

Images of the Prophet Muhammad: Brief Thoughts on Some European-Islamic Encounters*

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Introduction

On February 7, 2015, a massacre took place in the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*. While the French satirical magazine mocks all politicians, races, and creeds with equal irreverence, in recent years it became best known for its series of raucous cartoons satirizing Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. During their attack, the gunmen who assassinated staff members at *Charlie Hebdo* exclaimed that they had avenged the Prophet, leading to widespread speculation that this horrific incident was intended to punish those who produce images insulting to the Prophet. And yet it remains unknown whether such images were indeed *the* major reason for the attack.

In the wake of the massacre that took place in the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, I was called upon as a scholar specializing in Islamic paintings of the Prophet to explain whether images of Muhammad are banned in Islam (Gruber, 2009; Gruber and Shalem, 2014).

Although admittedly curt and skirting nuances, the short and simple answer is no. The Qur'an does not prohibit figural imagery. Rather, it castigates the worship of idols, which are understood as concrete embodiments of the polytheistic beliefs that Islam supplanted when it emerged as a purely monotheistic faith in the Arabian Peninsula during the seventh century. Moreover, the *Hadith*, or Sayings of the Prophet, present us with an ambiguous picture at best: at turns we read of artists daring to breathe life into their figures and, at others, of pillows ornamented with figural imagery ('Isa, 1995; and Ghabin, 1998).

In addition, there does not exist a single expressively stated and universally accepted "ban" on images in Islamic legal texts. It is only in the year 2006 that a reactionary Saudi Sunni-Salafi *fatwa* against "blasphemous" caricatures was issued as a direct response to the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad.

* The present essay is a synthesis and expansion of three earlier articles published in Newsweek in response to the Charlie Hebdo attack (see <http://www.newsweek.com/user/16692>).

While this decree might be accepted and followed by some individuals of austere Sunni inclinations, other Muslims of more moderate or secular Sunni or Shi'i leanings do not consider figural representations of the Prophet necessarily problematic as long as Muhammad is depicted respectfully.

This essay thus aims to give a brief account of Islamic traditions of depicting the Prophet Muhammad, evidence of such images' legal standing within historical and contemporary Islamic jurisprudence, and contemporary pictorial images produced primarily in Iran during the aftermath of 2005 publication of satirical images of the Prophet in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (Klausen, 2009; Cohen, 2009). In so doing, I aim to interrogate dominant discourses on the prohibition of prophetic imagery, much as the contributors to this volume on the "Seen and Unseen" collectively agitate against a kind of "visual imperialism" that presupposes and hence fossilizes singular and immutable meanings for works of art and visual culture within global Islamic contexts.

Images of the Prophet in Islamic Traditions

While Islam has been described as a faith that is largely aniconic—i.e., that tends to avoid images—figural imagery has nevertheless been a staple of Islamic artistic expression, especially in secular, private contexts (and today, Muslim majority countries are saturated with images, dolls, and other representational arts). Indeed, a variety of Muslim patrons commissioned illustrated manuscripts replete with figural and animal imagery from the thirteenth century onward. Among them are images of animals, humans, and saintly figures.

Over the past seven centuries, a variety of historical and poetic texts largely produced in Turkish and Persian spheres—both Sunni and Shi'i—include depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. These many images praised and commemorated the Prophet. They also served as occasions and centerpieces for Muslim devotional practices, much like celebrations of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*) and visitations to his tomb in Medina.

As a result, the visual evidence clearly undermines the premise that images of Muhammad are strictly banned in Islamic law and practice, thereby providing us with a less ideologically divisive and more fact-based way to speak about a subject that has grown increasingly contentious ever since 2005.

Representations of the Prophet in Islamic traditions have varied over time, and they have catered to different needs and desires. During the fourteenth century, a number of Persian drawings and paintings depict Muhammad as an enthroned leader surmounted by angels and surrounded by his companions (Figure 2.1). These images show the Prophet as a human messenger



FIGURE 2.1
Black-ink sketch of the Prophet Muhammad enthroned, possibly Tabriz, 14th century CE. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung, Diez A, fol. 72, page 2, no. 2.

entrusted with divine revelation through the angelic figures that protect and accompany him.

At other times, medieval paintings depict Muhammad alongside other Abrahamic prophets, the latter represented in fourteenth-century universal histories and sixteenth-century illustrated copies of popular texts concerned with explaining the lives and tales of the prophets (*qisas al-anbiya'*) (Milstein, 1999). In some instances, Muhammad is accompanied by Jesus Christ, who is revered as the Prophet 'Isa in Islamic traditions.

In other narratives, especially those dedicated to narrating and illustrating the Prophet's heavenly ascension (*mi'raj*) from Mecca to Jerusalem and onward through the celestial spheres, Muhammad is depicted surrounded by the Abrahamic prophets as he sits in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Figure 2.2). In these medieval paintings, which were commissioned around 1317–35 by the Sunni Persian ruler Abu Sa'id, Muhammad is praised as the leader of his faith community, as the bearer of divine revelation, and as a messenger belonging to a long and respected line of monotheistic prophets (Gruber, 2010).

After 1500, a major shift in representations of the Prophet occurs in both Persian-Shi'i and Ottoman-Sunni lands. Muhammad's facial features become covered by a white veil while his body is engulfed by a large gold aureole, visual



FIGURE 2.2 *The Prophet Muhammad sits with other prophets in Jerusalem as he undergoes the “testing of the cups,” anonymous, Mi’rajnama (Book of Ascension), Tabriz, ca. 1317–30 CE. Topkapı Palace Library, Istanbul, H. 2154, folio 62r.*

devices that doubly stress his unseen, numinous qualities (Figure 2.3). While these more abstract depictions of the Prophet certainly show an emerging tendency to shy away from figural representation, they also praise the Prophet as a secret, unseen mystery. This metaphorical language, which was translated pictorially, is a hallmark of Sufi (mystical) traditions found in both Sunni and Shi’i spheres.

While images of the Prophet have waned since 1800, there nevertheless exist a number of modern and contemporary representations that reveal a rather unsteady, and thus not cohesive or uniform, approach to the production of Muhammad-centered imagery. While “blessed icons” of the Prophet made in Iran during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries show Muhammad in his full corporeal form and touched by God through the symbol of the golden halo



FIGURE 2.3

The Prophet Muhammad receives revelations at Mount Hira, al-Darir, Sīyer-i Nebi (The Prophet's Biography), Istanbul, 1003 AH/1595–96 CE. Topkapı Palace Library, Istanbul, H. 1222, folio 158v.



FIGURE 2.4

Blessed Icon of the Prophet Muhammad, Iran, 19th century, Imam Ali Museum of Religious Arts, Tehran, icon no. 11267.



FIGURE 2.5
State ID card of the Prophet
Muhammad, Istanbul, Turkey, 2014.
Card in author's collection.

(Figure 2.4), depictions in Sunni and especially Arab lands remain largely abstract and show a clear preference for textual representations describing his physical attributes. Known as *hilyas*, these aniconic icons have been printed in Turkey in the format of a state ID card in recent years (Figure 2.5).

The contemporary ID card of the Prophet highlights a number of issues that are of particular concern today. First, in 2015 these laminated *hilyas* were used as invitation cards for celebrations of the Prophet's birthday in Turkey. At exactly the same time, ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) suppressed all *mawlid* celebrations in Iraq ("ISIS Blocks," 2015), and recently a document has revealed that Saudi Arabia has discussed plans to exhume the Prophet's remains from his tomb in Medina, supposedly in order to prevent his worship (Spillett, 2014).

Taken altogether, these images, sites and celebrations have one thing in common: namely, a very contemporary urge to erase various forms of devotion to the Prophet within discourses emanating from conservative and Salafi spheres. Such discourses, which present themselves as representing a "true Islam," have been loudly disseminated in the public sphere. With increasing frequency, this type of rejectionary rhetoric also has penetrated and altered discussions

pertaining to the permissibility of depicting the Prophet Muhammad within and outside of Islamic traditions. As in other spheres of political life, an extreme position has incrementally moved to the center, thereby altering what is perceived as Islamic “normativity” within a global setting.

The So-Called “Ban” on Images of Muhammad

In the wake of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, a flurry of articles have explored whether images of the Prophet Muhammad are “banned” in Islam. While some Muslim voices are adamant that this is strictly the case in Islamic law, others (both Muslim and non-Muslim) have cautioned that it is not so.

Most public discussions of this so-called “ban” have explored verses in the Qur’an and *Sayings* by the Prophet, neither of which yields decisive results. What has been lost in the mix, however, is an exploration of the evidence found within Islamic law. Indeed, if one is to speak of a “ban,” then one must canvas a variety of Islamic jurisprudential sources in order to determine the legality or illegality of representing the Prophet in Islamic traditions. And if one carefully mines the sources, the results become much clearer—and much more nuanced and complex than one might anticipate (Touati, 2015).

There exist many handbooks of Islamic law that compile opinions on a number of matters. In regard to image making, the earliest and most synthetic source is the medieval law book of Ibn Qudama (died 1223), a towering Sunni theologian of the medieval period. In his handbook, Ibn Qudama discusses the various possible “abominations” that can occur at wedding ceremonies, including the playing of music and backgammon, the consumption of liquor, and the presence of images. As for the legality of images, he notes that the question is complicated because it depends on what the images depict and where they are situated. He thus concludes that images are not prohibited *per se*; rather, their legality depends on content and context (Cook, 2000, pp. 145–146).

A century later, the staunchly Sunni theologian Ibn Taymiyya (died 1328)—who exerted great influence on today’s ultraconservative Wahhabi and Salafi theological movements—penned a hefty number of legal opinions. In his collection of *fatwas*, Ibn Taymiyya warns that images should not be used as a way to get closer to God, to seek His intercession, or to request a favor from Him. He also notes that Muslim practices must be differentiated from Christian ones, the latter defined by the prolific presence and use of images in churches.¹

1 See his *fatwas* on “images” (*tamathil*) available online at: <http://moamlat.al-islam.com/Loader.aspx?pageid=522&Words=+%D8%AA%D9%8E%D9%85%D9%8E%D8%A7%D8%AB%D9%90%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8F&Level=exact&Type=phrase&SectionID=7>.

As a consequence, in even this most conservative collection of medieval *fatwas*, there does not exist a single expressly stated “ban” on images. The crux of the matter, rather, is that images of saints should not be used for requests and when seeking intercession, as is the case in Christian religious traditions. In addition, no mention whatsoever is made of images of the Prophet Muhammad.

Moving forward through the centuries, the next major summary of legal opinions about images can be found in an essay-long *fatwa* written by Muhammad ‘Abduh (died 1905), best known as the reformist chief jurist (*mufti*) of modern Egypt. In his treatise titled *Images and Representations: Their Benefits and The Opinions About Them* (ca. 1899–1905), Muhammad ‘Abduh argues that the safeguarding of images and paintings represents a preservation of Islamic cultural heritage and knowledge. In addition, he stresses that, if images are not used in idolatry, then portraying people, plants, and trees is not forbidden (Ramadan, 2013).

He goes even further, stating that: “None of the legal scholars (*‘ulama*) has ever opposed it. There is no opposition against the benefits of images in the abovementioned case.” With defiant gusto, he goes on to state that: “You cannot convince a jurist (*mufti*) that the image has been, in all cases, an object of idolatry!” He then concludes that Islamic law (*shari‘a*) is “far from calling one of the greatest means of knowledge illegitimate, once it is ensured that it is not a threat to religion in either belief or practice. Indeed, Muslims are not keen to forbid themselves from something with obvious benefit” (‘Abduh, 1344/1925, vol. 2, pp. 498–502).

In sum, during the second half of the nineteenth century, this reputed grand jurist proclaimed in no uncertain terms that images and paintings were both beneficial and educational.

Muhammad ‘Abduh’s exposé was likely composed as a response to the spread and multiplication of images via the newly emergent printing press in Egypt. By far and large, before the nineteenth century, images were not publicly available, since they were embedded in rare luxury manuscripts and therefore restricted to a very small elite. With the onset of the mass media, however, new anxieties arose around the production and consumption of images. For these reasons, new forms of control over prophetic representations began to emerge in the form of legal decrees.

Among them is a 1926 *fatwa* that was issued by the Sunni clerics at al-Azhar University in Cairo, which banned a film about Muhammad that was financed by the secular Turkish Republic. Fifty years later, the cinematographer Moustapha Akkad faced similar difficulties when he set out to film his biopic about Muhammad titled *The Message* (Bakker, 2006; El Khachab, 2011). Although he received permission to produce the movie from the Sunni clerics at Al-Azhar, the Muslim World League—which is funded by Saudi Arabia

and follows a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam—refused to approve the film even though Muhammad is never shown on screen (the movie is shot from the Prophet’s point of view). In the case of these two twentieth-century movies, Egyptian and Saudi Arabian Sunni clerical bodies dissented on the manner in which Muhammad can be portrayed in film. This disagreement evidently did not fall along Sunni-Shi’i sectarian lines.

Moving forward a couple decades, the legal landscape and the wrangling over images of Muhammad become much more muddled from the 1990s onward. While earlier debates on the subject can be found, it appears that the year 1997 was a watershed in this regard.

At this time, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) wrote to Chief Justice William Rehnquist to request that the sculpted representation of the Prophet Muhammad in the north frieze inside the Supreme Court of the United States be removed or sanded down (Figure 2.6) (Bjelajac, 2014). Included among the great lawgivers of history and standing between Justinian and Charlemagne, the turbaned Muhammad is shown holding the Qur’an—and a sword—a symbol of justice within the Supreme Court’s pictorial program.



FIGURE 2.6

The Prophet Muhammad holding the Qur’an and a sword while standing between Charlemagne (left: holding the globe of Christendom) and Justinian (right: holding the “Corpus Juris Civilis,” or body of civil laws). Great Lawgivers of the Middle Ages, north wall frieze (designed by Adolph Weinman), Supreme Court of the United States, Washington, D.C., 1931–32.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES.

Around the time that Rehnquist rejected CAIR's request (as physical injury to an architectural feature in the Supreme Court building is unlawful), a *fatwa* on the matter was issued in 2000 by Taha Jaber al-Alwani, who at the time served as a professor of jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia and as the chairman of the Islamic Jurisprudence Council of North America. With his *bona fides* firmly established, al-Alwani sets out to argue through traditional forms of Islamic legal argumentation that, first, there exist no firm prohibitions on images in Islam and, second, that the depiction of Muhammad in the Supreme Court is nothing but praiseworthy. He thus arrives at the following conclusion:

What I have seen in the Supreme Courtroom deserves nothing but appreciation and gratitude from American Muslims. This is a positive gesture toward Islam made by the architect and other architectural decision-makers of the highest Court in America. God willing, it will help ameliorate some of the unfortunate misinformation that has surrounded Islam and Muslims in this country.

AL-ALWANI, 2000–2001, PP. 27–28

Put simply, in the year 2000 one of the highest-ranking legal scholars who was then based in Saudi Arabia and also served as the chairman of the principal council on Islamic law in America judged a sculptural representation of Muhammad in the nation's capital both permissible and laudable.

But then 9/11, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and the Danish cartoons of 2005 happened. The derogatory *Jyllands-Posten* caricatures of Muhammad became enmeshed in the complex geopolitics, the shifting European demographic landscape, and the Middle Eastern wars of the post-9/11 period. Understood as an attack and an affront to the Islamic faith, these cartoons were denounced by Saudi imams as sacrilegious in 2006 (“Imaams Denounce”). It is at this very moment that we suddenly see the more precise statement that “Islam considers images of prophets disrespectful and caricatures of them blasphemous” (“Imaams Denounce”). Along with this brand new legal proclamation, Saudi companies and organizations launched a boycott against Danish goods, including medicine, dairy products, and Lego toys. Flexing its monetary muscles to the tune of billions of dollars, Saudi Arabia's counterblow resulted in hefty financial losses for Denmark. Thus, this relatively recent Saudi *fatwa* against images of Muhammad also shows how loudly money talks.

Since 2005, Islamic law has evolved with contemporary circumstances and further *fatwas* against images of Muhammad have emerged. A number of these are easily accessible because they are available online as electronic *fatwas* (or *e-fatwas*). Two representative examples reveal that the legality or illegality of

representing Muhammad remains an unresolved and ever-evolving issue within the Islamic world.

For instance, the Salafi position remains utterly uncompromising: images of the Prophet and his companions are not permissible whatsoever.² On the other hand, Ayatollah al-Sistani, the supreme Shi'i legal authority in Iraq, opines that representations of the Prophet are acceptable as long as they show due deference (*ta'zim*) and respect (*tabjil*).³

It thus should come as no surprise that today reverential depictions of the Prophet can be found in Shi'i-majority areas, especially Iraq, Iran and Lebanon (Figure 2.7). Indeed, there exists a lively market for these kinds of devotional pictures, objects, and even rugs, which are purchased by many Muslims who do not tread the Salafi line.



FIGURE 2.7

The Prophet Muhammad holding the Qur'an, which emits flickers of radiant light, as he points his index finger to the proclamation of the faith (shahada), reading: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger," postcard, Tehran, Iran, 2001.

POSTCARD IN AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

- 2 See Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid's ruling on art and acting, which includes a discussion of filmic depictions of the prophets (<http://islamqa.info/en/158232>).
- 3 See al-Sistani's ruling on the subject at <http://www.sistani.org/english/qa/01282/> (English) and <http://www.sistani.org/arabic/qa/0384/> (Arabic).

In these latest disagreements between Sunni-Salafi and Shi'i scholars of Islamic law, it is easy to see how some might argue that the divergence in legal opinion falls along the sectarian divide. While this certainly rings true today, this was not the case before the Danish cartoons of 2005.

Indeed, in the year 2000, the Sunni legal scholar al-Alwani praised and expressed gratitude for the depiction of Muhammad in the Supreme Court while, during the twentieth century, Sunni legal bodies disagreed with one another as they turned to tackling the emergence of public images of Muhammad precipitated by the printing press and the motion picture industry.

Before then and stretching back to the twelfth century, scholars of Islamic law, among them famous Sunni luminaries, did not expressly forbid images, including representations of Muhammad. So the notion of a long-standing and immutable Islamic "ban" on images of the Prophet is nothing if not a contemporary innovation, catalyzed by the mass media, accelerated by insulting cartoons, and propelled throughout the world via the seismic influence of Saudi petrodollars.

Visually Reclaiming the Prophet in Today's Iran

An Iranian film about the Prophet Muhammad had its debut in the immediate aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. Directed by Majid Majidi and entitled *Muhammad: The Messenger of God*, the 2015 biopic's cost exceeded \$30 million, making it the most expensive Iranian movie shot to date. Well before its release, the film was the subject of criticism due to the physical presence of Muhammad on screen. Although the Prophet's facial features are camouflaged through light and shade strategies, the Sunni clerics at al-Azhar in Cairo nevertheless attempted to halt its release so that "an undistorted image of the Prophet can be preserved in the minds of Muslims" (Dehgan, 2015).

This latest disagreement over filmic portrayals of Muhammad reveals ongoing anxieties regarding visual representations of the Prophet in the Islamic world. However, such divergences do not appear to be based on a sectarian reading of the Prophet's biography, as the movie covers Muhammad's childhood until the age of twelve. Sunni and Shi'i debates over the life of the Prophet tend to revolve around the events of his adulthood, especially whether he appointed 'Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, as his rightful successor. As Majidi himself has noted, the film purposefully skirts these sectarian debates over the life of the Prophet in order to present a positive and united presentation of Muhammad to international movie audiences.

This new Muhammad film does not emerge out of thin air. In addition to earlier movies (like Akkad's *The Message*) and others still in the making (by

Qatar), Majidi's large-scale project is part of a larger effort to visually reclaim the Prophet and his legacy in Iran that has been under way since the Danish cartoons of 2005 (Child, 2013). While reactions to the cartoons in some Arab, Sunni, and especially Salafi quarters included the issuing of decrees stipulating that "images of prophets are disrespectful and caricatures of them blasphemous," a vastly different response has unfolded within Iran over the past decade. Instead, Iran has launched a number of artistic, educational, and public relations projects since 2006, itself dubbed by Ayatollah Khamenei "The Year of the Noble Prophet."⁴ As a result, celebratory depictions of the Prophet have emerged in full force, with Majidi's film the latest outcome of these officially sanctioned endeavors (Gruber, 2016).

Among them, one of the most visible Iranian responses to the Danish cartoons is a colorful mural depicting Muhammad's celestial ascension, which was painted in 2008 on a five-story building located on a major thoroughfare in central Tehran (Figure 2.8) (Gruber, 2013). Sponsored by Tehran's municipality, the mural beautifies the capital city's urban space much like the vibrant and sometime surreal compositions by Iranian artist Mehdi Ghadyanloo. Notably



FIGURE 2.8 *Five-story mural depicting the Prophet Muhammad's celestial ascension, Tehran, Iran, 2008.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR.

4 See Ayatollah Khamenei's New Year (2006) speech at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=208>.

missing here are portraits of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, as well as Palestinian and Iranian martyrs. In their stead appears a pictorial eulogy of the Prophet based on several paintings included in a fifteenth-century Turco-Persian manuscript illustrating Muhammad's night journey and ascension (Séguy, 1977). While the original illustration shows Muhammad's facial features, the contemporary mural renders his face as if a blank slate. This erasure of the Prophet's facial features most likely is because the image appears in the public domain instead of tucked inside a private manuscript. It also partially results from the more reactionary Muslim responses to images of Muhammad in the wake of the Danish cartoon controversy.

Besides this large-scale mural, a number of other Prophet-centered products have been made for the Iranian market since 2006. Targeting a juvenile audience in particular, a series of illustrated books written in simple prose and verse aims to teach children about Muhammad's life and miracles. These books include images of the Prophet, who often is depicted with a veiled face and solar halo, as can be seen in one image in which he is shown extending his arms to receive revelations at Mount Hira (Figure 2.9). The text that accompanies the colorful illustration informs its young readers that Muhammad was like the summer sun and the full moon, emitting both light and enlightenment into the world.



FIGURE 2.9

The Prophet Muhammad receives revelations on Mount Hira, children's book entitled "Greetings, Rose of Muhammad," Tehran, 2006.

IMAGE SCANNED FROM THE CHILDREN'S BOOK IN AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

Just like these Iranian children's books, Majidi's film takes up the question of childhood. The film's major scenes reiterate some of the more famous episodes of the Prophet's youth, including his highly auspicious birth and his being recognized as a prophet by the Christian monk Bahira. Visually depicting these pivotal moments of Muhammad's early life is by no means a new phenomenon in Persian lands. Indeed, from 1300 onward a number of manuscript paintings represent Muhammad's birth as a luminous, angelic event (Gruber, 2009). The texts that buttress these images inform us that, when he was born, Muhammad illuminated the entire world with his cosmic radiance, which rose upward to set the heavens and stars alight.

Persian illustrated histories and biographies also depict Muhammad's foretelling as a prophet at the tender age of twelve, when he visited the city of Busra in Syria. It is at this time that the Christian monk Bahira recognized the signs of the young boy's future prophethood through a series of natural phenomena (such as the bending of a tree's branches and/or a cloud providing him with shade) as well as the "seal of prophecy" mark imprinted on Muhammad's body (Figure 2.10) (Talbot Rice, 1976, 66, cat. no. 30). The latter episode belongs to a corpus of Islamic narratives that relate that the Prophet was announced and foretold as a prophet by a Christian holy man, who had read about his coming in the Bible.

The story of the young Muhammad's "seal of prophecy" remains a popular tale across Islamic lands until today. Over the course of the twentieth century, a number of mass-produced images of the young Muhammad—composed in a wide array of creative variants—were made in Iran. These appeared in



FIGURE 2.10 *The Christian monk Bahira recognizes the young Muhammad as a prophet, Rashid al-Din, Jami' al-Tawarikh (Compendium of Chronicles), Tabriz, 714 AH/1314–15 CE. University of Edinburgh Main Library, Special Collections Or. Ms. 20, folio 43v.*

banners, posters, postcards, carpets, and stickers until their production was curtailed in 2008. While the recent Iranian shunning of these images is in response to the Danish cartoon controversy, it also emanates from the discovery of its original pictorial source: an early twentieth-century Orientalist photograph of a young and rather effeminate Arab boy (Grabar and Natif, 2003; Centlivres-Demont, 2005).

Not shying away from depicting this pivotal moment in the Prophet's youth, Majidi in his biopic shows the young Muhammad arriving at Bahira's monastery (Figure 2.11). In this film still, the adolescent protagonist walks down the main aisle of a church as a burst of sunlight streams in from the open doors. This radiance symbolic of Muhammad's future prophecy floods into the interior space and overwhelms his facial features. This carefully designed visual strategy allows the Prophet to be both seen and unseen—represented and unrepresented—all at once.

These paintings, murals, children's books, and films about the Prophet that have been made in Iran since 2006 are illuminating in several ways. First, they show that traditions of representing Muhammad are still well and alive in some areas of the Muslim world. These still and moving images aim to commemorate the Prophet, present his status and legacy in a positive light, and teach a variety of audiences about his life and miracles.



FIGURE 2.11 *The young Muhammad enters a monastery, where he is recognized as a prophet by the Christian monk Bahira, film still, Majid Majidi, Muhammad Rasul Allah (Muhammad, the Messenger of God), Iran, 2015.*
IMAGE FROM: [HTTP://WWW.IFILMTV.COM/DEFAULT/DETAILS/222713](http://www.ifilmtv.com/default/details/222713).

Unlike in Sunni-Salafi spheres, in which recent responses to the Danish and *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons have largely comprised a flurry of obdurate injunctions, the response in Iran has been markedly different. Rather than shying away from or banning images of the Prophet, Iranian leaders, artists, and filmmakers have harnessed the creative arts to recover and restore the image of Muhammad in the public domain.

Such images serve as powerful reminders that there is no universally accepted “ban” on the figural arts in Islam and that traditions of prophetic representation still continue to flourish in Iran today. Above all, they highlight the fact that in Islamic lands there exist two diametrically opposed reactions to defamatory European cartoons: while some actors engage in censorship and suppression, others actively seek the promulgation of the Prophet Muhammad by reasserting the positive power of picture-making.

Conclusion

In sum, when one ignores (or suppresses) historical evidence and speaks of a “ban” of images of the Prophet in Islam, the negative repercussions are many. First, all doors to constructive dialogue on the topic are closed *a priori*, thus precluding a nuanced and apolitical discussion of historical Islamic images freed from the polarizing ideological narratives of today. In addition, such images effectively become further endangered as a form of artistic heritage if merely speaking of and illustrating them is seen as a subversive, rather than a productive and reconstructive, act. It is therefore now more than ever that concerned individuals—scholars, students, and the public at large—must labor to preserve the rich and textured pictorial traditions of Islam, which constitute a major contribution to our shared global artistic patrimony.

Last but not least, it is important to keep in mind that representations of Islam stemming from both Euro-American and Middle Eastern lands have been subjected to a variety of assumptions and simplifications. Over the centuries, Euro-American discourses have been all too keen to focus on Islam’s “differential” character—that is, what makes it putatively “other.” Within such a framework, an overemphasis on the notion that images of Muhammad do not exist or are banned strengthens age-old Oriental discourses, which have tended to couch Islamic civilizations as devoid of or actively adverse to images. As for their part, contemporary Salafi narratives about the same topic meet at exactly the same juncture, the latter presumption reinforcing the former, and vice versa. What gets lost in this loudly mediatized Oriental-Salafi echo chamber, however, is the creativity of Islamic cultures and arts, which over the

centuries have proved remarkably diversiform as well as embracing of devotional representations of the Prophet Muhammad in various times and places.

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