The Early Puritan Tradition of the American Cinematography's Animosity toward Muslim

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Abstract

The American film industry has hugely contributed to build up a cruel picture of Islam and its followers. Numerous Hollywood films depict Muslim characters as primitives and extremists kidnapping, raping, terrorizing, and killing innocents, often Americans or Europeans. It is, however, a mistake to think that this hostility toward Islam is resulted from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Historical evidences show that the tension between Americans and Muslims could be traced back to a long historical tradition. Muslims have been caricatured by many Americans, fundamental American Christians in particular, since the first colonies of Puritans in New England. Countless early Americans excoriated Muslims as savage, ignorant, and monsters. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the postmodern American cinematography's animosity toward Muslim is actually echoing the discourse of the early American Puritan literature.

ساهمت صناعة السينما الأمريكية بشكل كبير في تكوين صورة قاسية عن الإسلام وأتباعه. تصور العديد من أفلام هوليوود الشخصيات الإسلامية على أنهم بدائيون ومتطرفون يختطفون ويغتصبون ويرهبون ويقتلون الأبرياء، وغالبا ما يكونون أمريكيين أو أوروبيين. ومع ذلك، من الخطأ الاعتقاد بأن هذا العداء للإسلام ناتج عن الهجمات الإرهابية في 11 سبتمبر 2001. تظهر الأدلة التاريخية أن التوتر بين الأمريكيين والمسلمين يمكن إرجاعه إلى تقليد تاريخي طويل. تم تصوير المسلمين من قبل العديد من الأمريكيين، وخاصة المسيحيين الأصوليين، منذ المستعمرات الأولى الأولى للبيوريتانيين في إنجلاند ـ يو New

England. انتقد عدد لا يحصى من الأمريكيين الأوائل المسلمين ووصفهم بأنهم متوحشون وجاهلون ووحوش. الغرض من هذا الم   قال هو إثبات أن عداء السينما الأمريكية ما بعد الحداثة للمسلمين هو في الواقع تكرار لخطاب الأدب البيوريتاني الأمريكي المبكر.

1. *Introduction*

Many radical American Christian leaders openly accuse Muslims to be the "axis of evil". The film industry has highly contributed to distort the image of Islam and its followers. Numerous Hollywood films depict Muslim characters as primitives and monsters kidnapping, raping, terrorizing, and killing innocents, often Americans or Europeans. Jack Shaheen reveals that more than 900 films stereotype Arabs and Muslims as uneducated Bedouins, foolish, submissive females. In short, "when it comes to Arab character in movies," writes Shaheen, "Hollywood has only one kind: Bad Arabs" (Jack Shaheen).

Some common people might think that this virulent attitude toward Islam is a new phenomenon that has emerged from 20th century or simply resulted from the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001. But historical research proves that the tension between Americans and Muslims could be traced back to a long historical tradition. New Englanders, known by the name of "Puritans", have often essentialized Arabs and Muslims since their first settlement in the New World in early seventeenth century.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the 20th and 21st centuries Hollywood films toward Muslim are actually echoing the discourse of the early American literature. In our paper we address these questions: who were these early Americans who hated Muslims? Why did they hate Muslims? How were they able to influence the next generation until today? To do so, the paper is divided into two parts: we first approach the theme of anti-Muslim sentiment propagated by American films, and then we discuss the historical roots of this islamophobia, tracing it back to the first American colonists, namely Puritans.

2. Islamophobia in the Hollywood Cinema

2.1. Hollywood Films and Muslims before 09/11 Attacks

Evidences show that Hollywood has often used rough stereotypes to portray the Islamic world. In many 20th century films Muslims were portrayed negatively. In *The Sheikh* (1921), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *The Siege* (1998), *American Ninja 4* (1991), *American Samurai* (1992), *True Lies* (1994), *Gladiator* (2000), *The Mummy* (1999), among others, the Arabs (or Muslims)[1] are depicted as being foolish, brutal, inhuman, primitive, and uncivilized. Interestingly, the Arabs are presented as one individual, an exact copy of another, as if they were

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[1] Though the terms Arab and Muslim are quite different, we use them interchangeably in this paper, as the Western World tend to confuse them.

clones. Shaheen judiciously gives some examples to denounce this caricatural portrayal: "They [Arabs] all look alike to me" quips the American heroine in the film *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937). "All Arabs look alike to me," admits the protagonist in *Commando* (1968). Decades later, nothing has changed. Quips the US Ambassador in *Hostage* (1986), "I can't tell one [Arab] from another. Wrapped in those bed sheets they all look the same to me" (Jack Shaheen). This likeness is noteworthy to us. Out of an isolated case of a certain Muslim's misbehavior, Hollywood implies in a subtle way that all Muslims are wicked. As the most powerful film industry, Hollywood has succeeded not only to shape American imagination, but also to inculcate in the mind of Europeans that all Arabs share the same negative characteristics, namely religious fanatism and bruteness. More ridiculously, Arabs are either depicted as primitive nomads living with camels in the desert or lazy and foolish oil-rich spending their time in their harem maidens. Physically, they have all black beard, dark eyes and brown complexion. The prevalence of such misrepresentation of Arabs or Muslims during many generations has forged American imagination during several years in twentieth century.

2.2 Hollywood Films and Muslims after 09/11 Attacks

The 21st century- Hollywood films seemed to be willing to make effort to present how the real Arabs are. This attempt of so-called objective representation on Muslims brings some researchers, for example Ouidyane Elouardaoui, to state that a more reflective image of Arabs was released by Hollywood after the events of 9-11. However, one can notice that in some Hollywood films the image of Arabs and Muslims are still distorted, like in *Babel* (2006), *The Kingdom* (2007), *Taken* (2008), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *The Messenger* (2009), *Green Zone* (2010), and *The Dictator* (2012). Though these films attempt to offer a more realistic image of Arabs, but still persisted the same negative images of Hollywood films pre 09/11 attacks. Muslims are depicted as inferior because they are ignorant and brutal. If the Hollywood filmmakers really wanted to be objective, they should have devoted some scenes highlighting the pertinent Muslims' contribution to the western civilization. Why does Hollywood remain silent vis-a-vis to all Muslim philosophers, physicians and scientists who brought light to European of the Dark Ages?

It is worth noting that the radical Evangelicals are the most virulent toward Muslim in the US. These fundamental Christians believe that God will destroy the Muslim world when Muslims rise up to attack Israel in the last days. Since September 11, 2001, some conservative writers have even begun to suggest that the Antichrist will be a Muslim.

Some passages in the New Testament claim the coming of the Antichrist shortly before the end of the world. The Antichrist is the embodiment of the evil, he will persecute and massacre Christians, but he will finally be defeated by the armies of God under the leadership of Christ. And according to many radical Christians, the satanic biblical figure of Antichrist stands for the Muslim.

Interestingly to note that Hollywood apocalyptic movies in the post 9/11 are more abundant. We can note "between the line" that the US is always shown to be under the apocalyptic threat of evil forces, reminding the biblical figure of Antichrist. These forces are of course Islam. No wonder that George W Bush claimed that the War on Terror was part of a divine mission.

Having said that, two key elements draw our attention:

1) Hollywood films suggest that white American Christians are superior as they are the source of light and knowledge, whereas Muslims are inferior as they are the source darkness and ignorance.

2) Hollywood films emphasize the destruction of the Muslim world in the End Times, as Antichrist is allegorically interpreted to present Islam.

However, it is naïve to think that this anti-Islamic sentiment is new or has only emerged from 20th or 21st century. We are going to see in the second part that these two elements, namely white Christians' superiority to Muslims and the destruction of Muslims in the end times were advocated by the first settlers in the New World since the early seventeenth century. These first colonists were Puritans.

3. American Puritans' Attitude toward Muslims

The churchmen in the Middle Ages lived for long with the paranoia that Islam would destroy the Christian civilization. To face this threat, they extolled the virtues of Christianity as the unique true religion revealed by God, and edified common people that Islam was Muhammed's imposture. Muslims were accordingly portrayed as unhuman devouring innocent Christians. This fear of Islam was exported to the New World through massive migrations of English. Puritans, the first settlers in New England, were already taught by their ministers that the greatest enemies of God were Roman Catholic Church and Islam.

3.1 Who were the Puritans?

Among many definitions of Puritans, Francis Bremer's is the best in our view, "Puritans were those who sought to reform themselves and their society by purifying their churches of the remnants of Roman Catholic teachings and practice then found in post-Reformation England during the mid-sixteenth century" (Bremer, 2009, p. 2). Convinced that Anglican Church had been contaminated by the "filthy" Catholic teachings, they refused to conform themselves with it. When James VI of Scotland became the king of England in 1603, he launched discussion with the Puritans trying to persuade them to recognize his authority and accept working hand in hand with the bishops of the established Church. Being deeply Calvinist, they refused to cooperate with the leaders of the established Church, because they were Arminian. Hence, James I declared at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604: "I shall make them [Puritans] to conform themselves or I will harry them out the land, or else do worse" (Cheyney, 1904, 225). Disappointed, the Puritans detached themselves from the Anglican Church (this is the reason of their nickname "Separatists") and decided to leave England. In 1620, they set out to the New World. The political situation worsened for the Puritans under the reign of James I's son, Charles I. More radical than his father, the new king took repressive measures against the Puritans. To flee the persecutions, another wave of Puritans migrated to New England colonies in 1630.

Two things characterize American Puritans:
1) Unlike Catholics who regarded the Tradition and the Bible as the source of faith, Protestants in general and Puritans in particular relied on the Scripture alone. For the

latter, indeed, the Scripture was better than all universities for instruction as it was considered the complete source of knowledge, wisdom, and salvation.

2) The belief to be superior to others, particularly to non-Christians. Strong defender of the Calvinist soteriological doctrine, they were persuaded to be the only elect among all humankind. Called from their sinful mother country, about to be destroyed by God, to settle in the Promised Land of America.

These two characteristics explained Puritans' animosity to Muslim world.

3.2 Arabs in the Bible

Arabs were explicitly cited in the Bible. Some Biblical passages negatively referred to Arabs, "The first reference to the Arab is found in the Old Testament in Isaiah 13:20: 'The Arab shall not tent there'. Then, in a address to Judah Bible records: 'Thou hast sat (lurking) for them like an Arab in the wilderness.' (Jeremiah 3:2). Most of the Biblical references, as Montgomery writes, portray Arabs as Nomads and mercenaries" (Shaz, 2003, p. 15). Christian historians of 4th and 5th centuries, relied on the narrative of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis, attribute the term Saracens to Arab tribes, who were "tent dwellers" and well-known for their barbarity. Jerome (340-420), the most prominent of the early Latin Church Fathers, declared that Arabs were like wild predators. In his Commentary on Genesis, Venerable Bede wrote in 7th century that Ishmael's descendants were condemned by birth to roam the desert (Grafton).

No wonder that Puritans adopted a virulent position toward Arabs, as the latter were misrepresented by the Bible and caricatured by the early Church Fathers. The Puritan divines taught their disciples that Arabs' prophet Muhammed was the descendant of Ishmael, that the Bible described as "a wild man; his hand will be against every man" (Genesis 16:12). To warn them against the danger of Islam, they labelled Muslims with horrible terms. The minister of Boston's North Church, Cotton Mather qualified Muslims as "fierce monsters of Africa. Mahometan Turks, Moors, and devils" (Mather, 1820, p. 583).

In addition to the explicit pejorative references to Arabs in the Bible, American Puritans delighted to interpret allegorically some biblical metaphors and parables to essentialize Muslims. They made theological connections between Islam and the prophecies of the book of Apocalypse (more commonly known under the term of Revelation). Some passages in the New Testament claim the coming of the Antichrist shortly before the end of the world. The Antichrist is the embodiment of the evil; he will oppress innocent Christians, but he will finally be defeated by Christ's armies. Relying on eschatological interpretation of the Bible, John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, and other Puritan theologians, claimed that the Antichrist is a symbolical figure standing for Islam; the triumph of Christ over the Antichrist in the End of Times is the prophecy of Christians' domination of the whole world and the collapse of the Ottoman power and its provinces. A collapse which would be followed by a general conversion of all Muslims. Aaron Burr, a famous political figure in 18th century, believed that Islam's destruction would be caused by global evangelism and converting all Muslims. Accordingly, the early Americans, the Puritans in particular, were persuaded that declaring "holy war" on Muslim world would bring them closer to God. Civilising the ignorant Mahometans, through massive missionaries, henceforth, became a divine duty.

Defenders of typological interpretation of the Bible, the Puritans regarded themselves the

new Israelites saved by God to establish His kingdom in the world. According to them, America, because blessed by Lord, should supersede the Muslim power. Winthrop, for example, maintained in his famous sermon "A Modell of Christian Charitie" that the Puritans were called by God to build the "City upon the Hill". This calling was interpreted as a divine mission to be God's lieutenant to rule over the earth and convert all infidels, above all Muslims. To this end, many Puritan writers wrote books to praise the genius of Christianity and demonize Islam. Jonathan Edwards emphasized the superiority of Christians to Muslims in his sermon *Mahometanism Compared with Christianity* by: while Christianity was first begun in place of great light, propagated by instruction, knowledge, reasoning, and inquiry; Islam was begun in a dark corner of the earth, Arabia, and it was propagated by discouraging knowledge and learning, forbidding inquiry, blinding the eyes of mankind, and using the power of sword. (1977, pp. 262-263)

The Calvinist soteriological doctrine instilled the mind of many modern Americans with the fixed idea of Western civilization as the source of enlightenment. Many political figures boasted to be the descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers or non-Separatist Puritans. Deeply influenced by these early Americans' religious and racial ideologies, they asserted openly their desire to "enlighten" or "civilize" some remote Islamic countries. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 strained the relationship between the USA and Muslim World. Actually, literature on Islam appeared abundantly. Conservative Christian writers and politicians seriously addressed the topics of decline of Islamic religion and Muslim conversion to Christianity. Countless fundamentalist Christians, supporters of George W. Bush and his administration, often utilize an anti-Islamic rhetoric reminding of the Puritans' harsh discourse toward Muslims. The American evangelical pastor Ted Haggard's words on Islam recall those of Jonathan Edwards: "the Christian God encourages freedom, love, forgiveness, prosperity and health. The Muslim God appears to value the opposite" (Kidd, 2009, p. 146). Like his Puritan ascendents, Pastor Ted apprehends Islam's expansion to overwhelm Christendom and subsequently encourages the authorities to make more efforts to convert Muslims to Christianity. "He saw the tsunami that devastated Indonesia in 2005 as a God-given occasion to bring people to Christ." (Spector, 2009, p. 79) Moreover, many authors echo the Puritan millenarist rhetoric of Islam as the embodiment of the Antichrist. The pastor Reza Safa maintains that the Bible warns Christians that Satan can appear as an angle of light. He writes, "I believe Islam is Satan's weapon to oppose God, His plan and His people" (1996, p. 18).

Hollywood film industry whose concern was gaining money stressed the thematic of the Clash of civilization advocated by all Puritan ministers. Filmmakers made untiring efforts to find a way to recuperate the fundamentalist Christians' charge against Islam to represent Islam as consistent threat to the West.

4. Conclusion:

The American islamophobia can be traced back to the early seventeenth century, when the first Puritan colonists used Islam as a "cultural enemy."[2] Fearing the Islamic ambitions to control the whole world, the Puritans stressed in their sermons the huge gulf between Christianity and

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[2] The expression is borrowed from Timothy Marr who noticed that early Americans used Islamic religion as "cultural enemies" and as an "oppositional icon" (2006, p. 21).

Islam. While the former was the source of light, knowledge, and peace; the latter was of darkness, ignorance, and violence. This stereotypical presentation of Islam travelled through centuries and established itself in postmodern times. If zealous Christians have contributed to spread the traditional Puritan clichés on Islam and its followers, Hollywood industry remains one of the most important tools mispresenting the Islamic religion. The large broadcasted films on Islam inculcate into Americans with the image of Muslims and Arabs as being a savage predator ready to destroy the peaceful white Christian civilization.

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