what is described as Islam [...] belongs to the discourse of Orientalism, a construction fabricated to whip up feelings of hostility and antipathy against a part of the world that happens to be of strategic importance for its oil, its’s [sic] threatening adjacency to Christianity, it’s [...] formidable competition with the West ”(Said, 1998, p.9). Indeed, many Western books on Islam, by Orientalists, teem with mistakes, myths, and lies about Islam. But despite the fact that most of Western scholars who write about Islam, in the West, do not understand Arabic and they do not know the true Islam, their writings are read as main sources to understand this religion. In fact, Islamophobia exerts a great influence on their misconception of Islam and the prophet Muhammad PBUH.

In the last few years, drawing is used, in parallel with the written orientalist discourse, to stain the image of Islam and Muslims. The cartoons of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH are a serious offence. They are seen by all Muslims as a defamation of religion and a misrepresentation of the culture of the Orient. These offensive caricatures are rooted in Neo-Orientalism, a renewal and a revival of Orientalism which is a genuine misunderstanding and a deliberate misrepresentation of the Oreint. These caricatures confirm (neo)Orientalist thinking, which is contemporarily based on the Othering of Muslims. The Orientalist images are seen as essential to the construction of knowledge concerning Islam, Muslims, and the Orient. They reinforce the Neo-Orientalist view of Islam as a bloody and violent religion and that there is hidden danger lurking in every community of Muslims.

The hate-inspired misrepresentation of Islam and the prophet Muhammad PBBUH dates back to the Medieval age. Many books about the Prophet PBUH composed at that time are full of misunderstandings, lies, stereotypes and factual errors. Kidwi remarks that in the literary texts written in the Middle Ages, the prophet Muhammad PBBUH was paganized and demonized. In this regard, he

states that “one comes across a similar distorted representation of the Prophet in French epic poems namely, *La Chanson de Roland*, *Aliscans*, *La Chanson de Guillaume*, *Chanson d’ Antioche*, *La Conquete de Jerusalem*, and *La Voyage a Jerusalem*.”(2018, p.7) These poems depict the Prophet as the first-born son of Satan, apart from asserting that he was a renegade cardinal”(Kidwi, 2018, p.3). Thus, the prophet’s life and identity are disfigured and misrepresented in many Western texts. Kidwi adds that in many songs and Romances, the prophet PBBUH is represented as an idiot. These include “*Sir Bevis of Hampton*, *Sir Ferumbras* and *The Sowdan of Babylon*. The Prophet is usually included in the trinity of idols—Mahound, Termagent and Apollo.”(Kidwi, 2018, p.6). Not only they produced many polemical and fabricated material about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad PBBUH, but the latter was even rejected as a prophet who was sent divine revelation.

The event of 9/11 stirs a mad rush to describe Muslims as terrorists and Islam as a bloody and violent religion. In fact, it is tempting to suggest that the falsification and forgeries of the figure of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH are interlinked with the West’s general conceptualization of Islam, which is seen as the West’s Other. In this regard, Shalem states that the prophet’s biography was “instrumentalised for the condemnation, refutation, segregation, or even entrenchment of Islam in the West. It seems that a similitude between an abstract concept of Islam and the image of Muhammad had been established at a very early stage in the history of the West. Moreover, one can even argue that the image of Muhammad became a personification of the Muslim religion” (Shalem, 2013, p.143).

The misrepresentation of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH evinces the West’s refutation and rejection of Islam as a religion. It also shows the segregation and exclusion of Muslims who are demonized simply because they have different beliefs. Shalem maintains that “every generation felt the need to give a new face to

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the prophet and to reformulate their position towards Islam within these pictures [...] Muhammad's portraits can at the same time be read as the reflection of the psyche of contemporary societies in the West" (Shalem, 2013, p.147). The textual and visual misrepresentation of the prophet PBUH in the last years reflect the West's new misperception of this religion and its believers who are seen as vicious and violent monsters wanting death and destruction for the world.

Respecting others' religion, prophets, and religious symbols is likely to cement coexistence and contact among peoples and civilizations. The Qur'an calls for the dialogue of nations, cultures, and civilizations. God says: "O mankind, indeed, we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you is in the sight of Allah the most righteous of you." (Alhujurat, 49:13). Molesting prophets, in cartoons or through any other means, is a transgression that shows lack of respect and acceptance of other religions and cultures.. These cartoons might put the world into civilizational clash, because the vilification of the prophet is likely to hinder cultural dialogue and widen the gap between "US" and "Them". Religious dialogue is very important for achieving cultural dialogue. In fact, there will be no world peace without interfaith dialogue and peace among religions. God, in the holy Qur'an, asks us to respect others' religion, and He prohibits insulting others or their religion. God says: "Reville not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have We made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to their Lord, and We shall then tell them the truth of all that they did" (Surat Al-An'am: 108). To enhance civilizational dialogue and build bridges of understanding between the West and the Islamic world, the West should respect Muslims' religion and its prophet PBUH.

Instead of humiliating those who are different, we have to live with them peacefully, kindly and generously. Hence, the world will not become a scorched black sand upon which man drags his carcass from one day to the next in search for a place of rest and peace. If our objective is universal love and human brotherhood, we should try all means to achieve this goal to live eternal joy and peace.

## **2- Charlie Hebdo Cartoons and Freedom of Speech**

On October, 2020, the Islamic world was deeply hurt and shocked when Charlie Hebdo cartoons of the prophet Muhammad PBUH were projected onto government buildings in France. In Montpellier and Toulouse, these offensive cartoons were also displayed for several hours. This misrepresentation of the prophet in cartoons and caricatures is not new. On September 30<sup>th</sup> 2005, the Danish Newspaper Jyllands Posten published 12 offensive and scandalous drawings of the prophet Muhammad PBUH with an article entitled “Muhammad’s face” by the editor Fleming Rose. Charlie Hebdo also published satirical cartoons that are offensive to Muslims in February 2006 and in 2015. Charlie Hebdo’s caricatures are disrespectful of Islam and Muslims, and they trespass the values of politeness and civility. On 30 March 2016, Charlie Hebdo published an article entitled “How did we End up Here?”. The article shows the hatred of Muslims and their beliefs. The magazine identified three figures as the main reasons behind terroristic acts: the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan, a veiled woman, and a baker who does not sell pork.

The offensive cartoons of the prophet (PBUH), which are provocative and insulting; were meant to reinforce the myth that Islam is a violent religion that spreads terrorism. They attempt to stain the image of Islam, which many Westerners think is a threat to the Western world’s security and its cherished values. Pipes states that “clash is unavoidable between the Moslem and the Christian worlds: We must win over armed Islam by arms, science and thought, the same way we won over Fascism and communism” (as Cited in

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Gharib, 2007, p. 77). Thus, Islam is seen as the West's new arch-enemy that threatens its security and cultural identity.

Moreover, the religious crisis in France made it fear that Islam might fill the spiritual vacuum there. Islam is seen as a menacing rival of Christianity. Thus, Westerners fear that Muslims might impose their religion and ways of life and eradicate the Western culture. In his article "The Caricature Drawings and the Colonialist Islam", Daniel Pipes, one of the advocates of the idea of the clash of civilizations, states: "We in the West must defend values and good behavior, and freedom of expression or else the Islamists will impose their way of life upon us. In the end, we cannot compromise as the West either preserves its civilization including its right to insult divine thoughts or we give in" (qtd in *The Danish Caricatures of the Prophet* 80). Hence, Islam has always been perceived as a menacing rival. Many Westerners think that Muslims want to impose Shariah law for everyone and not just for Muslims. They are terrified of waking up one day to find that Muslims have declared Shariah Law and put an end to democracy. So, Westerners make fun of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH to remind everyone that Shariah Law in the West is and will always be impossible because it leaves no room for the non-Muslims.

One more reason for denigrating Islam and misrepresenting the prophet PBUH is to ignite provocations, because they already know that this angers Muslims worldwide, and it might lead some of them to respond violently by killing or knocking down buildings. Then, they will take these violent acts committed by ignorant or imposter Muslims in order to spite Muslims and spread their erroneous views of this religion.

The offensive cartoons of the Prophet PBBUH can never be justified as a practice of freedom of expression simply because the latter cannot be realized by mocking and insulting the prophet PBUH and Islam. These cartoons of October, 2020 came as an avengement of the murder of a French Islamophobe racist teacher by a Muslim radical. Thus, freedom of speech is used as an excuse to blaspheme religion and offend religious sentiments. Since it allows religious defamation, this kind of freedom of expression is likely to widen the gap between cultures and fan the problems between the West and the Islamic world. In fact, freedom of expression that turns us away against each other becomes a form of violence.

In his defense of the unrestricted freedom of expression, which amounts to religious defamation and blasphemy, Flemming Rose, in 2005, writes: "I am upset that fear of free expression reached the extent that the American comedian Frank Hvam did not dare to urinate on the Koran on the T.V show. Moslems should coexist with insult and sarcasm, irrespective of the extent of its harshness"(as Cited in Gharib, 2007, p. 79).This act is barbaric, and it clashes with the values of a civilized society, which is marked by politeness and respect for others. Todorov writes: "Politeness, which is an apprenticeship of life with others, is in turn a first step towards civilization; it is no accident that the world 'polite' is used to mean 'civilized' as well as 'courteous'"(2010, p.24). For Muslims, these insulting cartoons hurt more than sticks and stones. Thus, unrestricted freedom of expression is a kind of fundamentalism, and it is against the values of a civilized society which include respecting others' religious beliefs and feelings.

There are variegated interpretations of Muslims' protests and outrageous responses to the offensive cartoons, but they are widely seen as the inevitable result of the atavistic opposition of Muslims to the West's cherished values, including freedom of expression which they are unable to cope with according to them. However, the West's definition of freedom of speech is not universal, and it would not be



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accepted in all cultural contexts. In this regard, Todorov states that “freedom of expression should always be relative-to the circumstances, to the way people express themselves, to the identity of the speaker and the person he is describing. The demand for freedom only makes sense in context-and contexts vary enormously”(2014, p. 126). In the same vein, Armstrong states that there is a need for an “understanding of the context, we can imagine ourselves, in similar circumstances, ‘feeling the same’, in other words, we have to see where other people are coming from, in this way, we can broaden our perspective and ‘make place for the other’(2011). We can ignore this compassionate imperative only if we do not wish to understand other people-an ethically problematic position“. The cartoonists ignore Muslims’ feelings and their views of these cartoons, and this constitutes a great impediment to cultural understanding and dialogue. The problem with these cartoonists is their inability to think that Muslims have valid points in refusing their prophet to be misrepresented. They stubbornly believe in the freedom to offend and insult others, and they feel personally assaulted if their behaviors are criticized and their views are rejected and corrected. Armstrong writes: “When we speak out in the defence of decent values we must make sure that we understand the context fully and do not dismiss the values of our opponents as barbaric, simply because they seem alien to us. We may find that we have the same values but express them in a radically different way” (2011).

The cartoonists and their cohorts hold rigidly to their opinion, and they are unable to concede others’ viewpoint. In fact, the cornerstone of cultural dialogue is to listen to others and understand their values. Loving each other implies doing everything we can to avoid seeing others offended or hurt. Instead of humiliating and insulting those who are different, we have to deal with them kindly and generously.

Commenting on the murder of people who work in Charlie Hebdo magazine after the event in 2015, Axel Rudi states: “someone might claim that in the case of Charlie Hebdo ‘innocent people died expressing their opinion’ and that this would suffice to cause a public outcry. But again, this is not a new phenomenon and has not previously fomented such popular mobilization. In 1999, NATO bombed the Serbian state television headquarters, killing 16 journalists [...] and was lauded for doing so in several international newspapers. In 2001, the US bombed AlJazeera’s office in Kabul [...], and in 2003 the US repeated the event, this time in Baghdad, killing a journalist and a staff member. Recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, who linked arms at the world leader demonstration, was responsible for the murder of 17 Journalists in Gaza”(Rudi, 2015 p.26). The problem is that Muslims are seen as less human than those in the West. Hence, when true freedom of expression is suppressed or denied violently, in the Islamic world, this is never condemned by the world.

Rudi argues that “one of the reasons why Charlie Hebdo generated so much public attention was not because of its suppression of the universal right to freedom of speech, but because “the Charlie Hebdo killings defiled the First World privilege and Eurocentric sentiments behind the concept of freedom of speech. It was not transgressing against freedom of speech that riled people, but rather transgressing against what freedom of speech represented: the European identity based on Western exceptionalism and Enlightenment symbols. Several facts speak to this argument” (Rudi, 2015, p.27).

The Charlie Hebdo affair evinces Westerners’ fear that the whole European identity is threatened by Muslims. The offensive Cartoons show how the West wants to impose its values and secular views on the whole world. They want to monitor Muslims’ minds by making them accept satirizing their religion and insulting their Prophet PBBUH.

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Freedom of expression does not mean aggression and insult without limits and restrictions. If there are no limits for freedom of speech, why do people fear to deny the holocaust? However, as for the prophet Muhammad PBBUH, talking about him is permissible, and it is seen as a kind of freedom of expression that is guaranteed by law. If this freedom of expression creates enemies, it's no more a virtue. Insulting Muslims will drive "us" and "them" into an endless quagmire of antagonism. After Charlie Hebdo event in 2015, mosques were destroyed and many Muslims remain locked inside their houses for days because of fear. Mosque vandalism is the epitome of France's vehement hatred of Islam and Muslims. Their act contradicts their pretentious principle of freedom, which includes freedom of belief. It is a form of cleansing that shows their intolerance of other religions. In 2006, Jacques Chirac says: "Anything that can hurt the convictions of another, particularly religious convictions, must be avoided"(2006) He adds: "Freedom of expression must be exercised in a spirit of responsibility. It condemns all manifest provocations, likely to dangerously stir up passions"(2006).

The offensive cartoons of the prophet PBBUH are nothing but a kind of terrorism and a form of violent extremism, which instigates hatred and hateful racism. Freedom of expression has never been synonymous with insulting and mocking sacred sanctities and religious symbols. Thus, a binding law must be enacted to prohibit and criminalizes insulting the prophets and messengers and their heavenly messages. The best definition of freedom of expression is the freedom to say the truth to power; it is the also the freedom of a minority to speak to the majority. In *The Inner Enemies of Democracy*, Todorov says that "freedom of expression is a necessity becomes clear when we think of the isolated citizen, mistreated by the administration, before whom all doors are closed and who has only one course left: to publicize the injustice of which he is victim, by

bringing it, for example, to the attention of the readers of a newspaper”(Todorov, 2014, p.125).

### **3. Muslims’Response:**

The misrepresentation of religion and its messenger PBBUH, which have hurt Muslims’ deep-rooted religious feelings, have ignited the anger of Muslim masses worldwide, and they have convulsed them to outrageous protests.

Muslims worldwide expressed their fury because of the offensive drawings of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH. Unfortunately, some Muslim extremists do not react in a civilized manner when the cartoonists insult and poke fun at the prophet PPBUH; hence, they do not adhere to the teachings of Islam which ask us not to respond to uncivilized manners in the same way. In the holy Qur’an, God the Almighty says: “And the servants of (Allah) Most Gracious are those who walk on the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say, "Peace!”(Al Furqan, 25: 63). Some of them expressed their anger at insulting the prophet, PBBUH, by means of demonstrations. However, demonstrations, vandalism, killing of innocents are not inspired from the teachings of the Qur’an. The Prophet PBBUH used to be called a magician, liar, poet...etc. But God commanded him to be patient. He says: “And be patient (O Mhammad) with what they say, and keep away from them in a good way”(Al-Muzzammil, 73:10). God also says: “Indeed, we know that your heart is straightened at what they say. So, glorify the praise of your Lord and be of those who prostrate (to Him)” (Al Hijr, 15: 97). The prophet Muhammad PBBUH was patient and prevented his companions from taking revenge. The disbelievers, in defaming religion, intend to ignite provocations. Then, they will show to the world that their wrong views of Muslims are right. Unfortunately, some foolish Muslims and Westerners follow the vicious cycle of revenge which God prohibited. God says to the prophet PBBUH: “And let not the hatred of some people in (once) shutting you out of

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the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgression (and hostility on your part). Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour”(Al Ma-ida, 5: 2). Revenge will turn people’s life into a real tragedy. Hence, people should be guided by moderation and thoughtfulness instead of their emotions of fury and rage.

The mindless violence, which came as a response to these cartoons, in the name of faith, is against the teachings of Islam which calls for wisdom and patience. The Prophet Muhammad (PBBUH) says: “The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his [physical] strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in Anger”(Bukhari, p.2267) According to the teachings of Islam, it is unlawful to assault innocents whether in peace or war. God says: “And no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another”(Al-An’am 6:164). The act of killing others in defense of the prophet PBBUH is invalid, and it does not reflect the teachings of religion. Acting violently will rather spread violence and hatred in the name of the prophet PBBUH. Thus, they will reinforce the Westerners’ negative image of the prophet PBBUH. In his time, the prophet PBBUH was insulted, but his companions didn’t protest and act violently because the Qur’an and Sunnah guide their love for the prophet PBBUH.

The prophet PBBUH never responded physically to those who insulted him or used verbal violence. God consoled the prophet PBBUH by recounting what happened to the previous prophets. God says: “Verily, (many) messengers were denied before you (O Muhammad), but with patience they bore the denial, and they were hurt till our help reached them, and none can alter the word of Allah. Surely there has reached you the information (news) about the messengers (before you)”(AN ‘Am, 6:34).

Muslims should not react violently and irrationally, but at the same time, they should not retreat into silence. The prophet PBBUH says: “None of you truly believes until I am more beloved to him than his child, his father and all the people”(Bukhari, p.7582). So, Muslims should react to these disgraceful insults of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH, but this should be done wisely and peacefully.

One of the best ways of defending the prophet PBBUH is by following him in every aspect of life and by increasing our knowledge about his life. His Sunnah should be in all Muslims’ hearts and in their life. By obeying him and following his Sunnah, the non-Muslims will certainly notice in our behavior the greatness of this prophet PBBUH.

Muslims should express their love for the prophet by demonstrating his mercy, his kindness and compassion. They should demonstrate his virtues by following his Sunnah and showing his actions. Kidwi states: “The Western writers [...] had no doubt fabricated a false, loathsome image of the Prophet in order to discredit him and Islam. But Muslims of the day too, did precious little by their word and deed which could impel Westerners to revise and correct their biased stance.”(Kidwi, 2018, p.xiv). One of the best ways of defending our prophet is to study his seerah and apply his moral values and virtues in our life. We should take him as a role model, and each Muslim should become an ambassador of the prophet PBUH.

Muslim scholars, in particular, should not remain passive and supine accepting others’ insults with indifference. They need to make positive initiative to respond to the blasphemous misrepresentation of the prophet PBBU. They can question and counter intolerant discourse, and they can preach peaceful Islam. The pen is their means of defense, and because of its importance, God the almighty swears by it in Surat Al-Qalam (Surat of the Pen). He says: “Nūn. By the pen and what they inscribe, You are not (O Muhammad), by the favor of your Lord, a madman. And indeed, for you is a reward uninterrupted. And indeed, you are of a great moral character”(Al-Qalam, 68: 1-4 ).

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Muslim scholars should write a counter discourse to debunk the myths constructed about the prophet Muhammad PBBUH. In the same vein, Kidwi states: "In today's globalised world with numerous opportunities for interaction and much faster and varied channels of communication we can and should ensure a better representation of the Prophet and of ourselves. Our real, meaningful tribute to the Prophet consists in facilitating a better understanding of Islam and the Prophet by dint of our character and conduct patterned after the Prophet's role model which is characterized by sympathy, sincerity and love for all fellow human beings" (2018, p.xiv).

Muslim scholars can also help correct non-Muslims' misperceptions of their religion and its messenger by translating books on Islam and the prophet PBBUH and his life into other languages. Sadly, most of the available books are written by non-speakers of Arabic, and most of them are written by (neo)orientalists. In fact, media can also play a pivotal role in deconstructing and refuting non-Muslims' negative views of Islam and the prophet Muhammad PBBUH.

The reality is that misrepresenting the prophet Muhammad PBBUH would lead to opposite results, because Muslims will always react by defending him and showing his exalted manners and his exceptional personality. Moreover, the misrepresentation of the prophet PBBUH will always fail to take away his dignity and honor, because God the almighty has preserved them. God the exalted says: "And [we] raised high for you your repute"(Ash-Sharh,42: 4).

### **4. The Prophet as a Perfect Role Model for all Times:**

Indeed, the prophet PBBUH is a paragon of virtues. He is upon the highest level of character that a human being can ever get to. Thus, he is a perfect role model because of his good manners, ethics, and moral character. Praising his prophet PBBUH, God says: "And verily, you (Oh Muhammad) are on an exalted standard of character"

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(Al-Qalam, 68:4). The prophet PBBUH showed mercy on the sinner, embraced the stranger, protected the weak, and he forgave the enemy. When A'ishah, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBBUH) wife was asked about his manners, she said: "His morals were the morals of the Qur'an"(Musnad Imam Ahmad, p.25813). In what follows is a brief synopsis of his exceptional qualities which make him a perfect role model in all times.

### **Mercy:**

The prophet Muhammad PBBUH was a paragon of mercy for all humans. God the almighty says: "We sent thee not, but as a mercy for all creature"(Al-Anbiya, 21: 107). The prophet PBBUH, who was very merciful with all humans, says: "He who does not show mercy to our young, nor honor our old, is not from us." (Abu Dawood). He also says: "Sown mercy to those on earth so that He who is in the heavens will have mercy on you"(Musnad Imam Ahmad, p.6494). The prophet PBBUH was merciful with animals, which was unusual in his time. He also fed prisoners himself and made sure they were treated well.

The prophet Muhammad PBBUH was also very merciful with the enemies who mistreated him. People of Taif, for instance, harmed him and drove him out of this particular city. He was deeply injured, and they made his body bleed. An angel came to him and said that if he wished, he would crash them between the two mountains because God asked him to follow the prophet's instruction. However, the prophet Muhammad PBBUH displayed an extreme act of forgiveness and mercy. He was not sent to crash people, but he was rather a mercy.

### **Forgiveness:**

The prophet PBBUH never returned evil for evil, but he always forgave and forget gladly, and he never held any grudge against anyone. God the almighty commanded his prophet PBBUH to abide by this moral virtue. He said: "Hold to forgiveness; command what is right, but turn away from the ignorant"(Al-Araf, 7,p.: 199). One of the



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best examples of the Prophet's ideal trait of forgiveness is his pardoning of people of Mecca. After entering Mecca, he gathered people who had abused, harmed, and tortured him and his companions, and he addressed them saying, 'What do you think I will do to you?' They answered: 'You will only do something favorable; you are a kind and gen-erous brother, and a kind and generous nephew!' The Prophet PBBUH said: 'Go - you are free to do as you wish.' (Sunan Bai-haqi, p.16809). So, he was very tolerant with them despite the harm they inflicted on him and despite killing his uncle Hamza, mutilating his body, ripping it open and chewing a piece of his liver. His heart verily overflows with love, kindness, and compassion.

A'ishah said:

'I asked the Messenger of God: "Did you face a day harder and more intense than the Battle of Uhud?" He re-plied: 'I suffered a lot from your people! The worst I suf-fered was on the Day of al-'Aqabah when I spoke to Ali b. Abd Yaleel b. Abd Kilaal (in order to support me) but he disappointed me and left me. I left the area while I was quite worried, and walked - when I reached an area called *Qarn ath-Tha'alib*, I raised my head to the sky and noticed a cloud that shaded me. Gabriel called me and said: 'O Muhammad! God, the Exalted, has heard what your people have said to you - and has sent the Angel in charge of the mountains, so you can command him to do what you please.' The Prophet said: 'The Angel in charge of the mountains called me saying: 'May God praise you and keep safe from all evil! O Muhammad, I will do whatever you command me to do. If you like I can bring the *Akh-shabain* mountains together and crush them all.' The Messenger of God said: 'It may be that God raises from among them a progeny who worship God alone and associate no partners with Him.' (Bukhari, p.3231).

When he was tortured, the prophet Muhammad PBBUH never responded with similar torture. He was a teacher of humanity who filled the hearts of his believers with utmost love and respect for others even those who harmed and persecuted him.

The prophet PBUH always responded to non-Muslims' abuse and abasement with tolerance and pardon. Abdullah ibn Masood said that the prophet Muhammad PBBUH "was harmed by his people. He wiped the blood from his face and said: 'O God! Forgive my people, for they know not!' (Bukhari, p.6929).

### **Kindness and politeness:**

The prophet PBUH treated all people around him with much kindness and affection. He used to greet all of them whether he knew them or not, and he was the first one to shake hands. He was cheerful and tender-hearted. Abdullah bin al-Harith said: 'I have never seen a man who smiled as much as the Messenger of God .' (Tirmidhi, p.3641). The prophet's teachings exhorts Muslims to visit the sick people and to help the poor and the weak. He used to visit the sick people whether he knew them or not, and he consoled them by his affectionate and kind words.

He had never beaten or struck anyone, including servants, children, and women. Anas Ibn Malik, who served the prophet Muhammad peace and blessing be upon him for 10 years, remarked his exceptional manners. He said: 'The Prophet did not swear at anyone, nor was he rude, nor did he curse anyone. If he desired to reprimand someone, he would say: 'What is wrong with him, may dust be cast in his face!' (Bukhari, p.2243 )He commanded all Muslims to treat others, including non-Muslims, with good and civilized manners. He says: "Fear Allah wherever you are, do good deeds after doing bad ones, the former will wipe out the latter, and behave decently towards people".(Sunan Tirmidhi, p.1987).

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## **Enhancing Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Debunking Misconceptions About the Prophet Muhammad PBUH**

The prophet Muhammad had set the best example of kindness and compassion for kids; ‘The Messenger of God performed *Salah* (prayer) while he was carrying an infant girl named Umaamah, daughter of Abul-Aas. When he bowed, he put her on the ground, and when he stood up, he would carry her again.’ (Bukhari, p.193) He was very merciful with the infants, and this evident even in his prayers. The prophet Muhammad PBBUH said: “‘I start the prayer with the intention of lengthening it, but when I hear a child crying, I shorten the prayer, as I know its mother would suffer from his screams!’ (Bukhari”, p.250).

When his grandsons Al-Hassan and Al-Hussain rode on his back while he is bowing, in prayers, he never put them aside. Once a man was surprised to see the prophet PBBUH kissing his grandsons, Al-Hassan and Al-Hussain. He told the prophet PBBUH, I have ten children, but I have never kissed them. In response, the prophet PBBUH says: “‘What Shall I do if Allah has taken mercy from your heart’”(Bukhari, p. 5998).

### **The prophet’s Love for Peace:**

The prophet PBBUH used to resolve all disputes and conflicts between people and tribes. When he heard, for example, of people’s of Qubaa’s dispute with each other, he said: “‘Let us go to resolve the situation and make peace between them.’ (Bukhari, p.2293).

In fact, the prophet PBBUH is the harbinger of peace and difference. The Prophet PBBUH says: “‘An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab. Nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab. Also, a white has no superiority over a black. Nor does any black have superiority over a white. One’s superiority consists in his piety’”(Sahih Muslim, p.673) His teachings call for brotherhood and love for others. The prophet PBBUH says: “‘You cannot truly believe unless you wish for your brother what you wish for yourself’”(Sahih Bukhari, p.13) The prophet PBBUH also says: “‘The best among

people is he who is most beneficial for people.”). So, the teachings of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH make our hearts pure and soft towards one another, full of love that transcends all differences that lead to hatred and conflicts. Even if we disagree with each other, the only emotions we have to display are love and mercy rather than hatred and animosity. Kidwi states: “What the world needs today for the lasting peace and happiness of Muslims, the West and entire humanity is to imbibe the life-giving and life-ennobling message of the Prophet which is anchored deep into the ideals of mutual respect and large-hearted tolerance for all, irrespective of faith, ethnic or other labels”(Kidwi, 2018, p.xiii).

Islam emphasizes human unity. The principles which bring peace to humanity are: belief in God, good deeds, benevolence to people, and avoidance of grievances and wrongdoing. Thus, there would be no abuse from the old to the young, nor injustice from the strong to the weak, and no assaults on human rights. God says: “On Mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you is the most righteous of you”(Al Hujurat, 49:14). There is no religion that called for peace as Islam called for it, and none of the modern or ancient political doctrines contributed to consolidating peace as Islam did.

When he went to Medina, the prophet Muhammad PBBUH established a multicultural society that was inclusive of all people regardless of their religion. He signed a treaty with the Jews, and they agreed upon four points. The first is to live together and protect one another. The second is to live side by side fulfilling the right for each other. The third is that each one was free to believe in his own religion and no one should harm the other. The fourth is that they should not do anything that results in the detriment of another and that they will never assist anyone who would come to harm one of them. Sadly, the treaty was broken by the Jews.

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## **Enhancing Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Debunking Misconceptions About the Prophet Muhammad PBUH**

The prophet Muhammad PBUH created a just and decent society, and he was against violence and terrorism. A man once asked the prophet PBUH: “What is the best kind of Jihad?” The prophet PBUH answered: “A word of truth in front of a tyrannical ruler.”(Suna Tirmidi, p.345). Nowadays, speaking the truth to power is more important than ever. It has to be known that Islam is not a religion of anger and revenge but rather one of guidance, mercy, and forbearance. It also prohibits torture. The prophet PBUH says: “Verily, Allah will torture those who torture people in this world”(Sahih Muslim, 2613).

There is a distorted misunderstanding of the meaning of the word “jihad”, which bears no relation to terrorism. True jihad is not fighting others to impose one’s religion, ideology, or culture. Jihad, literally, means making efforts to purify the soul. It is the struggle of the self to be closer to God. The most important jihad in Islam is to make efforts to discipline and improve the soul. God says: “And those who strive in our cause, we will certainly guide them to our paths. For verily Allah is with those who do right.”(Al-‘Ankabut, 29: 69).

Jihad, in the sense of fighting others, is allowed only for self-defense. God the almighty says: “Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Verily, God loveth not aggression”(Al-Baqara, 2::190). In fact, Islam spread peacefully and not by the sword as it has been stereotyped in the West. The prophet Muhammad PBUH used to converse kindly and courteously with others, and this is what impelled them to convert to Islam. God says:

So by mercy from Allah, [O Muḥammad], you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from about you”(Al-Imran, 3:159). God the almighty also guides the prophet PBUH to the best way of conversing with non-believers. He says: “Invite to the

way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best (An-Nahl, 16;125 ).

The prophet Muhammad peace and blessing be upon spread Islam peacefully. In Surat Al-Ghashiya, God says: “So remind, [O Muhammad], you are only a reminder. You are not over them a controller”( Al-Ghashiya, 88:21-22). In Surat Qaaf, God says: “and you are not there to compel them”(50:45) The messenger has been commanded since his mission to convey his message in goodness and to try to persuade those whom he invites to Islam. And if they argue with him, he was asked to respond to them in the best manner. The followers of the prophet PBBUH were also asked to invite people to Islam using wisdom and goodness. God, in Surat Al-Ankabut, says: “And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say ‘We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one, and we are Muslims [in submission]’” (29:46).

Islam calls for avoiding quarrels and clashes with those who oppose it. There is no invitation to Islam except with goodness, and there is no arguing with opponents except with what is good. Islam emphasizes

### **Modesty:**

The prophet PBBUH treated others as equals. He displayed humility which is a quality of universal leaders. The prophet PBUH used to serve himself and his companions despite being their leader. He helped his companions in building the first Masjid in history.

The prophet Muhammad never behaved as a king. He used to carry out his own affairs, and he assisted others in collective duties. A'ishah, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBBUH) wife said of him: “He always joined in household chores and would at times mend his clothes, repair his shoes and sweep the floor. He would milk, tether and feed his animals.” (Musnad Ahmed, p.25640). The prophet

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PBBUH used to serve himself like any other ordinary man. A'ishah said: 'I was asked how the Messenger of God PBBUH behaved in his house.' She said: 'He was like any man; he washed his clothes, milked his sheep, and served himself.' (Musna Ahmed, p.26724) His house, his dress, and his food are marked by simplicity. The prophet PBBUH never dressed or behaved as a king. He was the most humble person. If a stranger, for instance, came to see him while he was sitting with his companions in the mosque, he would never recognize him.

### **Generosity:**

He was the most generous person on earth. Ibn Abbas said: 'The Prophet PBBUH was the most generous of people. He was most generous during Ramadhan when he met Gabriel .He would meet him every night during Ramadhan to practice and review the Qur'an with him. The Messenger of God was so generous, that he was faster than the swiftest wind in this regard (Sahih, Bukhari p.1033 ).The prophet PBBUH was generous to whoever came to him. Jabir ibn Abdullah said that 'The Prophet did not refuse to give anything which he had to someone if he asked for it.' (Bukhari, p.1035).

### **His Mercy with non-Muslims:**

When the Prophet PBBUH was harmed by the non-believers, he never took revenge. His wife A'shah said: "By God! He never avenged himself. He only became angry when people transgressed the limits and boundaries of God; in that case he avenged [for the sake of God]." (Bukhari, p.6126). Even in war, the prophet PBBUH protected children, women, and old people. He displayed an extreme humanity and kindness that have never been seen in the history of humanity. In the battlefield also, he gave instructions to his enemies not to embezzle, not to cheat, not to break trust, not to mutilate, not to kill a woman, an old man, or a child. He asked them not to hew down trees or burn them. Moreover, strict instructions were given not to molest monks and persons engaged in worship.

Another instance of his mercy on non-Muslims was when the tribe known as Daws refused to convert to Islam, the companions of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH asked him to curse them. However, the prophet Muhammad raised his hands and prayed God to guide them to the right path. He said: ‘O Allah guide the tribe of *Daws* and bring them to Islam!’(Bukhari, p.2937 ).

In fact, the prophet PBBUH was kind and humane even with people of the Book. According to an authentic Hadith narrated in Bukhari, “A funeral procession passed in front of the prophet and he stood up. When he was told that it was the coffin of a Jew, he said: ‘Is it not a living being (soud)?’ ”(Bukhari, p.1313).

Umar may Allah be please with him (after he was stabbed), instructed (his would-be-successor) saying, “I urge him (I.e. the new Caliph) to take care of these non-Muslims who are under the protection of Allah and His Apostle in that he should observe the convention agreed upon with them, and fight on their behalf (to secure their safety) and he should not over-tax them beyond their capacity”(Bukhari, p.3052). .

### **Honesty:**

The prophet Muhammad PBBUH was honest even with non-muslims. Once the non-believers of Mecca, who were very hostile towards him, left their valuable things with him. Later, these non-believers of Mecca abused him and tortured his companions and drove them out of their houses. Nevertheless, he gave instructions to Ali bin Abi Talid to postpone his migration for three days in order to return these valuable things to their people (Ibn Hicham Vol. 1, p. 493).

### **Physical beauty:**

The prophet Muhammad PBBUH was well known for his physical beauty. Describing his immense beauty, one of his companions said: ‘The Prophet was a person of average height. His shoulders were wide. His hair reached his earlobes. Once I saw him



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adorned in a red garment; I never saw anything more beautiful than him.’ (Bukhari, p.3551).

### **Pleasures of life:**

The Prophet Muhammad PBBUH never sought for the pleasures of life. Abdullah Ibn Massod said: ”The Messenger of God went to sleep on a mat. He stood up and he had marks on his side due to the mat that he had slept on. We said: ‘O Messenger of God, shall we not make [a proper] bedding for you?’ He said: ‘What do I have to do with this world? I am only like a wayfarer upon a mount that stopped to take shade and rest under a tree, and then leaves it behind and continues on the journey’” (Tirmidhi, p.2377).

When he passed away, he hadn’t left any wealth or gold. He was not eager for money like nowadays people. Though its necessary for people to live, money is not the most important thing, and it does not determine one’s dignity and worth. The latter are rather determined by the person’s high moral values. His family used to spend many nights successively without eating because of lack of food. He never slept on a soft bed but on a palm mad. He used to spend most of his nights praying. When he passed away, he left only few coins, a part of which was given to repay a debt, and the remaining ones were given to a poor person who came to his house for charity. In the same vein, Carlyle remarks: ”Mahomet [Muhammad] himself, after all that can be said about him, was not a sensual man. We shall err widely if we consider this man as a common voluptuary, intent mainly on base enjoyments,—nay on enjoyments of any kind. His household was of the frugalest; his common diet barley-bread and water: sometimes for months there was not a fire once lighted on his hearth. They record with just pride that he would mend his own shoes, patch his own cloak. A poor, hard-toiling, ill-provided man; careless of what vulgar men toil for”. (Carlyle, as cited in Kidwi, 2018, p.110).

The prophet PBBUH was very modest and humble. He never thought of himself as someone who is superior to others.

**Truthfulness:** The prophet Muhammad PBBUH was known for his truthfulness. Telling lies was the trait he hated most. Even non-believers, at that time, used to call him the trustworthy and the truthful. The Messenger, may God's prayers and peace be upon him, used to go down to the markets, guide people to honesty, and forbid them from deception and fraud in dealings,

**Democracy:**

He was not an authoritative man, but he used to listen to others and to consult them in making decisions. Democracy was practiced in the time of the prophet Muhammad PBBUH, but it was known as Shura. The prophet Muhammad used to consult his companions and ask for their viewpoints in different matters. His companion Abu Hurairah said: 'I have not seen a person more keen for the sincere advice of his companions than the Messenger of God' (Tirmidhi, p.1714)..He would consult people of opinion in matters of politics, war, or worldly affairs, and would take their opinions if it became clear to him that they were right.

Democracy is demonstrated when Muslims from different walks of life and social status pray together side by side, and they all proclaim that only God is Great. In pilgrimage also, men dress the same way: two simple pieces of white seamless cloth, and this gives a startling spectacle of their equality in front of the Almighty God. All differences of race, color, and language vanish.

**His kind treatment of women:**

The prophet Muhammad PBBUH was the first one to emancipate women from the rigid traditional patriarchal system. He considered women as equal to men. He said: "Women are the twin halves of men"(Tirmidi, p.190).

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The prophet Muhammad was very respectful of women. He gave instructions to men to take care of them and to treat them kindly. In the Farwell Sermon( Hijjat Al-Wada) during pilgrimage, he said: “O people. It is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in mildness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers.”(Tirmidhi, p.3087) In pursuit of education and knowledge, man and woman are granted the same opportunities. Very much like men, women were given the right to express their views freely.

The prophet PBUH was a perfect husband. He loved his wives immensely, and he treated them with much kindness and affection. In fact, he remained loyal to them even after their death. When his first wife Khadija, who was much older than him, passed away, he never stopped talking of her exalted manners. He even used to send presents to her friends. Such kind of love seldom exists in our time in which the material side triumphs over the spiritual one.

He was very romantic with his wife A'isha. He used to have races with her. When she drank from a vessel, he put his mouth at the same place and drank. He died between her neck and her chest, with her saliva in his mouth.

Prophet Muhammad PBUH commanded men to treat their wives in the best way. He says: “The best of you is the best to his family, and I am the best of you to my family”(Tirmidhi, p.3895).

When Fatima, the beloved and the only remaining daughter of the prophet PBUH entered his room, he stood up and kissed her; then, he laid his garment for her to sit on.

**Equality:**

The prophet's teachings reject any discrimination that is based on race, color, or language, and despite being the messenger of God, he never dealt with others as a distinguished person. In his Farwell Sermon, he said: "You are all equal. Nobody has superiority over the other except by piety and good action"(Tirmidhi, p.1628)

Non-Muslims, at the prophet Muhammad (PBBUH)'s time had admitted his prophecy and were mesmerized by his elevated manners. Hercules, for instance, said: "If I had been with him, I would have washed his feet"(Sahih Muslim, p.3322). Some Western writers payed a glowing tribute to Prophet Muhammad PBBUH. Thomas Carlyle, for instance, recognizes the greatness of Prophet Muhammad PBBUH. He says: "But, from an early age, he had been remarked as a thoughtful man. His companions named him "*Al Amin*, The Faithful," A man of truth and fidelity; true in what he did, in what he spake and thought. They noted that *he* always meant something. A man 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. This is the only sort of speech *worth* speaking! Through life we find him to have been regarded as an altogether solid, brotherly, genuine man. A serious, sincere character; yet amiable, cordial, companionable, jocose even;—a good laugh in him withal: there are men whose laugh is as untrue as anything about them; who cannot laugh".( Carlyle, as Cited in Kidwi, pp.107-108).

The prophets' outstanding qualities are also noted by Michael Hart who views the prophet Muhammad PBBUH as the best man ever in the history of mankind. In his book *The 100: A Ranking of the most Influential Persons in History*, he chooses Muhammad PBBUH on the top of the most important hundred personalities in history. Hart states: "My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on

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both the religious and the secular levels [...] Today, thirteen centuries after his death, his influence is still powerful and pervasive”(Hart, 1993, p. 3).

Karen Armstrong in her book, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* tries to correct the misconception and misperceptions of Islam and the Prophet in the West. She writes:

Muhammad was not a man of violence. We must approach his life in a balanced way, in order to appreciate his considerable achievements. To cultivate an inaccurate prejudice damages tolerance, liberality, and compassion that are supposed to characterize Western culture”(2007, p.6).

Armstrong asserts that the prophet Muhammad PBUH is a role model for our time.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In fact, the stereotypical views of Islam and the prophet Muhammad PBUH have been rife in the West for centuries, but they have been exacerbated and rehearsed with greater venom since the atrocities of 9/11. Since the event, Muslims have always been misrepresented as vicious and violent monsters wanting death and deconstruction for the world. In addition to the (neo)orientalist written discourse, caricatures and cartoons, which invoke the past mythical motif of freedom by defaming religion and profaning the sacred, have been used to insult the prophet PBUH and construct the narrative of the ‘barbarians are coming.’ Thus, they would inevitably spread intolerance, ferment hatred, Islamophobia and xenophobia, which are crystalized in acts of violence against Muslims.

The weaponization of these caricatures also make some ignorant people, who are psychologically prone to violence, use these drawings, as a catalyst, to act out their feelings of stigmatization and humiliation. The misrepresentation of prophet Muhammad PBBUH strengthens arguments of fear and antagonism towards the Muslim ‘Other’. They create Gordion knot of conflict between “Us” and “Them”, and they hinder cultural understanding and dialogue.

Muslims and non-Muslims need to better define the concept of freedom of speech and define what is right and wrong. In Islam, ridicule of other faiths, their messenger and what they hold sacred is unacceptable. It is seen as incompatible with human rights and the respect for others’ religious beliefs and practices.

In fact, the huge barrier of misunderstanding can be removed by knowing and respecting Muslims’ religion, because this will certainly help cement co-existence and contact among people and civilizations. Another important means of enhancing cultural dialogue and tolerance is by imbibing the manners of the prophet Muhammad PBUH and applying them in our life to give others a positive image about him.

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## **Enhancing Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Debunking Misconceptions About the Prophet Muhammad PBUH**

Because of the lack of space, I could touch only a glimpse of his personality, but educated people should read about this great prophet who has humanized us, and they will find that he embodies exalted qualities that have impressed people worldwide at all times. These qualities include tolerance, mercy, kindness, humanity, generosity, and many other qualities.

Muslim scholars have a huge responsibility to educate non-Muslims about Islam and the prophet Muhammad PBUH. They need to write a counter-discourse to debunk the misconceptions and expose the faults of (neo)orientalist visual and written discourse, which instill in people's mind wrong ideas about Islam and the prophet Muhammad PBUH. To close, these futile attempts to misrepresent the prophet Muhammad PBUH will always be doomed to failure because his greatness will remain eternal, and this is avowed even by non-Muslim scholars.

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