The British Attitudes towards the Islamic World over History
Les attitudes britanniques envers le monde musluman à travers l'histoire
المواقف البريطانية تجاه العالم الإسلامي عبر التاريخ

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Abstract – The West's evolution of a specific attitude towards Islam and the culture associated with it is a process by which ideas were accumulated over time and then handed on from one generation to another to become sources for scholars who, undoubtedly, use the culture of their age and previous ages ; never work in abstraction. The absence of clear meaning, interpretation and precise objective became apparent with regard to the English literature on Islam in particular. Behind these attempts to twist the concept and image of Islam are the animosity held so long to the faith for the greater losses it caused to Christianity, general misconceptions of Islam's spiritual nature, and political motivations. The description of this perspective along with its emotional complexity is the subject of this paper which calls into question the origins of this antagonism and the contributing factors to its continuity

Key words : Islam, Christianity, English literature, animosity, misconceptions

ملخص - إن تطوير الغرب لموقف محدد تجاه الإسلام والثقافة المرتبطة به هو عملية تراكمت بها الأفكار مع مرور الوقت ثم تم تسليمها من جيل إلى آخر لتصبح مصادر للعلماء الذين ، دون شك ، يستخدمون ثقافة عصرهم و العصور السابقة ولا يعملون ابدا في التجريد. أصبح غياب المعنى الصحيح والتفسيرالجلي والهدف الدقيق واضحا فيما يتعلق بالأدب الإنجليزي حول الإسلام على وجه الخصوص. وراء هذه المحاولات لتحريف مفهوم الإسلام وصورته هناك العداوة التي دامت لفترة طويلة ضد هذا الدين بسبب الخسائر الكبرى التي سببها للمسيحية ، ويوجد ايضا المفاهيم الخاطئة العامة عن الطبيعة الروحية للإسلام ، لدوافعه السياسية. إن وصف هذا المنظور مع تعقيداته العاطفية هو موضوع هذا المقال الذي يبحث في أصول هذا العداء والعوامل المساهمة في استمراريته.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الإسلام ، المسيحية ، الأدب الإنجليزي ، العداء ، المفاهيم الخاطئة

I. Introduction :

Three decades ago or more, it became clear that Islam and the West represent highly contested concepts whenever the right condition surfaces. But the examination of Christian-Muslim relations is older than that. According to Norman Daniel, the Western images of Islam had been distorted since Medieval times as a result of political and religious contexts. In agreement with Daniel, Edward Said published his fascinating work '*Orientalism*' to show how it is Western discourse about Islam which designed its shape in derogatory ways. Thoughts about Islam and its relation with Christianity have provided a countless number of themes since looking at Islam was associated with a mixture of panic, bewilderment and suspicion, which made Christians see it in more than one light (Hourani 9). In fact, information about Islam and Muslims comes from numerous literary records such as travel diaries, literary fiction, captivity narratives, and stage plays which, no doubt, have inherent biases. Moreover, if misunderstanding were present in a genre this would be reproduced in the other. The Anglo-Saxon world also relied on Christian theological ideas to give information about Islam and Muslims within a set of assumptions though Christian texts predated Islam and assumptions can never be thought of as accurate perceptions.

Politics has always been present in and intruded most academic scholarship over time. But has not there been any interest in Islam, its prophet and scripture designed to understand them as an end in themselves, not as a response to some irresistible challenge or in search of some ideologies in justification ?

II. Islam's Rise and Expansion

By the time Islam spread from its initial base in the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East to more distant areas in Africa, Asia and Europe, it was a rival to Eastern Christendom, « the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom … It made the West profoundly uneasy», stated R.W. Southern in *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (3-4). The very idea that Christianity should not be the last and final religion, and that there should be another prophet after Jesus who would lure Christians away from their faith aroused fear and hatred in the Christian world. Hence, the rise of this unexpected threat to Christendom needed an explanation – if not a strategy of mental defence to save one's faith (Hofmann 90). The view that Islam formed a problem to Western Christendom was also held by the British historian Albert Hourani though the French scholar Maxime Rodinson maintained that it was considered a real problem only after it was perceived a menace long before that (3).

The dissemination of Islam was gradual but amazingly rapid. Although it tolerated other beliefs and did not force any kind of conversion, its expansion owed much to military conquest. The success of Muslim armies restricted the Western media to a body of literature that attacks Islam, « a repertoire of Christian legends rather than hard historical evidence about Islam and Muslims, nourished by imaginative fantasies » (Humayun). Initially, the attempt was to equate Islam's expansion with imposition at the point of the sword. This belief prevails even today though history stores cases of Christian populations who sought refuge under Islamic rule which was more benevolent than their own, and closercontacts with Muslims, on the whole, revealed a superior civilization with a stronger claim to universal truth. Then, the plot was to denigrate the prophet. In fact, most Christians could not accept Muhammad as a genuine prophet nor could they acknowledge the authenticity of the revelation given to him.

The revelations of Muhammad, Allah's messenger to the Arabs, began in 610. This event of the seventh century led to the birth of a new monotheistic religion, Islam, taking root in the Arabian Peninsula through the new prophet's message at the same time as Christianity through Augustine's

mission to Kent. Both religions gained support and were well-established though Islam with much more speed and victories. The first decade of Arab conquests was depicted in the Christian records as lacking hostility, and Christians referred to their defeat as being a consequence of their sins. However, this view was to change because of the continuous military success of Islam and its persistence. Christian writers began writing polemic histories as a sophisticated method to overcome the challenge of Islam. An influential example is :

The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, a Syric work from the last quarter of the seventh century. Like earlier writings, it described the rise of Islam as a punishment by God. The novelty of the apocalypse was to present the conquests as a sign of the impending Day of Judgement, thereby promising an end to Islamic and the ultimate triumph of Christianity. So widely copied was this work that by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period at least two Latin versions had found their way as far west as England (Beckett 40-41).

Other envious Orthodox Byzantine writers, who lost part of their territories to Islamic rule, had madly denounced Islam. To illustrate, John of Damascus in his *De haeresibus* portrayed Islam as a superstition of the Ismaelites and its prophet as a false diviner who plagiarised from the Bible. Furthermore, « John of Damascus, living in a Muslim milieu, does not go that far, but he stillseems to believe that Muslim exclamation Allahu akbar ("God is the greatest") is a hidden praise of a Pagan goddess with some connection to the Black Stone in the Ka'ba » (Heilo 117).

In the eighth century, Bede, the English monk and writer (673-735), introduced some information about Islamic religion to Anglo-Saxon England, but it was too vague and less valuable than the detailed accounts coming from Muslim histories. Bede's ideas about the Orient derived from St. Jerome who saw the Saracens[1] in connection with all that was dark and having shadows. Bede never actually met a Muslim, yet he wrote vividly to describe their hatred to Christians. He described them as 'enemies of the church', 'companions of the devil and heretics (qtd. in Ariana 37). He only reproduced some of the early pre-Islamic theories to shape the first medieval understandings of Arabia's Saracens. As a result of both men's prejudices, Anglo-Saxon views were antipathic towards Islam, which remains evident in the contemporary times. By and large, apprehensions about Islam did not stem from its nature; they were rather based on folktales, mythical narratives about the East, as well as individual opinions.

Islam, being the subject of misunderstanding, is no surprise as long as we believe this could be ascribed to the ignorance of the religion. As mentioned by Karen Armstrong, « The Song of Roland[2], which was composed at the time of the First Crusade, shows a revealing ignorance of the essential nature of the Islamic faith. The Muslims enemies of Charlemagne and Roland are depicted as idol-worshippers, bowing down before a trinity of the "gods" Apollo, Tervagant, and Mahomet » (Armstrong 25). Paradoxically, the dogma of trinity is related to Christianity ; not to Islam whose followers bear witness that there is no god except Allah and that Muhammad is his slave and messenger. Yet, however, misunderstanding cannot be a matter of carelessness because these fantasized images, as pointed out earlier, were deep-rooted and held faithfully. According to Southern, « … these legends and fantasies were taken to represent a more or less truthful account of what they purported to describe. But as soon as they were produced they took on a literary life of their own » (29).

III. The Islam's Literature throughout the Ages

The Crusaders' mentality also contributed to the negative European attitude towards Islam along with

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[1]Before the 16th century, the words 'Muslim' and 'Islam' were not used in Western languages. Christian writers referred to Muslims as Saracens, Arabs, Turks, Moors, and Ishmaelites. For more details on the term, see

Tolan John Victor. *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination.* Columbia UP, 2002.

[2]A narrative epic poem considered the oldest major work of French literature. It was possibly first composed some time in the 10th or 11th century. The poem celebrates King Charles of France and his best menknown as the Twelve Peersin their fight against the people of the Saracen Empire. Roland, the leader, and his men seek to anni hilate the heathen Saracen religion or convert its adherents. It is associated with pan-European strug gles against Islam.

the keenness on maintaining it. The two hundred years of the Crusades are traditionally seen in the west as a series of heroic battles in which the kings of Europe tried to wrest Jerusalem from the wicked Muslim infidels. These religious wars resulted in massacres – of Muslims by Christians – on the largest scales and left deep scars in the West, not the East because they were associated with the belief that the Muslim world should disappear whereas it did not. The conquest of the Byzantine metropolis Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in May 1453 strengthened the negative image of Muslims that had prevailed in Europe since the Crusades and shaped the perception of a 'Turkish menace'[1].From the mid-15th century, it became customary to equate Muslims with Turks. When early modern texts speak of someone having "turned Turk", it means that he has converted to Islam.Inaddition to the bitter legacy left by the Crusades and the descriptions of the Turkish atrocities, anti-Arabism is anotherprejudice against Arabs since Islam, for all Europeans is an Arab religion. Ironically, churchmen were the most interested people in the sponsorship of Arabic studies, and so strong was the desire to learn from the Arabs in general. In fact, « until the Renaissance and Reformation … Arabic was probably the most widely translated language in the world » (Lewis 61). At Cambridge, the chair of Arabic was created in 1632, and few years later, professorship in Arabic was established at Oxford. Missionaries engaged in debates with Muslims, « but the latter were not convinced by Christian arguments. Worse, conversions of pagans and Christians to Islam continued apace, as did losses on the battlefield. Optimism soured into pessimism » (O'Brien 67). The discourse of the "Turkish menace" continued to characterize the image of Islam as an anti-Christ force and reinforced ethnic prejudices about the Turks throughout the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation. During the Reformation, Protestants were likened to Muslims in terms of deviation from their earlier faiths. This means the medieval duality of Christians vs. Pagan or heretical Saracens persisted.

In the course of speaking about the literature that dealt with Islam in the 16th and 17th centuries, the study of Islam and England cannot begin without Samuel Chew's massive 1937 work *The Crescent and the Rose,* which started by informing that Muslims were never absent from the anxious thoughts of Elizabethan travelers (vii). The beginning of modern British historical writing was in the early seventeenth century. Writings on Islam repeated the former prejudices more rigourously thanks to reason, empirical evidence and the linguistic potential. From the reign of Queen Elizabeth I to that of Queen Ann, Islam and its world were represented by the Ottoman Empire and the North African pirates. To Europe and Early Modern England, Islam remained referred to as the religion of the Turks and Arabians were synonymous with Turks. In England there existed misconceptions of Islam, and after 1649 one of the primary sources that shaped and perpetuated misconceptions was the first English translation of the Koran – *The 1649 Alcoran of Mahomet*. No further than the title page, it was stated the purpose was to provide the Early Modern English audience an insight into Turkish vanities. Britons, despite their encounters of the Moors, Turks, Persians and Indians continued to imagine Muslims in the theatres and churches, as « a tribe of warring anti-Christians intent on establishing the universal monarchy of their long-dead leader known as 'Mahomet' » (Mac Lean, Matar 26). English writers such as Richard Knolles, Edward Pococke and Paul Raycant drew pictures of the Ottoman Empire as a great terror and described its torture and despotism, but they also recounted positive details of the religious, political and military organization of Muslim society as well as their courage, determination and tolerance. Towards the end of the 17th century, however, the perception of the Turks as enemies was substituted by a more positive attitude. Descriptions of gallant Moors and Muslim heroes shattered the earlier accounts of dreadful Turks.Everything Oriental became exotic.

Then the assumption was that the Enlightenment emerged out of what is usually called the "Judeo-Christian tradition".The implication of course is that Islam along with fanaticism[2] towards the faith have

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[1] A topic that found its way into publications all over Europe in the 16th century although western Europe was never directly threatened by Ottoman armies

[2] In addition to despotism, it was a new judgmental term that entered the discourse on Islam through the Enlightenment's critique of Islam. The new image then was of the fanatical Muslim as the opposite of the enlightened European.

been unable to allow the same process to take place. Enlightenment scholars and orientalists such as Edward Gibbon and William Jones were both fond of Islamic Civilization and believed in its superiority, but saw Europe in the light of reason and command of science as far advanced. When the Orient became less threatening with the growing British power over Muslims and a feeling of being militarily superior, it remained exotic under the impact of Romanticism in historical accounts.

The late eighteenth century English views of Islam and Muslims were mostly affected by the British developed hegemony ; for instance, the rising empire in Mughal India while the latter stagnating. Therefore, Muslim societies lost respect for their cultural heritage and demonstrations of their barbarism took root in order to justify colonialism. The focus of the nineteenth century English thought, thus, was to figure out the disparities between the east and the west. The new stereotypes which circulated stated that Islam and modernity were incompatible, Islam oppresses women, and it is the reason of the Muslim Orient's inferiority. In this age of European Imperialism academic knowledge was used to legitimize European rule over Muslim societies. Leading Scottish intellectuals, notably John Malcolm and Mountstuart Elphinstone were archetypes of imperial historians. « They were supported by a growing evangelical public sentiment, which viewed empire as the work of Providence » (Humayun). Western missionary movement in general, and its literature demeaned Muslims in an effort to convert them to Christianity. James Mill in his History of British India also believed in the benefits of colonialism on the ground that it improves persecuted societies. Orientalist writing in general became a tool to justify imperialism. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, racist theories were added to the stereotypes of Islam. Race replaced the precedent contempt for both language and religion. In fact, the British writer Charles Pearson « saw in the Turkish decline an opportunity for European powers such as Austria or Russia to annex territories for a higher race as part of its natural habitat in Europe » (Rich 435-51). Orientalism, as the new structure of thought, represented the British and French Oriental studies of the 19th century as being foreunners of a hegemonic discourse on the Orient and thereby supporters of western rule in the Middle East. An example of a political figure who supported and contributed to the European discourse on Islam was Evelyn Baring, the First Earl of Cromer who held office from 1883 to 1907 as the British Consul-General in Cairo and advised in this capacity the Khedive of Egypt, whose country was occupied by Britain in 1882. For Cromer, Arabic is not worth learning, the Oriental Egyptian is entirely irrational and in every way the complete opposite of the European Englishman, and Islam is a failure. On the whole, Western scholarship of Islam, under Orientalism, portrayed Muslims as archetypal others. Bernard Lewis, often called 'the doyen of Middle Eastern studies,' is one of the reigning monarchs of Orientalism. His counterpart, Edward Said, in his *Orientalis*m, dissected the imperialist connections of this ideological enterprise. He claims that the Orient can not be a creation of imagination :

Ideas, cultures and histories can not seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configuration of power also being studied. To believe that Orient was created – or as I call it, 'orientalized' – and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination is to be disingenuous.... The Orient was orientalized not only because it was discovered to be oriental in all those ways considered commonplace by an average 19th century European, but also because it could be – that is, submitted to being – made oriental (5-6)

While many British scholars attempted to emphasize the superiority of the Occident, little room was left to a few who kept their earlier fascination with the Islamic world. Edward Lane's excitement about Egypt, in his *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* along with Carlyle's famous lecture on Muhammad *'Hero as prophet'* stand as sympathetic attempts against many Victorian products shaped by paternalism and utilitarianism to sustain British colonial hegemony. Nevertheless, the Christian missionaries and the Orientalists continued to strongly contribute to paint a mediocre image of the Orient, Islam as irrational, and Muhammad as an imposter. The reinforcement of the picture of the decadent Orient in the minds of the builders and administrators of Empire was the function of English writers, but « was exaggerated and often wildly inaccurate. It sometimes reflected the urges and instincts of its creator more than the reality » (Ahmad 119).

Twentieth century Britain was not less fortunate than before. The decadence of the Ottoman Empire – the sickman of Europe – and the backwardness of Islam were views widely held among many writers and thinkers, but not persuasive into European powers politics which remained anxious about the rise of an Islamic Nationalism. Eventually, «the crisis indicated that the great powers in Western Europe were now faced less with a threat from Islam but from a Pan Slavism »[1] (Rich 448). The defeat of the Ottoman Empire during World War I resulted in the colonization of Arab Muslim nations. Britain gained dominance in the Middle East. Historians like Reginald Coupland argued that only the British Empire was able to shape the destiny of people in need of protection. Muslim political activism and pan-Islamism which have their roots in the double assault of imperialism and decentralization on the Ottomans in the late nineteenth century, raised European anxiety and were reflected in the English literature of the twentieth century. When the Caliphate (khilafa) disappeared as an institution giving way to its replacement in the form of pan-Islam, T.W. Arnold wrote in hope of its reconstitution.

Europe before World War II and the USA after the war preserved their view of the Orient as unviable for development, mainly because of its connection with Islam and the Arabs. The anti-imperialist resistance of Muslims reinforced the view of Islam as a demonic religion that produces fanatic movements. The instability generated by the process of decolonization and the beginning of the Cold War, made scholars such as Richard Southern and Norman Daniel observe that to achieve influence on policy makers, inaccurate images of Islam and Muhammad in more refined works were necessary. The two noteworthy figures of this period were Hamilton Gibb and Bernard Lewis. Gibb assumed that there was an unchanging Arab or Muslim mind in his *Modern Trends in Islam*. Lewis went further than this by claiming that Islam does not develop people in touch with reality. He nourished the West with ideas that Muslims are hostile, warlike, and addicted to false history. For Lewis, Islam appeals to communism for its autocratic nature.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the failure of Muslim societies to modernize according to Western models was the time's issue. Lewis linked Muslims lack of interest in discovering the secrets of European advances to their hostility towards the West. But Nabil Matar and others argued that many Muslims travelled voluntarily for study and work. Curiosity about the European growing strength attracted thousands of men and women whose colonial education rendered their bond through religion at best fragmentary. In fact, national movements of independence in most Muslim states were led by the Westernized elite whose commitment at that time was not based on Islam for the most part, even when Islam was used as a rallying slogan. This means that the goal of those independence movements was merely to achieve freedom from the colonizing state and although stray ideas about the nature of post-independence state and its institutions exist, there is very little concrete evidence to suggest that that generation was able to work out any clear and solid plan of the post-independence era as far as Islam and its world view are concerned (Iqbal 603)

During the post-independence period, British historical writing continued to rationalise Western tutelage and insisted that Western political theories and institutions were carried over as part of the colonial legacy. Just like former Mill and Macaulay, Niall Ferguson offered provocative histories of the British Empire in hope that the modern world in general and the Islamic world in particular would believe it is the best force of order and justice. He argued that many of Britain's wars, mainly that on Iraq, were justifiable.

Up to the present Islam is criticized for having not been secularized like Christianity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as claimed by Lewis, Islam was both God and Caesar[2]. Yet,

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[1]A cultural and political movement among Slavic peoples, prevalent in the 19th century, whose adherents believed that their lineal and linguistic ties should bring about a union of all Slavs. In the early part of the 20th century Pan-Slavism saw a limited revival.

[2]The whole saying goes like this: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Overthe centuries, many Christians have based their attitudes toward government on this passage. Some have thought that Jesus'

however, there are scholars who reject the portrayal of Islam and the West as adversaries. Medieval Islam was a religion of remarkable tolerance for its time, allowing Jews and Christians the right to practise their beliefs, the contribution of Muslim Spain to the preservation of classical learning during the Dark Ages, and the impact of Muslim societies on the rise of European Renaissance have been highlighted in order to prove there were not only conflicts, but also the exchange of ideas and technologies. Indeed, the September 11 events shook the USA and its allies – Britain in particular. The Western and Muslim worlds are now more distrustful of one another than at any other epoch of their interaction. Huntington's popular dichotomous notion of the clash of civilizations is influential only in policy making circles because the Islamic historical and present associations with the West display much more belonging and tolerance in terms of trade, knowledge and migration. Edward Said criticized Huntington for this notion defining the Islamic civilization as self-contained, and the ignorance involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization (Said).

IV. Conclusion

To conclude, the Western images of Islam have long been based as much on imagination and presumption as on knowledge. Medieval Britain represented Islam as a force of political chaos. During the Crusades, it was chronicled as a process of idolatry. The Protestant Reformation viewed Muslims as heretics. The rational faith of Enlightenment condemned the Muslim other to obscurity and backwardness. Up to the present, portrayal of Islam's images remain constantly related to ideas of fundamentalism and terrorism. Although Islam, since time immemorial, is the same faith, growing ideas and views of it varied according to the issue of the day. The impact of colonialism rendered nearly all Arab countries utterly dependent and obliged Turkey and Iran to recognize and resist European hegemony. Since the apparent end of colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s, however, new intellectual forces from everywhere started to respond to the complex transformations their world underwent since the advent of Western capitalism into many a Muslim country. The common 20th century history of Europe and its neighbours remain obscure. The political writing of England after World War Two seemed imprecise and vague to many towering authors such as George Orwell. This is also applicable to the literature on Islam which often confused the concepts of Islam, Muslim world, Islamic history, and Islamic revivalism. Most importantly, the English thought and writing vis-à-vis the Muslim world did not escape the limitations of their scholars who could not refuse to place their knowledge for the interest of the Empire even when they succeeded to escape the impacts of their cultures, methods and concerns. Judgment of Islam has been grossly distorted.

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statement establishes two separate realms, Caesar's and God's, and that people should render to each what they ask for in their respective realms. Hence, their present separation of church and state.

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