Introduction: three views

From the beginning of Christian–Muslim encounters, much discussion has focused on the person and status of Muḥammad. This chapter cannot cover everything that Christians have written on Muḥammad over almost fifteen hundred years; it certainly cannot cite all relevant texts. What it does set out to do is to summarise, with reference to representative sources and contributors, the main contours of Christian thinking on Muḥammad, and especially to highlight what might be described as significant developments or changes. What follows will show that the majority of Christians have had little positive to say about him, denying that he was God’s prophet, often suggesting or asserting that he served Satan or his own immoral and selfish interests. It should also be said, at the outset, that many Christians continue to hold negative views of Muḥammad. The best-selling books on Muḥammad by Christians today are those written by evangelicals for whom Muslims and Christians do not even worship the same God. For these Christians, there is no common ground between Christianity and Islam. Given this negativity, which persists, one main aim of this chapter is to identify anything that shifts away from total hostility towards a more positive view of Muḥammad, that is, towards affirming that some common ground exists between Islam and Christianity.

Christian thinking on Muḥammad is inevitably linked with overall assessments of Islam, which therefore will also be described. This especially applies to how the Qurʾān, the revelation that Muslims believe Muḥammad received from God, is understood. There is also a close correlation between what Christians think about Muḥammad and Islam, and their view of Christianity’s relationship – or lack of relationship – with other religions, and with beliefs about the possibility of salvation for non-Christians. While theologically problematic, given that Muḥammad’s position in Islam as God’s messenger, and Jesus’ position in Christianity as God incarnate, are different, discussion also tends to draw comparisons between Muḥammad and Jesus. Such comparisons feature in both early and very recent texts. Whether or not the Muḥammad–Jesus comparison is appropriate, given Muslim respect for Jesus as prophet, Christian difficulty in reciprocating this with reference to Muḥammad has pragmatically created dissymmetry in Christian–Muslim relations. This is seen in how Muslims add ‘peace be upon him’ after mentioning Jesus’ name while, in contrast, Christians may refer to Muḥammad as the ‘false’ or ‘so-called’ prophet. The degree to which views of Muḥammad reflect actual encounter with Muslims – or lack of encounter – is
also highlighted; the context of Christian thinking about Muḥammad often shapes the content of that thought. Social, political and international factors affect the way in which Christians regard Muslims and their Prophet. Access or lack of access to Islamic sources is another important factor behind the ways in which views develop. On the other hand, theological conviction plays a more dominant role; thus, neither encounter nor access to authentic Islamic sources necessarily results in more positive ideas about Muḥammad.

What follows includes discussion of Christian attitudes towards Muḥammad’s claim to be a prophet, whether his life and conduct support that claim, his relationship with God, whether Christians can in any way see Muḥammad as a godly, good man and how views impact actual relations between Christians and Muslims. Broadly, three paradigms emerge. The first represents a Christian denial of Muḥammad, expressing a total rejection of Islam; Muslims must convert or remain spiritually lost. This view is often accompanied by a confrontational attitude that posits a civilizational clash between Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority space; there is no possibility for the salvation of non-Christians. The second expresses limited positivity; conversion is necessary for salvation but Christians can identify positive aspects of Muḥammad’s legacy when attempting to evangelise Muslims; other religions may find fulfilment in Christian faith but are not themselves ‘saving’. The third position moves towards a Muslim view of Muḥammad as a genuine prophet; while problematic issues remain, this position allows that Muslims may, without necessarily becoming Christian, find divine favour. Salvation is through Christ but not necessarily Christianity.

The denial of Muḥammad

Negative Christian attitudes towards Muḥammad, representing a complete denial that his life had any positive aspects, rejects everything that Muslims believe to be true about his character, spiritual status and significance. For Muslims, Muḥammad was the perfect man, whose moral conduct presents the best model to be imitated. He was incapable of sin. He was divinely commissioned to become the universal prophet, the last of thousands of prophets called by God to teach the difference between godly and ungodly conduct. This message is set out in the Qur’ān, which God revealed to Muḥammad through the Angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years between 610 and 632. The Qur’ān is God’s speech, containing no humanly authored content. Earlier prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus, are honoured, as are the books that some prophets, known as apostles, also received, though Muḥammad’s scripture corrects errors that over time compromised these. Thus it represents the definitive guide. Some Muslims say that salvation is only available to those who affirm both the oneness of God and the apostleship of Muḥammad. Almost point by point, these beliefs are contested, rejected and denied by Christians, who see Muḥammad very differently. Only such facts as when and where Muḥammad was born, when he began to claim to be a prophet, where and how he died, are accepted, although for centuries many of these details were unknown or twisted in various ways in Christian writing.

An early example is found in a brief Latin life of Muḥammad written in Spain in about 850. The writer was living under Muslim rule, so might have consulted Muslims to find out what they believed. Given that some factually accurate information is contained in the Life, the author may have had access to an early Muslim source; the earliest surviving biography of Muḥammad had been written about a hundred years before. However, he was evidently predisposed to view Islam, Muslims and Muḥammad in the darkest way possible, and calumny could still substitute for fact and negative assertions about Muḥammad replace positive Muslim beliefs. The Life correctly states that Muḥammad was an orphan who worked for and later married a wealthy
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widow. However, it quickly turns this into something sinister and odious, describing him as ‘aflame with the fuel of his lust’ (Wolf 1997: 48). Aware that Muhammad travelled on business and encountered Christians, which Muslim sources also describe, the Life has it that Muḥammad attended Christian assemblies and, ‘as a shrewd son of darkness’, committed Christian sermons to memory. Then, pretending to receive visits from the angel Gabriel who allegedly brought him divine revelation, he presented himself as a prophet. He was swollen with pride, though it was actually a trained vulture that came to him, which the Life calls ‘the spirit of error’, leaving open the possibility that this was Satan in disguise. Muḥammad preached to ‘irrational animals.’ His followers were ordered to take up arms in his name and established Damascus as their capital (though this city was not captured until 634 and became the capital only in 661). Muhammad’s lust again features in a reference to his marriage with the wife of his adopted son Zayd, which he justified by passing off a verse of his ‘Law’ (Q 33:37, paraphrased quite accurately) ‘as of divine inspiration’. He ‘arranged other songs in the honor of Joseph, Zachary and even the mother of the Lord, Mary’ (Wolf:49). This correctly identifies Sūras 12 and 19 by their titles. It was this sin among many that precipitated his death. Aware that ‘he would in no way be resurrected on his own merit’, the ‘false prophet’ ordered his followers to guard his body, anticipating a miracle. However, instead of rising after three days, his body began to give off a horrendous stench that drew dogs who devoured the corpse: in memory of this, Muslims slaughter dogs every year. A later legend situated Muhammad’s tomb at Mecca, where his iron coffin was suspended in the air by a giant magnet (some others correctly locate Muḥammad’s tomb at Medina).

Many of these details became standard features of this approach, namely, that Muḥammad was a sexual reprobate, pretended to be a prophet, composed the Qurʾān to advance his personal goals, gained followers by force or deception, faked Gabriel’s appearances, drew on or was influenced by Christians, committed many sins and falsely predicted his resurrection. In fact, as had John of Damascus writing before about 749, the Latin Life described Muḥammad as a heresiarch, thus depicting Islam as a deviant form of Christianity. John, who had also referred to the Zayd-Zaynab affair, also speculated about Muhammad’s state of mind during his supposed revelatory experiences, suggesting that as Muḥammad was sleeping when ‘the Book came to him’ we could rightly conclude that all he experienced was dreams (Sahas 1972: 135). By the eleventh century, the popular Song of Roland had Muslims worshipping three deities, Apollin, Tevagon and Mahom (http://omacl.org/Roland/r234-291.html, verse 3490), the latter identified as Muhammad. Muḥammad’s illiteracy, which most Muslims affirm, has been routinely rejected by Christian authors, who usually assume without question that he wrote the Qurʾān.

Rarely were correct dates given for Muhammad’s life. The year 666 became popular, thus identifying Muhammad with the Beast of Revelation. He was frequently referred to as the (or an) Antichrist; John calls him a forerunner of the Antichrist (Sahas 1972: 133). Nor was his name transliterated into European languages very accurately. In fact, several pejorative terms entered English usage derived from his name, including ‘mummery’ and ‘mawmet’, meaning superstition (John called Islam a ‘deceptive superstition’), and possibly ‘miscreet’ as well. Over time, Muḥammad was accused of practising black magic. An early and persistent idea was that his revelatory experiences were actually some type of seizure, such as epilepsy (referred to as ‘the falling sickness’), or were crazed delusions. In fact, during his own lifetime, Muhammad’s opponents called him a liar, mad, demon-possessed or bewitched, just as they accused him of acquiring what he knew from a Christian slave called Jabr, as possibly reflected in Q 68:1–3 and 16:103 (see Ibn Iṣḥāq 1955: 121, 130, 180). The Risālat al-Kindī, an anonymous diatribe against Muhammad and the Qurʾān attributed to a certain Christian named ‘Abd al-ʿAlī al-Kindī, written in Arabic probably in Baghdad in the early ninth century, did much to perpetuate the denial of Muhammad through translation into Latin in the thirteenth century and inclusion in the 1543 printed edition of the
first Latin rendering of the Qur’ān; the scholar William Muir produced an English abridgement in 1881. According to this, Muḥammad lacked any qualification to be considered, as Muslims claim, a ‘blessing and mercy to mankind’. His lack of miracles, of biblical attestation (Muslims frequently cite biblical verses that they say predict Muḥammad), use of the sword, immoral conduct, sexual excesses, assassination of critics and jumbled, contradictory message offer the world nothing of value. Muḥammad only offers sexual licence and a sensual paradise. The anonymous Christian author contrasts Jesus as Saviour with Muḥammad who cannot save, Jesus as peaceful with Muḥammad who is warlike, Jesus as predicted by the prophets of the Old Testament with Muḥammad who lacked any accreditation (51) and Jesus who performed miracles with Muḥammad whose own book denied that he could, although he cited stories of miracles, which he called ‘fabulous’ (121). Muḥammad’s denial that Jesus was crucified and that God is Triune leaves no room to see him as anything other than an opportunist and imposter (110). His goals were all self-serving, to achieve power and indulge his sexual appetite. A tradition much cited by Christians says that he could pleasure 40 women in a single night. The author hints at Satanic origins as well, something about which other Christian authors have been explicit. Given how prominently a sword-wielding Muḥammad features in this view, it should be noted that Muslims reject the contention that Muḥammad forced people to convert to his faith, although they do acknowledge that Muḥammad used the sword in self-defence. None of the incidents in Muḥammad’s life that Christians who deny him completely choose to censure are interpreted negatively by Muslim writers, including his multiple marriages. A recent text in this denial tradition, Unveiling Islam (2002), was written by the Caners, two Turkish brothers who describe themselves as former Muslims. On the one hand, their summary of the details of Muḥammad’s life in terms of chronology and events is well informed, but on the other, at every point they compare Muḥammad negatively with Jesus: thus, Jesus was perfect while Muḥammad sinned, Jesus taught forgiveness while Muḥammad taught revenge, Jesus was peaceful while Muḥammad ‘urged use of the sword’, Jesus intercedes for humans before God but Muḥammad is no advocate (245–6). Nor is Allāh the God that Christians worship (207). Muḥammad ‘oscillated between revelations from Satan and Allah’ (44). The Zayd-Zaynab affair and ’Ā’isha’s age when Muḥammad married her are highlighted as examples of Muḥammad’s immoral behaviour; thus his ‘life can be summed up in the words complexity, expediency, and depravity’ (63). In June 2002, having read this book, the former President of the Southern Baptist Convention, Jerry Vines, described Muḥammad as a ‘demon-possessed paedophile’. Repeated on radio by Jerry Falwell, who added that he thought that Muḥammad was a terrorist, this led to violent riots, the burning of churches and several deaths. Fierce as such words sound, deliberate insulting of Muḥammad by Christians has a long history. It dates at least back as far as the martyrs of Córdoba in the ninth century, who publically vilified Muḥammad, believing that this would hasten the apocalypse, for which they were executed. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century was unusual in suggesting that instead of killing Muslims, Christians might evangelise them, though contemporary members of his own order chose to insult Muḥammad outside the ruler’s palace in Seville, for which they were deported. They did the same in Morocco, for which they were imprisoned. They were moved from jail to jail, perhaps in the hope that this would silence them (an indication of Muslim forbearance), though in the end they too were executed (Daniel 1997: 144). Early Franciscan missionaries in India in 1321, asked by Muslims what they thought about Muḥammad, replied that he was keeping his father company in hell, where his followers would join him, for which they were beheaded (Kanjamala and Arles 2014: 264). It should be noted, though, that very negative comments about Muḥammad were often primarily intended for Christian consumption, to reassure them that their religion was superior to Islam. Often, even when encounter with Muslims was possible, Christians had little real contact with them. Those who lived at a distance tended to see the Muslim world as an actual or potential foe, a political or imperial rival, which obviously coloured what they wrote about him.
Limited positivity

Typically, this view of Muḥammad identifies certain aspects of his teaching or life that can be described as positive, while maintaining that Muslims are unredeemed. One midway position between total denial of Muḥammad and limited positivity sees God’s hand behind Muḥammad’s life but only as a punishment against Christian disunity. An early example of this has been attributed to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, Muḥammad’s contemporary, as recorded by Theophanes the Confessor in the early ninth century (cited by Ockley 1857: 91). One of the first scholarly biographies of Muḥammad in English that drew on early Islamic sources was the nineteenth-century scholar and missionary William Muir’s Life of Mahomet, which pioneered the reconstruction of the original order of the Qurʾān’s chapters as a context for the biography. His final estimate of Muḥammad was negative; like the more recent Caners, he depicts Muḥammad as struggling between Satanic and divine influence. However, he does portray the first phase of Muḥammad’s prophetic ministry until 622 in positive terms as a sincere search for truth. It was only later that his ambition and personal indulgence led him into conscious fraud and a ‘compromise with evil’ (vol. 2:90). For all this Muir could not but help admire aspects of Muḥammad’s life, such as his loyalty to friends, his simple, unpretentious lifestyle, his urbanity, kindliness of disposition and moderation, although Muir also remarks on his cruelty towards his enemies, his perfidy and his polygamous marriages (vol. 4, ch. 37).

Others who subscribe to partial affirmation list Islam’s strengths alongside its weaknesses, suggesting that the former can prepare the way for Christianity. William St-Clair Tisdall, a missionary in India and Iran who knew Muir, thought Christians too hasty in dismissing Muslim prayer as mechanical (1916: 42). He repeated many of the familiar criticisms levelled at Islam but argued that ‘no absolutely false system has ever prevailed among men’ (1912: 38–9), explaining that positive elements in any religion find ‘their completion, their fulfilment, their realization’ in Christian truth (227).

An important example of partial or limited affirmation is seen in the writings of the former missionary to Bangladesh Phil Parshall, a pioneer of the Messianic Muslim movement in which converts to Christianity remain culturally and socially Muslim. Unlike many of his fellow evangelicals, Parshall says that Muslims and Christians worship the same God (2002: 27), and rather than denying that Muslim spiritual and devotional practice has any value, he invites Christians to ‘equal or excel’ Muslims’ zeal in prayer (1985: 233). He thinks that where possible Christians should avoid language that Muslims find offensive or objectionable, including calling Jesus God’s Son because this has carnal connotations for them (1985: 201). He tends to endorse Muḥammad’s sincerity as a God-seeker, whose ultimate fate rests with God, not with Christian critics. Morally, Muḥammad falls short of Jesus but compares favourably with Old Testament prophets (260). Parshall does not say that Muslims as Muslims may stand in a right relationship with God, though neither does he say that everything to do with Islam has no value and must be repudiated or denied. Thus, some Islamic practices and forms can be adapted for Christian use, and Messianic or ‘Īsā-believing Muslims may continue to act outwardly as Muslims while believing in Jesus in their hearts. At least for Tisdall and Parshall, it seems that sustained exposure to Muslims did have an impact on their evaluations.

Towards a fuller affirmation of Muḥammad

Any Christians who wish to remain a Christian, especially in good standing with their church or communion, will encounter problems when attempting to go beyond the partially positive view of Muḥammad. Issues such as the doctrine of the Trinity, Jesus’ divine sonship, the Incarnation, the reality of human sin, the status of the Qurʾān and the integrity of the Bible all present serious
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Challenges. Christians have found it easier to see a biblical verse such as Matthew 24:24, on the coming of false prophets, as pointing to Muḥammad than they have to identify biblical affirmation for his claims. To affirm of Muḥammad exactly what Muslims do might also imply that one would view God and Jesus as they do as well.

Some writers who have shifted towards a Muslim view of Muḥammad have had issues with normative Christology, tending to affirm a Unitarian or Arian position. One of the first non-Muslims to write almost entirely positively about Muḥammad was the English author Henry Stubbe, who wrote *An account of the rise and progress of Mahometanism, and a vindication of Mahomet and his religion from the calumnies of the Christians* around 1674 (although it remained unpublished until the twentieth century). Stubbe did subscribe formally to the doctrines of the Church of England but thought the doctrine of the Trinity ridiculous. Transliterating Muḥammad’s name correctly, he castigated others for misspelling this and for reading all sorts of malignant notions into their versions (Matar 2014: 189). Dismissing calumny after calumny made by earlier Christians as unfounded and false, including that Muḥammad’s lineage was base and that he spread Islam by violence, he presented a pioneer account of Muḥammad’s life that closely followed Muslim sources. He saw Muḥammad as a wise legislator whom Christians had transformed into ‘the vilest imposter’ (192). Challenging the charge that Muḥammad suffered from epilepsy, he found nothing in accounts of Muḥammad’s inspiration or revelatory visions that justified this. They were probably rather ‘ecstasies’ similar to those experienced by ‘the old prophets’ and Paul. As late as 1851, the Orientalist Aloys Sprenger was arguing that at times Muḥammad was ‘a complete maniac’, suffering from ‘cataleptic insanity’ that produced hallucinations without loss of consciousness. This condition, *hysteria muscularis*, gave Muḥammad the propensity to lie and deceive (1851, vol. 1: 114–16; 1869, vol. 1: 208–10).

Stubbe’s position does not represent one that a Trinitarian Christian can easily adopt and may be closer to the humanist view of Edward Gibbon. In what he wrote on Muḥammad, Gibbon expressed admiration for a creed that was free from dogmas and priests (as he saw it) and that offered a straightforward, rational message that still motivated women and men. It had taken great courage for Muḥammad to achieve what he did, unifying a divided Arabia. Christians had distorted Jesus’ teachings, while Muslims maintain the purity and simplicity of Muḥammad’s. Gibbon dismissed as absurd the myth about Muḥammad’s tomb being suspended in mid-air in Mecca (1901, vol. 5: 244).

An important Christian re-evaluation of Muḥammad was offered by Tor Andrae in *Muḥammad: the man and his faith* (1936), in which he located Muḥammad’s revelatory episodes within a general framework of mystical experience, comparing him with shamans (59). Andrae accepted Muḥammad’s sincerity and the genuineness of his religious experience (62–4, 233), and unlike Muir he saw more continuity between the pre- and post-ḥijra phases of Muḥammad’s life. The latter period gave him the opportunity to put his political ideas into practice, but his aim was always spiritual as well as political, to set up a ‘religious community’ that was also political in character (186). Andrae did criticise certain actions of Muḥammad as moral lapses but also made an effort to understand why he acted as he did. For example, his alleged killing of a poet was because the vilifications circulated by this opponent posed a serious threat to Muḥammad’s esteem among his contemporaries, on which he heavily depended (207).

Notwithstanding the challenges and difficulties involved in offering positive statements about Muḥammad while retaining Christian integrity, perhaps the first ever attempt was offered at a very early date by the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (d. 823) in conversation with the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdī (d. 785). When on the second day of exchanges al-Mahdī asked him what he thought of Muḥammad, Timothy replied:
Muḥammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people, O my Sovereign. He walked in the path of the prophets, and trod in the track of the lovers of God. All the prophets taught the doctrine of one God, and since Muḥammad taught the doctrine of the unity of God, he walked, therefore, in the path of the prophets.

He took people ‘nearer to good works,’ opposed ‘idolatry’, taught ‘knowledge of one God’ and about ‘God, His Word and His Spirit’ (Mingana 1928: 16).

On the one hand, this statement leaves a lot of questions unanswered, including what exactly Timothy meant by Muḥammad walking in the path of the prophets (see Samir 2001 for a much less positive interpretation of these words of Timothy). The rest of the exchange makes it clear that he did not alter his stance on the Trinity, Jesus’ incarnation and death, or the lack of biblical attestation for Muḥammad, even though the caliph cited the allusions in John’s Gospel to the coming of the Paraclete as evidence of this (one of the earliest attestations to the identification by Muslims of the Paraclete as Muḥammad). Timothy may be close to Henry Stubbe and, more recently, to Kenneth Cragg in comparing Muḥammad to Hebrew prophets in terms of his God-inspired activities. Cragg tends to see Muḥammad’s articulation of the Qurʾān as similar to the utterances of a poet rather than as God’s direct speech, or indeed as similar to the speech of an Old Testament prophet (2000: 83). Even so, the Qurʾān may still represent divine communication. It is both a word from God and Muḥammad’s words, since ‘despite itself’ Islam ‘finds place for categories of relationship between divine ends and human means’ (1984: 65).

Attempting to articulate how a Christian might affirm Muḥammad in more positive terms, Bennett has argued that accepting paradox might be vital to any understanding of God’s nature. God, who is ultimately beyond any numerical value, is both One and Triune yet also neither of these. Thus, unity and Trinity may both be equally true about God’s nature (1998: 234), although neither may represent the whole truth. He suggests that God’s word might both become incarnate as a person, Christ, and as a book, the Qurʾān, regarding the ‘how’ of both to be a mystery, just as God’s nature is mysterious (1998: 236). Muḥammad’s life as a husband and a political and military leader may in fact be a supplement to the more purely spiritual guidance found in Jesus’ life and teachings. Thus, acting as what Hans Küng calls a ‘prophetic corrective’, Muḥammad reminds Christians that God, not ideas about God, must be at the centre of a life of faith and that ‘orthodoxy and orthopraxis belong together everywhere, including politics’ (1986: 129). As Andrae says, Muḥammad saw the spiritual and the social as inseparable. The goals of this world, as well as those of the next, are crucial. The struggle to feed the hungry, house the homeless, end war and uphold justice is as important as correct belief. Muḥammad’s passion for justice, equality and social solidarity, attested by the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, can be meaningful for Christians without compromising Jesus’ role as their definitive gauge ‘of any claim to represent the will of God’ (Bennett 1998: 235).

Conclusion

The usual challenge posed by Christians has been to choose either Muḥammad or Jesus. Perhaps this is too polarising, when both can arguably be seen as channels of divine guidance. There are Christians whose encounter with Muslims serves to confirm their negative ideas about Islam and Muḥammad. They may like individual Muslims, but they consider their religion as false and dangerous. For others, encounter leads to new reflection on how God makes Godself known to humanity and to alternative ways of making sense of who Muḥammad was. For many Christians, the claim that God spoke through Muḥammad is spurious because Jesus offers everything necessary for salvation. Yet many Christians believe that God still communicates with people
through the action of the Holy Spirit, which moves freely like the wind, inside and outside the visible church (John 3:8). They affirm that whatsoever is pure, lovely and of good report is worth considering (Colossians 4:17). They rejoice in truth wherever it is encountered (I Corinthians 13:6), and they are able to find this in Muḥammad’s life and example.

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Further reading

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