

The Enlightenment Qur'an

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*The Politics of Translation and the
Construction of Islam*

ZIAD ELMARSAFY



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*For the new family members and
those who brought them in*

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PREFACE

Translation is the most political art, all the more so when it involves re-presenting a text held sacred by those with whom relations are not always friendly. The forms of information and varieties of scholarship necessary for the translation of the Qur'ān into Western languages – a text not only sacred but considered by believing Muslims to be so powerful as to reduce its opponents to impotence – are driven by the complex ties that bind the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. They are also shaped by politics of the sacred within the West itself. The following pages will trace the ways in which the trans-lation, the carrying over, of the language of the Qur'ān is negotiated by translators and readers across cultural differences, both between the Middle East and Europe and within Europe.

This study's focus on the long eighteenth century is deliberate, not only because past studies on the translation of the Qur'ān have dealt with other ages, but also because the Enlightenment holds a privileged position in the making of modernity writ large, seeing the consolidation of the values and institutions that run the contemporary world. This is when the vast projects of rationalization that started during the past two centuries finally come together. Between the Newtonian revolution in the sciences, the Lockean revolution in philosophy, the *Encyclopédie* project, Rousseau's revolution in both fiction and political science, and Voltaire's many revolutions in just about every area of human inquiry, the movement known as the Enlightenment made a decisive impact on the creation of the modern world. The consequences of all this activity, culminating in the American and French revolutions, Napoleon and the invasion of Egypt, are still with us today. In more than a banal, historical sense, the modern world is the product of the Enlightenment.

The eighteenth century saw the constitution of disciplines that organize the process of cultural exchange into the precursors of the modern social sciences – anthropology, sociology, psychology, and modern political philosophy. These discourses of observation and

discovery center on the question of understanding the Other. All those cultural differences that threaten Europe – the “primitive” world, the violence of the “savages,” the mores of non-European societies, the difference of physical characteristics, and systems of belief – are confronted and rationalized during the Enlightenment.

Among these other cultures, Islam is the one with which Europe was most familiar, though this familiarity did not necessarily lead to better understanding. It would be a mistake to claim that the rapport was defined by conflict alone: the many faces of Islam that appear in the literature of early modernity bear witness both to European fascination and bewilderment. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the travel accounts of early modernity, where cultural differences often prompt emulation and altered self-definition rather than outright violence.¹ The literature of the period involves a constant re-evaluation of the boundaries between European and Muslim identity, with medieval opposition frequently giving way to identification between non-Muslims and Muslims.² This identification is increasingly focused on Muhammad himself, who starts to be seen as a great man and a wise legislator rather than the wicked voluptuary of medieval legend. Islam’s manifestations speak simultaneously to one or another of the nascent forms of knowledge and the underlying mixture of curiosity and anxiety that coaxes the Western observer on. At the same time, many in Christian Europe were impressed by the example of inter-religious tolerance set by the Ottoman Empire. The awed and frequently puzzled gaze that the West brought to the Muslim world wrought serious changes in the gazers themselves, often to the point of defining their lives and careers: for better or worse, Montesquieu is still thought of as the author of the *Lettres persanes*, and Voltaire the student of religion is inseparable from the author of *Mahomet*. While these might be dismissed as accidents of reception, what is beyond doubt is the lasting mark left by the engagement with Islam and its central text, the Qur’ān. Furthermore, the turn to the Qur’ān comes at times and places that look, in retrospect, like turning points: Rousseau’s construction of the legislator and the social contract, Voltaire’s denunciations of fanaticism and nascent anti-clericalism, young Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt, the young Goethe’s oscillation between poetry and prophecy as literary paradigms, and the older Goethe’s theorization of world literature. In all of these cases, the engagement with Islam enables a radical break with past traditions and the conception of something entirely new: a

legislator who owes nothing to traditional contract theory (Rousseau), a view of universal history that goes well beyond the received idea of God's plan unfolding in human affairs, and in doing so inaugurates a new vision of modernity (Voltaire), a vision of a secular republic expanding outside Europe and into the Middle East and North Africa (Napoleon), a model of global literary production based on translation rather than creation (Goethe).

Of the developments that brought about these shifts of perspective, the new translations of the Qur'ān that were being produced in Europe after the mid-seventeenth century must take pride of place. André Du Ryer's pioneering effort in 1647 resulted in the first published translation from the Arabic into a vernacular language since the Middle Ages. Over the next 150 years, Ludovico Marracci, George Sale, and Claude Savary would translate the Qur'ān into Latin, English, and French respectively, adding a sizeable scholarly apparatus to the text: an introduction to Islam, cross-references to the available commentaries, and a very real effort to come to terms with Islam. This struggle gave rise to vastly different results – outright hostility in the case of Marracci (though the hostility was coupled with amazing erudition and excellent scholarship), something very much like genuine understanding in the case of Sale, and romantic mythology in the case of Savary. Perhaps because of its diffusion in whole and in part – the long “Preliminary Discourse” that served as an introduction to the Sale translation was quickly translated into French and added to the text of the Du Ryer translation – George Sale's translation was to exert the greatest influence on Europe's intellectual history, especially through the mediation of one of Sale's most intelligent readers, Voltaire. Savary's translation would prove influential in a far more dramatic manner: it seems to have been part of Napoleon Bonaparte's reading, along with a number of histories of the Orient. Were it not for Savary (among others), the invasion of Egypt might have followed a vastly different course. And were it not for all of the above (or at least Rousseau, Voltaire, and Napoleon), Goethe's – and consequently our – ideas about literature would have taken on a markedly different inflection.

In this study my aim is to look at these translations and their impact. I do not propose to write a detailed history of the production and dissemination of these texts – though these details certainly come into play – but rather to provide the reader with a series of snapshots of the

dynamic interaction between Enlightenment Europe and the Muslim world. These snapshots take an in-depth view of the moments outlined above – the astonishing Sale translation, Rousseau's theory of the legislator, Voltaire's conception of the engaged intellectual, Napoleon's imperial gaze, and Goethe's hesitation between the poetic and the prophetic – in relation to the translation of the Qur'ān and the surrounding discourse on the Orient in which it is couched.

As will be seen, the politics of the translation of the Qur'ān reveal a great deal about the intellectual politics of the Enlightenment itself and the very long shadow that it casts over our own day and age. Whereas solid information about the Muslim world was available to Europe, its uneven penetration in various societies underlines the extent to which Westerners and Western intellectuals often choose to believe what they want to believe about Islam, rather than believing what the evidence suggests that they believe. Then as now, the Western world seems extremely reluctant to let go of the intellectual hooks by which its view of Islam is suspended. It is to be hoped that, by studying the period during which some of those cherished misconceptions were released, we can bring about a better understanding of the Muslim–Western dynamic today and save ourselves from the inexorable march toward a Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations.”

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1

TRANSLATORS AND TRANSLATIONS OF THE QUR'ĀN

At first glance the most striking aspect of the translation of the Qur'ān into Western languages is that it exists at all. At second glance, the extant translations amaze by their quantity and the tendency many of them exhibit toward polemic and mythmaking. They bear witness simultaneously to a history of conflict – not only with Islam but within Christendom – as well as a secret attraction across the boundary between cultures and religions.

Perhaps inevitably, the earliest serious attempt at translating the Qur'ān was conceived at a key geographic and cultural interface between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds; namely the Iberian peninsula. In 1142 Peter the Venerable, the hyperactive Abbot of Cluny, was invited to Spain by Emperor Alfonso VII in order to discuss certain financial and diplomatic matters.¹ Like the rest of Christendom, Peter's view of Islam was marked by the recent memory of the First Crusade, though he was exceptional in not being happy with the direction of the movement that increasingly saw war as an end in itself. Peter wanted to convert Muslims rather than exterminate them, and one means of doing so would be to study Islam the better to be able to refute it. Along with the trope of substituting words for weapons, this was to become a standard part of Christian anti-Muslim polemical and apologetic literature. While in Spain, he commissioned a translation of the Qur'ān and a number of auxiliary texts aimed at providing the reader with a solid source of information about Islamic history and Muslim doctrine. The Toledan Collection, as the result came to be known, was a group effort: Robert of Ketton translated both the Qur'ān and a compilation of Muslim traditions entitled *Fabulae*

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saracenorum (*Fables of the Saracens*); Herman of Dalmatia translated Sa'īd b. 'Umar's *Kitāb nasab Rasūl Allāh* (*Book of the Genealogy of the Messenger of God*) as the *Liber generationis Mahumet et nutritura eius* and 'Abdallāh b. Salām's *Masā'il* (*Questions*) as *Doctrina Mahumet*, while Peter of Toledo and Peter of Poitiers co-translated an early Arabic Christian apology, the *Risālat 'Abdallāh b. Ismā'il al-Hāshimī ilā 'Abd al-Masīh b. Ishāq al-Kindī wa risālat al-Kindī ilā l-Hāshimī* ('*Abdallāh b. Ismā'il al-Hāshimī's Letter to 'Abd al-Masīh b. Ishāq al-Kindī and al-Kindī's Reply*).² The whole was accompanied by Peter the Venerable's summary, the *Summa totius haeresis saracenorum* (*Sum of All the Heresies of the Saracens*).

Robert of Ketton called his translation the *Lex saracenorum*, thereby setting another lasting trend that would be imitated by future translators. The idea of the Qur'ān as a source text of Muslim law, rather than the text that fulfills both doctrinal and liturgical functions, would hamper Western translators for centuries (though certainly not in the eyes of the translators), as would the sacred status of the language of the Qur'ān. Robert tried to produce a Latin translation marked by the elevated style associated with sacred rather than profane texts, frequently inserting material taken from exegetical commentaries on the Qur'ān into the text itself, with the result that his translation comes across as a well-informed paraphrase rather than an accurate rendition of the original.³ One place where this is especially evident is in Robert of Ketton's "arrangement" of the Qur'ānic text, whereby the divisions between the various chapters ("Azoaras") correspond only occasionally to the divisions between sūras (mainly after Q10), and at other times follow the divisions between the *ahzāb* (sixtieths), leading to a translation of the Qur'ān that contains 124 "chapters" instead of the canonical 114.⁴ The titles of the "chapters" usually followed the Arabic name of the sūra in question accompanied in some copies by hostile rubrics emphasizing the falsity and incoherence of what was to follow. Later marginal annotations added to the polemical tone, thereby making it impossible to read Robert's translation (which, as Thomas Burman points out, is itself fairly restrained) without being as shocked as a Christian should be by the ostensibly heretical character of the Qur'ān. The coexistence on the same page of philological interest in the Arabic language and the obsessive concern with the safety of the Christian reader is probably one reason why, despite the liberties that Robert of Ketton took with the text, it was a lasting success, finding a place in numerous European libraries and serving as the

basis for numerous future Western translations of the Qur'ān. Around 1210, Mark of Toledo started work on a more literal translation for the Archbishop of Toledo, Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, giving his finished manuscript the title *Liber Alchorani* and adding a preface to make clear his hostile and polemical credentials. Despite the greater accuracy of Mark's version, or at least its greater similarity with the syntax of the original, the Toledan Collection's user-friendliness, aided and abetted by the Cluniac network, ensured its wider distribution and longevity. Its arrangement – framing the Qur'ān with abundant material and numerous polemical annotations while paying careful attention to the exegetical and philological dimension of the work – established a paradigm that would be followed for centuries.⁵

One key shift in the practice of the translation of the Qur'ān came about with the introduction of bilingual translations in the fifteenth century. In 1480–1481 Flavius Mithridates, a Jewish convert to Christianity who would later teach the Kabbalah to Pico della Mirandola, translated Q21 and Q22 into Latin with the Arabic on facing pages. His translation left much to be desired, but it was not without consequence. Soon thereafter Egidio da Viterbo followed the example of Peter the Venerable: having been named cardinal in 1517, he was sent to Spain as a papal legate and there commissioned a translation by a Spaniard, Iohannes Gabriel Terrolensis. The result is a translation that, like the Complutensian Polyglot Bible, seems designed for the student of the language of the Qur'ān and the culture of Islam rather than one interested mainly in anti-Muslim polemics. The translation was designed to occupy four columns: the Arabic text, its transliteration into Latin, the Latin translation, and notes on the translation, thereby allowing the reader quick and easy access to each part of the text. Unlike Robert of Ketton's translation, there is a deliberate and visible separation of text from commentary in Egidio's edition, a practice that would become increasingly evident in future translations. Remarkably, the notes attach far less weight to polemic than they do to philology – something that Marracci's bilingual translation would fail to do. Despite its quality, however, Egidio's edition did not circulate as widely as the Toledan Collection.

The Toledan Collection was printed in 1543 with numerous revisions by Theodor Bibliander (né Buchmann), a successor of Zwingli's at Basel, as part of a multi-volume reference work under the title *Machumetis Sarracenorum principis vita ac doctrina omnis ...*

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(*The Life and Teachings of Machumet, Prince of the Saracens*).⁶ The publication itself proved controversial: Bibliander's printer, Johann Oporinus (né Herbst), followed the usual practice of failing to inform the municipal authorities that he was about to publish the Qur'ān in order to speed up the process. He was denounced while the printing was well underway, and ordered to stop during the ensuing debate among the authorities on the suitability of his enterprise. Oporinus ignored the order again and was imprisoned for several days while his proofs were confiscated. Finally, he was then released on condition that he not contact anyone until a final decision was made, but by this point word had reached Bibliander and, through him, Protestant authorities elsewhere, leading to the interventions of Luther and Melancthon. The fact that multiple parties intervened and numerous (sometimes contradictory) opinions were voiced bears witness to the degree of public interest in the Qur'ān.

The case against printing the Qur'ān relied on arguments forged during the long medieval tradition of anti-Muslim polemic. Under the leadership of Sebastian Münster, a former teacher of Bibliander who held the chair of Hebrew at Basel, the argument centered on the claim that there was nothing in the Qur'ān worth reading. Scholars and specialists may need access to the Qur'ān, but certainly not the general public. The Qur'ān was blasphemous and the public had to be protected. The opposite case was argued under the leadership of Oswald Myconius, another former teacher of Bibliander who had by then become the preacher of Basel and professor of New Testament exegesis. The Qur'ān did indeed contain much that was dangerous, but it was precisely in order to alert the public to its dangers that it had to be printed. In view of the continuing threat of Ottoman military incursions into central Europe and subsequent conversions to Islam, it was a matter of great importance that the Qur'ān be disseminated in order to inform the public about the true character of Islam. Finally, publishing this text in Basel would contribute to its prestige as a progressive center of liberal and tolerant thinking. Although the risk of anyone being converted by a mere reading of a book as difficult as the Qur'ān was small, the proponents of the printing advised adding some material to the publication to guide the reader through it theologically.

It was, in fact, after the addition of large quantities of such theological "guidance" (read: anti-Muslim polemic) that the Toledan Collection was finally published. Not only were there apologies by

Bibliander and Melanchthon, but a prefatory letter by Luther as well (though this was not added to all editions). Far from being prompted by any inclination toward Islam on Luther's part, this letter marks the culmination of a long series of works in which Luther tried to learn as much as he could about Islam as a way of fighting the Turks, the Pope, and heterodoxy within the church.⁷ "Know your enemy" might stand as a useful summary of Luther's perspective on the necessity of translating the Qur'ān.⁸ Bibliander's apology is equally forthright in its denunciation not only of Islam, but also of his own Christian enemies, not least among them being the Catholics and Anabaptists. Indeed, Bibliander argues, the latter are a case in point of what happens to a Christian society that is ignorant of its own traditions and consequently falls victim to pseudoprophecy. Bibliander's aim, in other words, was to show where true heresy was located.

Bibliander's edition contains a light re-working of Robert of Ketton's translation—his modest command of Arabic did not allow him to do much more than that. Bibliander's annotations, however, were copious, some bearing on the variants between the manuscripts that he used, some commenting on linguistic aspects of Robert of Ketton's translation – some even giving the Arabic original of a given word in Hebrew transcription, thereby attesting to the widespread importance of Semitic philology as a point of access to the study of Arabic and the Qur'ān at this point in time – and marginal comments, usually expressing dismay or contempt at what he takes to be the Qur'ān's contradictions and lies. Bibliander does not fail to add a significant number of notes on parallels between the Qur'ān and the Bible, usually ones bearing on a topic or story common to both. This particular use of textual points of contact as an exercise in comparative religious studies would become a regular feature of translations of the Qur'ān during the following two centuries. Although he consulted Arabic manuscripts of the Qur'ān, Bibliander did not consult any exegetical material at first hand. The three volumes of Bibliander's *magnum opus* are divided by function: first the sources, then the refutations, and, finally, history. The Toledan Collection takes up the first volume. The second contains polemical material, much of which was written after the twelfth century, including works by Riccoldo da Monte Croce, Juan Luis Vives, Savonarola, and Nicholas of Cusa. The inclusion of the latter's *Cribratio Alcorani* is a significant addition that demonstrates Bibliander's (and the reader's) interest in approaches to Islam that attempted to harmonize it with Christianity, albeit through

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a mystical lens, as well as the heuristic importance for Renaissance readers of parallels between the Qur'ān and the gospels.⁹ The third volume contains several works on the history and political order of the Ottoman Empire by Luther, Giovio, and Pope Pius II, among others.¹⁰ Thus the reader, according to his or her patience and attention span, is led from the origins of Islam to the politically strained relations between Islam and Christendom at the time.

Despite its questionable quality, the significance of this publication lies in the fact that it is the first published translation of the Qur'ān, as well as the fact that the Qur'ān has now become an integral part of polemics *within* Christianity as opposed to being used to address Christian–Muslim polemic. The pattern whereby a given theological opponent is accused of either being a Muslim or of being an ally of the Muslims acquires an additional dimension with the publication of the Qur'ān, so that Bibliander's "Protestant" project would soon be censored and banned by various Catholic authorities.¹¹ Arguments very similar to Bibliander's would be advanced during the second half of the seventeenth century in England, and again, Islam would prove "good to think with" in these polemics; a tool that would enable both traditionalists and radicals better to define their positions.

Two curious instances of this use of Islam within Christian polemic would come about in the same year.¹² Johann Albrecht von Widmanstetter published a summary of Robert of Ketton's translation joined with a polemical dialogue about Muhammad under the title *Mahometis Abdallae filii theologia dialogo explicata*. Widmanstetter imposed a polemical framework on summaries of the Toledan Collection that were circulating in manuscript by the late 1530s, with a view to providing the Catholic reader with a user-friendly tool to use in such instances.¹³ Although the epitome of the translation of the Qur'ān is short (some thirty pages in print), Widmanstetter's annotations repeatedly refer to the Bible and Kabbalah. Thus there is more at stake in this project than anti-Muslim (and, since Widmanstetter was Catholic, anti-Protestant) polemic: part of the aim seems to have been the re-inscription of Islam within a larger corpus of comparative belief. Far less user-friendly was another work published in 1543 by Guillaume Postel (the most important Arabist of the sixteenth century, author of the first Arabic grammar in the West, a fervent Catholic, and occasional consultant to Bibliander), namely the *Alcorani seu legis Mahometi et Evangelistum concordiae liber*, in which he argued that

the Protestants (of whom Bibliander was one) had a great deal in common with the Muslims, not least in their capacity for sowing discord and schism. Despite its title, the book does not contain a translation of the Qur'ān. Postel did, however, insert large tracts of the Qur'ān in a book he published the following year, the *De orbis terrae concordia*, in which he made a case for reconciling all the Abrahamic monotheisms under one religion; namely an improved Catholicism. The translations, which take up about a sixth of the total, are clearly made directly from the Arabic. Postel's translations indicate far greater familiarity with Arabic than Robert of Ketton, though Postel's vocabulary and diction are often inexact and occasionally weird. Postel went through the entire Qur'ān from beginning to end and chose what he considered to be the most important passages for his project. Nevertheless, the partial translations and esoteric character of *De orbis terrae concordia* limited the impact of Postel's work on the Qur'ān. It also bears pointing out that there is here a key instance of a pattern whereby Islam is used as part of a comparative system that tries to resolve the differences between the monotheisms. A century later, similar techniques would be used in a radically different register to argue against organized religion altogether.

In 1547 Andrea Arrivabene re-translated a much shorter, single-volume version of Bibliander's text into Italian while claiming to have produced a new translation from the Arabic text. What he did produce was a translation of the Qur'ān into a vulgar tongue, albeit one that was not translated from the Arabic.¹⁴ In 1616 Salomon Schweigger re-translated Arrivabene's re-translation from Italian into German under the title *Der Türken Alkoran*, thereby indicating the extent to which "Muslim" and "Turk" were now synonymous, due in part to the reality of the Ottoman military threat in central Europe. In 1641, an anonymous Dutch translator re-translated Schweigger's re-translation of Arrivabene's re-translation of Bibliander's version of Robert of Ketton's translation of the Qur'ān, producing a text five times removed from the Arabic original.

As of the middle of the seventeenth century, Western readers mainly had access to versions of the Qur'ān increasingly distant from the Arabic text, along with multiple partial translations of selected passages and chapters. Nevertheless, the authorities were concerned with adding to what was known about the Muslim world without necessarily increasing the public's exposure to the Qur'ān. Thus Archbishop Laud obtained a royal letter requiring each Levant

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Company ship to bring back one Arabic or Persian manuscript, except for the Qur'ān, since there were already enough of these in England.¹⁵ The royal and university collections had yet to be filled with Oriental manuscripts, but somehow a sufficient number of Qur'ān manuscripts were in circulation to deem this exception to Laud's collecting strategy necessary. It was as if the Qur'ān were considered simultaneously desired and dangerous: desired because it is the Arabic book par excellence, the book of the "law of the Saracens"; dangerous because its reading could somehow "convert" the reader.¹⁶ Laud's complementary strategies – founding the Laudian Chair of Arabic at Oxford and planning a "learned press" at Oxford using Arabic type – would have a lasting effect on early Orientalism and the translation of the Qur'ān.¹⁷

The quality of the Western translations of the Qur'ān took a dramatic turn for the better with the publication of André Du Ryer's (?1599–1672) *Alcoran de Mahomet* in 1647. Du Ryer had a long and varied career as a diplomat in the Middle East, with appointments in Alexandria, Cairo, and Istanbul. Though far more attentive than his predecessors to the form and literary qualities of the Qur'ān, Du Ryer nevertheless rendered the Arabic text into the elegant French that would be deemed acceptable for a seventeenth-century public without being overly concerned with an accurate rendition of the content.¹⁸ Although it contains several serious mistakes, Du Ryer's translation is a vast improvement on what had gone before, as witness his openly acknowledged reliance on well-established exegeses, despite the fact that he occasionally gets the attribution wrong.¹⁹ Instead of providing the reader voluminous compendia aimed at refuting the Qur'ān, Du Ryer contents himself with a six-page summary of "la religion des Turcs," openly derogatory in tone but arguably included to camouflage Du Ryer's sympathy with the Muslims and wide circle of Muslim friends.²⁰ Du Ryer takes the reader away from the mode of translation born of conflict and crisis toward a more genuine, if still troubled, inter-cultural connection, boasting of having made Muhammad speak French ("J'ay fais parler Mahomet en François").

Two years later Du Ryer's French text was translated into English.²¹ Although the translator's identity is unknown, the name of Alexander Ross has been associated with this version since it appeared in 1649. The translation was published with several paratexts, including Du Ryer's preface, various diplomatic documents, a life of Muhammad

(again, by an unknown hand), and text by Alexander Ross that makes the case for reading the Qur'ān. Ross takes pains to display his anti-Muslim credentials (possibly, again, in an attempt to foil any censors' attempts at accusing him of holding too favorable a view of Islam): the reader is promised a text in which "the great Arabian Impostor now at last after a thousand years, is by the way of France arrived in England, and his Alcoran, or gallimaufry of errors (a Brat as deformed as the Parent, and as full of Heresies, as his scald head was full of scurf) hath learned to speak English," and a lengthy "needful caveat" detailing the reasons for which reading the Qur'ān cannot do the reader much harm.²² None of this stopped the Commonwealth authorities from issuing warrants for the seizure of the press and the arrest of the printer and bookseller. Nevertheless, the translation was published, and despite its poor quality went on to become one of the more popular books of seventeenth-century England (and, coincidentally, the first translation of the Qur'ān to be published in the United States of America [Springfield, 1806]).²³ Its greatest merit, perhaps, seems to be in diffusing the hysterical charge that greeted the publication of dissident views in early modern England. Ross attracted a great deal of criticism for his heterodox views. The promulgation of a comparative perspective on the world's religions in his *Pansebeia: or, View of All the Religions in the World* (1653) prompted a paradigm shift according to which the validity of religions other than Christianity became increasingly acceptable in seventeenth-century England, thereby paving the way for the outlook of the Sale translation.²⁴

By the end of the seventeenth century Arabic studies and library collections in the West reached a point that enabled more complete and better documented translations of the Qur'ān.²⁵ One of the key Arabists of the age, Edward Pococke Sr. (1604–1691), had done much by mid-century to lay the ground for what would become the key translations with which we will be concerned in this study.²⁶ Arabic studies were already enjoying a revival in Europe for a number of reasons, chief among which were the importance of the language for both the study of the Bible after the Reformation, diplomacy, and the improvement of relations with the Christian populations of the Arab world.²⁷ All of these constituted the responsibilities of Edward Pococke Sr., who served as chaplain to the Levant Company at Aleppo from 1630 to 1635, and was appointed Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford in 1636 in addition to his appointment as Regius Professor of Hebrew.²⁸

Before Pococke, William Bedwell, a pioneer of Arabic studies in England, proved instrumental in shifting the emphasis in the justification of Arabic studies from missionary to diplomatic, economic, and scientific uses.²⁹ Pococke's concern with the development of Arabic studies in England is evinced not only by the large number of Oriental manuscripts that he bought for the Bodleian, but by the shape of his publications. He translated an excerpt from the Syrian historian Bar Hebraeus (aka Ibn al-'Ibrī, Abū-l-Faraj) under the title *Specimen historiae arabum* in 1650. What is striking about this edition is the ratio of text to commentary: some fifteen pages are printed in Arabic (one of the earliest, if not the earliest, uses of Arabic type in England) with Latin translation on facing pages, but the whole is accompanied by some three hundred pages of notes and annotations bearing on every single point made by Bar Hebraeus in minute and very learned detail. The commentary effectively sets the record straight, giving the reader a proper account of the early rise of Islam, the lay of the land during the pre-Islamic period, and the structure of Muslim belief, including details of various legal schools and sects. Pococke takes care to correct errors and false claims repeatedly made by his predecessors, not least among them being Hugo Grotius, whose *De veritate religionis christianae* he would translate into Arabic in 1670. The arrangement of the material and the spirit of the project – compendious rather than critical or analytical³⁰ – anticipates and informs the work of the two key translators of the Qur'ān of the following century, Marracci and Sale, both of whom repeatedly seek recourse to the *Specimen* and Pococke's two other major historical works, the *Contextio gemmarum* (his translation of Eutychius's [aka Sa'īd b. al-Bīṭrīq, the Melkite Patriarch of Alexandria] *Nazm al-jawhar*, 1658) and the *Compendiosa historia dynastiarum* (a complete translation of Bar Hebraeus's *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī-l-duwal*, 1663).

While Pococke was working on his compendious histories and correcting the inveterate mistakes of his forebears, Ludovico Marracci was making his way as a regular member of the Order of the Mother of God, a teacher of rhetoric and Arabic, and confessor to Pope Innocent XI.³¹ Marracci's relationship to the Arabic language – in which he claims to have been entirely self-taught, with some assistance from such native speakers of Arabic as he managed to meet and employ – was intense to say the least, and his reputation for piety and learning made it difficult for the Vatican to let go of him, despite his repeated requests for peace and quiet. By virtue of the age and order

to which he belonged, Marracci was very much a man of the Counter Reformation. The Order of the Mother of God of Lucca was founded as a congregation by Giovanni Leonardi in 1574 before being promoted to the status of order in 1621 with the aim of fighting heterodoxy (read: Protestantism) through the instruction of the masses and the education of young minds. Coupled with Marracci's linguistic and philological gifts, as well as the ongoing advance of the Ottoman Empire and the siege of Vienna in 1683, this factor helps explain the outlook of Marracci's major lifework, his translation-cum-refutation of the Qur'ān, published in Padua in 1698. (Ironically, Padua and the Venetian republic were by then privileged points of entry for the "new philosophies" of Descartes and Spinoza into Italy.)³² Marracci's ability as an Arabist had already been exploited by the Vatican on several occasions, first in helping to expose the Granadan Leaden Books as forgeries, and then much more significantly in bringing to fruition the Vatican's Arabic translation of the Bible in 1668 after the project had suffered numerous setbacks. Here, again, is an indication of the strong concern in the West with the spiritual and political salvation of Arabic Christians and a point of contention not against Muslims but against other Western Christians, such as those of the Levant Company. Nevertheless, Marracci gives the reader a very good idea of his orientation in dedicating the work to the man who had beaten the Ottomans at Vienna and then vindicator of Christendom, the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, whose alliance with Pope Innocent XI was seen to have been "rewarded" with victory over the Turks. This was more than a translation, therefore: for Marracci it was part of a vast war effort with roots extending to the Renaissance, undertaken with the aim of restoring the intellectual and theological glory of the Church of Rome and the memory of the Vatican as Europe's foremost center of Oriental studies.³³ His dedication to his project and the cause behind it was accompanied by a number of feverish efforts in Protestant Europe – mainly Germany – to produce a properly Lutheran translation of the Qur'ān.³⁴ Leibniz in particular seems to have been spurred by news of Marracci's undertaking to a hyperactive search for a suitable Lutheran counterweight, a task for which the nominees included Abraham Hinckelmann, the Hamburg pastor and Orientalist who would publish one of the earliest printed Arabic editions of the Qur'ān in 1694. Still, it was almost impossible to compete with Marracci's learning and excellent collection of sources at the Vatican library. As will be seen in the next chapter, this competition

between rival Christian sects would prove to be a key impetus to the process of the translation of the Qur'ān in the West.

Marracci is, as Norman Daniel puts it, remarkable: on the one hand, his feeling for the Arabic language and culture are unparalleled; on the other hand, he dedicates his life to refuting the book that defines that language.³⁵ Pierre Martino gave what is probably the wittiest description of Marracci's translation a century ago:

Un religieux italien, Maracci [sic], passa quarante années de sa vie à étudier le Koran, minant par avance chaque verset du livre maudit pour qu'il s'effondrât de lui-même. D'abord il publia une réfutation, afin que le remède fût connu avant le mal; puis, quand il fit paraître le texte lui-même et sa traduction latine, il eut soin qu'ils fussent enserres entre les interminables colonnes où s'allongeaient les objections victorieuses: on eût dit un criminel, fluet, encadré entre d'énormes geôliers qui ne lui permettent pas de respirer.

[An Italian priest, Marracci spent forty years of his life studying the Koran, undermining every verse of the book in advance so that it might fall apart automatically. First he published a refutation, so that the cure might be known before the disease; and then, when he published the text itself with its Latin translation, he saw to it that they were surrounded by endless columns of victorious objections: rather like a feeble criminal flanked by enormous prison guards that did not allow him to breathe.]³⁶

Marracci proceeded in stages, first publishing a prolegomenon to his refutation of the Qur'ān (the *Prodromus ad refutationem Alcorani*, 1691) in which he takes on the basic tenets of Islam, before publishing the *Refutatio* in 1698, along with a re-publication of the *Prodromus*, as a two-volume set, the *Alcorani textus universus*. Marracci presents a great deal of Arabic material in the *Prodromus*, almost all of it in print for the first time. After a preface to the reader, Marracci gives a life of Muhammad based entirely on Muslim sources, though he does not always manage to separate fact from fiction. The critique of Muslim doctrine in the *Prodromus* falls into four parts: the first attacks the Muslim claim that Muhammad's mission is foretold by Christian scripture; the second argues that, unlike Christianity, Islam cannot be a true religion because Muhammad did not perform any miracles; the third, that Christian dogma is true while Muslim dogma is false, and adduces the multiplicity of Muslim sects as evidence of the error inherent in their belief (adding a confession of Christian

faith in Latin and Arabic); while the last section (inevitably) pleads for the superiority of Christian ethics over the violence and moral laxity of Islam. The thoroughness with which Marracci pursues these points is matched by his apparent intention to produce a new refutation of Islam on par with the great medieval polemics. The actual translation contained in the *Refutatio* is striking on a number of levels: the reader is met with the fully vocalized Arabic text of the Qur'ān,³⁷ followed by a detailed translation, followed by an impressive set of scholarly notes adducing multiple Arabic sources, exegetical and historical, usually quoted in the original and then translated into Latin. Unfortunately, the volume of all this valuable information is dwarfed by the painstaking “refutation” that Marracci adds to every translated passage. The refutations in question often surprise the reader by the obtuse approach that Marracci takes, deliberately ignoring or overlooking an obvious explanation for what he considers to be egregious mistakes. Despite the open hostility of Marracci’s tone, his frequent recourse to military language – he brags about having fought the Qur'ān with the Qur'ān and “killed Muhammad with his own sword”³⁸ – and the often too literal quality of the translation, the sheer wealth of information contained therein makes it a good candidate for the title of the first proper encyclopedia of the Qur'ān. By Marracci’s own admission, however, this refutation was clearly aimed at a Christian audience: at one point he states openly that he would not like it to be read by Muslims.³⁹ Marracci died in 1700, possibly worn out by the effort involved in translating the Qur'ān.

The years around the publication of Marracci’s *magnum opus* would prove decisive to the future of Arabic and Islamic studies. In 1697, three books were published, all aimed at disparate audiences: Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, a founding text of the European Enlightenment; Humphrey Prideaux’s *True Nature of Imposture, Fully Display’d in the Life of the Prophet Mahomet*, a scathing critique of Muhammad in which the author repeated many of the same false claims about Islam that characterized Western discourse since the Middle Ages, written with a view to refuting Socinian/Unitarian and deist positions;⁴⁰ and finally Barthélémy D’Herbelot’s *Bibliothèque orientale*, an encyclopedic, alphabetically arranged compendium that has been called the first encyclopedia of Islam. George Sale, on whom these three texts would leave their mark, and who would rely on them

(along with many others) for a radically innovative translation of the Qur'ān, was born around the time of their publication.

Unlike Marracci, Sale did not take holy orders, though he did share his interest in Orientalism, which seems to have taken up more of Sale's time and energy than his ostensible profession, law. George Sale combined Enlightenment values and Christian commitment. In addition to the year of his birth, Sale's youth coincided with some key advances in European studies about Islam, among them Adrian Reland's *De religione Mohammedica* in 1705 (second edition, 1717; English translation of the first edition, 1712), and Jean Gagnier's *De vita et rebus gestis Mohamedis* in 1723. Reland and Gagnier in particular introduced key moments in the demythologization of Islam that would mark future scholarship permanently. Reland is remarkable for bringing to the study of Islam a perspective inspired by the growing Cartesianism of early eighteenth-century Utrecht, making a case for reading received ideas about Islam with skepticism and turning to Muslim sources for information about Islam and Muslims.⁴¹ If anyone was fated to produce a good translation of the Qur'ān by being born at the right time, it was George Sale.

Bayle's dictionary needs no introduction, but what I would like to emphasize here is its status as one of the key vectors of critical and Spinozist thought that Sale would encounter. Bayle's article on Muhammad, "Mahomet," which was updated with every subsequent edition of the *Dictionnaire*, set out to deconstruct the received idea of Muhammad as a violent and licentious impostor. Bayle's critique of the idea that Muslims monopolized violence was probably informed by his own bitter experience as a Protestant refugee from Louis XIV's *France toute catholique*, as his comparison between French and Muslim armies makes clear:

Mais enfin, comment résister à des armées conquérantes qui exigent des signatures? Interrogez les dragons de France qui servirent à ce métier, l'an 1685: ils vous répondront qu'ils se font fort de faire signer l'Alcoran à toute la terre, pourvu qu'on leur donne le temps de faire valoir la maxime, *compelle intrare, contrains-les d'entrer* [i.e. Luke 14:23]. Il y a bien de l'apparence que si Mahomet eût prévu qu'il aurait de si bonnes troupes à sa dévotion, et si destinées à vaincre, il n'aurait pas pris tant de peine à forger des révélations, et à se donner des airs dévots dans ses écrits, et à rajuster ensemble plusieurs pièces détachées du judaïsme et du christianisme. Sans s'embarrasser de tout ce tracass, il eût été assuré d'établir sa religion partout où ses

armes auraient pu être victorieuses; et si quelque chose était capable de me faire croire qu'il y a eu bien du fanatisme dans son fait, ce serait de voir une infinité de choses dans l'Alcoran, qui ne peuvent sembler nécessaires qu'en cas qu'on ne veuille point user de contrainte. Or il y a beaucoup de choses dans cet ouvrage qui ont été faites depuis les premiers succès des armes de Mahomet ["Mahomet," rem. N] ...

Il faut avouer la dette: les rois de France ont établi le christianisme dans les pays des Frisons, et dans celui des Saxons, par les voies mahométanes ["Mahomet," rem. O].⁴²

In the English translation of Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, a project with which Sale would later be associated, though it is not clear that it was necessarily he who translated the article "Mahomet," these passages are translated as follows:

[In] short, how is it possible to stand out against conquering armies, which demand your subscription? Ask the French Dragoons who were employed in that trade in the year 1685; they will answer that they will undertake to make all the world subscribe the *Alcoran*, provided they have a sufficient time allowed them to push that maxim, *compelle entrare*, i.e. compel them to come in. It is very probable that if Mahomet had foreseen that he should have at his devotion such good troops, and an army so resolute to conquer, he would not have taken so much pains in forging revelations, in giving himself such devout airs in his writings, and in adjusting so many detached pieces of Judaism and Christianity to his scheme. Without embarrassing himself in all this business, he would have been confident of establishing his religion wherever his arms could prevail; and if anything could make me believe, that he was pretty much tainted with fanaticism, it would be the observing an infinite number of things in the *Alcoran* which appear quite unnecessary, except upon the supposition that Mahomet did not mean to make use of compulsion. But there were a great many things in that work, which were wrote after his first successes in war ... We must acknowledge our debt: the Kings of France established Christianity in the country of the Frisons and Saxony, by the Mahometan methods.

Europe's Most Christian Kings, in other words, are no better than the mythical version of Muhammad. Worse yet, intolerance is a Christian specialty, consistently and systematically used by one sect against another. If Muslims have used violence to spread their religion, they are only doing what French Catholics did after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.⁴³

In a key Spinozist moment, Bayle's article reminds the reader that Muhammad never claimed to have performed any miracles, but rather it was his followers who imputed them to him, thereby alluding to the radical argument that miracles are designed for the masses by a corrupt, manipulative clergy.⁴⁴ Many of Bayle's other footnotes take direct aim at the many myths about Muhammad and the Muslims that have circulated in Christendom, a point on which Bayle cites Marracci's argument that, far from advancing their cause, such behavior just makes Christians look ridiculous. Still, as the ambivalent tone of the passages quoted above demonstrates, Bayle's article is more of a balance sheet, establishing Muhammad's positive and negative qualities, rather than an outright defense or attack.⁴⁵ The many quarrels and polemics at work in Bayle's life color his portrait of Muhammad, leaving the reader better informed about Bayle's differences of opinion with those who have written on Islam before him rather than his own views. This is only to be expected, given Bayle's intention of writing a dictionary of past mistakes.

Barthélemy D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* aims elsewhere. Like Bayle's dictionary, the *Bibliothèque* is very much a product of Louis XIV's France, though its focus is exclusively Orientalist and its political orientation far from critical of the regime, as D'Herbelot was a fervent Catholic who followed the tradition of studying Oriental languages better to understand the Bible. Edward Said's analysis of the excessively rational alphabetical grid into which D'Herbelot allegedly forces myriad facts about the Orient is too well known to require further comment, but it bears emphasizing that, since the *Bibliothèque* is essentially a series of translations from Oriental sources, chief among them being the monumental *Kashf Al-Zunūn* of the seventeenth-century polymath Kātib Čelebi (an annotated bibliographical dictionary of some 14,500 works in Arabic Persian and Turkish), it could hardly have been otherwise.⁴⁶ It is worthy of note that D'Herbelot chose (or was fortunate enough to possess) a relatively recent bibliography by the most conspicuous and productive scholar of the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire in the *Kashf*, the first volume of which was completed in 1653–1654. D'Herbelot was thus aiming at the cutting edge of Oriental scholarship being produced in the Orient. Furthermore Kātib Čelebi's massive output included translations from Latin works dealing with the Ottoman Empire, including Mercator and Hondius's *Atlas Minor* as well as a sixteenth-century compilation

of Western historical writing about the Orient spanning Byzantine, German, and Italian sources, the *Historia rerum in Oriente gestarum* (1587).⁴⁷ In dealing with this particular source of the *Bibliothèque*, therefore, we are confronted with a scholar whose work performs a key sorting and organizational function at the interface between East and West, rather than an Oriental entity passively suffering imperialist knowledge and control. Moreover, the vast compilation of facts in the *Bibliothèque* fit rather poorly under D'Herbelot's Arabic headings (which seem designed to frustrate the Western reader), with the net result that it is not the iron-clad container of knowledge about the Orient that Edward Said makes it out to be. Henry Laurens explains the curiously disappointing character of the *Bibliothèque orientale* by the same token whereby it enchanted its contemporaries: despite its erudite and restrained tone, the concatenation of translations from some thirty Oriental sources in the *Bibliothèque* obliges the reader to integrate the content of the articles into what can at best be called a personal, rather than an informed, opinion:

La *Bibliothèque orientale* n'est en fait qu'une série continue de traductions et les efforts d'interprétation sont naturellement consacrés au domaine religieux, formant un ensemble particulier au sein de l'ouvrage. Le problème de la traduction impose un nombre relativement restreint de sources vraiment utilisés: notre trentaine de sources [covered in pp. 49–61 of Laurens' study]. Et ce caractère de traduction va donner un style, un cachet particulier à la *Bibliothèque orientale*.

[The *Bibliothèque orientale* is in fact only a series of translations; any attempt at interpretation is naturally devoted to the field of religion, which constitutes a specific unit in the middle of the work. The problem of translation imposes restrictions on the number of sources actually used: whence our collection of about thirty sources. And this attribute of translation gives the *Bibliothèque orientale* its style and character.]⁴⁸

We are not far, then, from the aesthetic that drove Du Ryer's translations: the aim is to make the Orient readable without overwhelming the reader with erudition. On this particular count, D'Herbelot seems to have failed: the *Bibliothèque* was found to be a very useful work of reference, but hardly a readable one. D'Herbelot's will to exoticize the material is strong, and the tone is not far removed from Galland's *Mille et une nuits* – hardly surprising in view of the fact

that Galland completed and updated the project after D'Herbelot's death.⁴⁹ When it comes to the articles on Muhammad and the Qur'ān, D'Herbelot keeps to the conservative positions that were typical of his age, choosing those two topics as privileged moments for the exercise of a critical faculty that he refuses to use on his own material, and concluding that the Qur'ān is a random collection of texts drawn from multiple informers – not unlike the *Bibliothèque* itself.⁵⁰ Conservatism and exoticism aside, the *raison d'être* of the *Bibliothèque* is, as Nicholas Dew explains, to substitute comparability, standardization, and compatibility for particularity and material copiousness.⁵¹ That this substitution, in the end, produced something that most readers, like Gibbon, found “indigestible” is testament enough to the fact that the mere collection of facts was no longer enough as an approach to the Orient or Muslim world, and that something more was needed.

Like Bayle, Adrian Reland was concerned with demythologizing and correcting Western views of Islam. His application to the task was sufficiently thorough to result in the aforementioned *De religione Mohammedica*, a work described as “the first scientific description of the institutions of Islam” by Goldziher, probably the most important Orientalist of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵² A gifted polymath who combined remarkable learning (adding command of East Asian languages to the Orientalist's standard arsenal of biblical and Near Eastern ones), Reland set out to separate fact from legend in the representation of Islam once and for all. His *De religione Mohammedica* went through two editions and was quickly translated, making its way to multiple libraries and changing minds across Europe. Reland's influence was not limited to an academic audience: John Toland owned a copy of his work.⁵³ Reland's motives are couched in the usual language of “defeating” Islam, but it is clear that he is sincerely interested in a better understanding of Islam for its own sake:

Truth, wherever it is, should be search'd after; and it is, in my Opinion, a laudable Exercise, to put a stop to Lyes, and to give a view of a Religion, which hath spread so far, to every one that pleases; not as it is disguis'd and cover'd with the Clouds of Detraction and Error, but as it is taught in the Mahometan Temples and Schools, that so we may be able to attack it with sure Blows; and if we are not able to shew the Vanity of it to the Turks, we may at least be convinc'd of its Vanity our selves.⁵⁴

Reland compares the false claims thrown at Islam with those that the various Christian sects use against each other, thereby demonstrating his lucidity as to where the real gist of the quarrel about Islam lay in the early eighteenth century. Catholics and Protestants, says Reland, accuse each other of resembling Muslims, but whether these polemics bring either side to a clearer comprehension of Islam is very much in doubt.⁵⁵ These polemics are further compounded by the fact that the Western reader is rarely, if ever, encouraged to find things out about Islam for him- or herself, but rather informed by institutions that are far from being unbiased and often wrong in their assessment of Islam. In fact the only thing the hapless student of Islam is encouraged to do by some of these authorities is to burn the Qur'ān.⁵⁶

The logic of Reland's approach – letting Muslim sources speak for themselves – comes through in the first part of *De religione Mohammedica*, which opens with the phrase “In the Name of the most Merciful God” and continues “Praise and Glory be to God, who hath brought us to the Faith.”⁵⁷ The reader, in other words, is clearly reading what a Muslim has to say. The rest of the first part, an annotated translation of a Muslim text detailing the Muslim creed, lays out in lucid detail the five pillars of Islam and provides accurate descriptions of the rituals of prayer, ablution, alms, fasts, and pilgrimage. The second part of his book lists and corrects numerous misconceptions about Islam, mostly of the sort that are attributed by Western writers to the Muslims. The full range of Reland's learning comes out in this section, wherein we learn that Bartholomew of Edessa accuses the Muslims of believing that Mary became pregnant by eating dates and that Euthymius Zigabenus claims that Muslims believe that man was created out of a leech, among other things.⁵⁸ These laughable samples of patristic and medieval polemics are dealt with alongside weightier matters such as the Muslim view of salvation and the nature of paradise. Overall, Reland synthesizes the projects of Bayle and D'Herbelot: in a marvel of brevity (the English translation of *De religione Mohammedica* fills just over 100 printed pages) he lists, and refutes, the errors of past commentators on Islam while at the same time providing the reader with an authoritative introduction to Muslim dogma based on Muslim sources.

Humphrey Prideaux's *True Nature of Imposture* has a self-explanatory title, inviting the reader to see in Islam the true nature of imposture (as opposed to the imposture falsely imputed to Christianity by the deists) and urging him or her to remain within the true faith.

Prideaux writes to protect the Christian reader from the dangers that are sweeping across the land, chief among which is the multiplicity of sects and schisms. This multiplicity is, according to Prideaux, what made the Eastern churches such easy prey for the Muslims. The fate of the Church of England will almost certainly be that of the Eastern churches if such dangerous trends as deism are tolerated:

Have we not reason to fear, that God may in the same manner raise up some Mahomet against us for our utter confusion; and when we cannot be contented with that blessed Establishment of Divine Worship and Truth, which he hath in so great purity given unto us, permit the Wicked One by some other such instrument to overwhelm us instead thereof with his foulest Delusion? And by what the *Socinian*, the *Quaker* and the *Deist* begin to advance in this Land, we may have Reason to fear that Wrath hath some Time since gone forth from the Lord for the Punishment of these our Iniquities and Gainsayings, and that the Plague is already begun among us.⁵⁹

In order to terrify the reader, Prideaux narrates the life of Muhammad, who embodies “the true nature of imposture.” For Prideaux, Muhammad is a frustrated, ambitious man who used imposture to reach his ends: political power. Had his father lived, Prideaux notes (correctly) that he would have inherited the leadership of the Quraysh effortlessly. Having been orphaned, however, he had to seek other means, and spent the first forty years of his life laying a wicked plan for the seduction of his peers.

His two predominant passions were *Ambition* and *Lust*. The course which he took to gain *Empire*, abundantly shows the former, and the multitude of women which he had to do with, proves the later. And indeed these two run through the whole frame of his *Religion*, there being scarce a Chapter in his *Alcoran* which does not lay down some Law of War and Bloodshed for the promoting of the one; or else give some liberty for the use of Women here, or some promise for the enjoyment of them hereafter to the gratifying of the other.⁶⁰

Nor is this all. In his appendix, the “Letter to the Deists”, Prideaux proceeds to establish a semiotics of imposture, the better to enable his reader to identify imposture in matters of religion. The impostor is and has a character, in La Bruyère’s sense of the term, which allows him to be recognized. The last and most important of these signs of imposture is the use of violence to propagate the false religion, “That

it can never be established, unless backed by force and violence.⁷⁶¹ Imposture, for Prideaux, is unconvincing; its claims do not stand up to close scrutiny, unlike the true faith, whose hold on hearts and minds is undeniable. Hence the need for force.

The debate around imposture and religion in the late seventeenth century was not limited to Islam, but was inscribed in the wider questions dealing with salvation, “natural” religion, and reason. Indeed, the two decades from 1660 to 1680 saw the publication and dissemination of the largest number of texts centered on the theme of imposture in religion all over Europe, reflecting both interest in and anxiety surrounding the issue.⁶² The debate was naturally linked to the many sects that so frightened Prideaux, chief among them being the Socinians (aka the Unitarians) and the deists.⁶³ The Socinian movement in England grew steadily during the seventeenth century, despite repeated persecution. In 1690 Arthur Bury argued in his *Naked Gospel* that Muhammad “possessed all the articles of the Christian faith, and declared himself not an Apostate, but a Reformer; Pretending to purify it from the corruptions wherewith it had been defiled.”⁶⁴ Taking advantage of the relative weakness of Eastern Christianity, Muhammad founded the true (Unitarian) gospel. Bury’s argument anticipates both Prideaux’s attempt at a rebuttal and the argument that would become increasingly common in deist circles; namely that the true enemy of faith is the incomprehensible discourse in which religious beliefs are shrouded by a corrupt clergy. In his *Brief History of the Unitarians* (1687), Stephen Nye had argued that the Unitarians were the true heirs of early Christianity, invoking the Nazarenes, an early Judeo-Christian sect, as the first example of this pristine belief and again anticipating arguments that would be presented in more provocative form by John Toland, who made much of the parallels between Nazarene belief and Islam. Common to both Bury and Nye was the assumption that the doctrine of the Trinity was a corruption introduced by later Christians at Nicea in order to continue an age-old pattern of oppressive and mendacious behavior. The Anglican counter-polemic also built on the parallels that the Unitarians proposed, charging them with making common cause with the Muslims to bring about the downfall of Christendom. Prideaux was largely capitalizing on this trend in the composition of his *True Nature of Imposture*.

In 1720 there appeared an anonymous text that has been attributed to George Sale, though recent research has called this into question.⁶⁵ “Mahomet No Impostor,” which takes explicit aim at Humphrey

Prideaux, was published somewhat incongruously as part of a literary miscellany, the *Miscellanea aurea*, and brings a cool skepticism reminiscent of Spinoza to Prideaux's alarmist claims. (The rest of the miscellany consists of prose and verse epistles exemplifying the moral laxity at which Prideaux took aim in *The True Nature of Imposture*.) Over the course of some twenty pages, the hoary concept of Muhammad's "imposture" is carefully deconstructed: far from establishing a false religion, Muhammad took the unity of the Godhead as his first principle, proceeding therefrom to the establishment of His worship, the elimination of idolatry, and the enforcement of moral principles. If anything, he was a reformer who delivered his people from error. If Muhammad practiced polygamy, so had Jacob and David. Unlike the lands where Christianity holds sway, Muslims still adhere to the principles that Muhammad taught them. What is remarkable about Sale's text (assuming that he is the author) is the trouble he takes to speak as a Muslim and a defender of Muhammad and Islam. He does this some three years before Montesquieu adopts a similar strategy in his *Lettres persanes*. Unlike Montesquieu, however, the aim of the piece is less a critique of the West through Eastern eyes than the defense of Muhammad as a prophet and statesman.

In the 1720s Sale became involved with the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. Founded in 1699 in reaction to what its members considered the prevailing moral laxity of the age, the society's policies had missionary and educational goals: the building of charity schools and workhouses, the distribution of books to those who could not afford them, and a general re-invigoration of Anglicanism.⁶⁶ Unfortunately these were soon oriented along an anti-Catholic axis, eventually turning the SPCK into a spearhead among several other national societies opposed to "popery," with a watching brief on "the practices of the priests to pervert His Majesty's subjects" and tactics that included keeping track of English Catholics at home and English seminaries abroad, plans for the conversion of Irish Catholics, and the use of a *Protestant Catechism* in their schools aimed, in part, at teaching children the basics of Anglicanism and the "Principal Errors of the Church of Rome."⁶⁷ In 1720 the SPCK added to its activities the publication of an Arabic translation of the New Testament aimed at the Eastern Christian communities in the Levant. Two Syrian Christians living in England at the time, Salmon Negri and Carolus Dadichi, were involved – indeed, Negri's correspondence with the SPCK repeatedly stressed the need for such a

translation in view of the inaccessibility of the Arabic Bible in the Middle East, cleverly suggesting that the Levant Company at Aleppo be charged with its distribution, and attracting the approval and encouragement of none other than Humphrey Prideaux.⁶⁸ It is probably from Negri and Dadichi that Sale learned, or at least perfected, his Arabic, and with Negri that he worked on the corrections to the Arabic New Testament, having become a corresponding member of the SPCK and accepted the assignment of corrector in 1726.⁶⁹ The result, العهد الجديد لرَبنا يسوع المسيح (*The New Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*), was published and shipped in 1727.

Apart from the Arabic New Testament Sale was involved with the English translation of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* – though he does not seem to have added much beyond the letter “A” and his name does not appear on the title page past the fourth volume – and an early historical encyclopedia and prototype of the French *Encyclopédie*, the *Universal History*, to the first volume of which (the *Cosmogony*) he made an important contribution.⁷⁰ He was supposed to act as general editor, but his erudition and breadth of mind were ironically held against him, resulting in the transfer of the editorial responsibility to George Psalmanazar.⁷¹ Both projects attest to Sale's interest in the philosophy of systems of belief and a rare capacity for global perspectives. Both also bear witness to Sale's attraction to critical approaches to received ideas: among his sources for the *Cosmogony* were deist texts that called into question biblical accounts of creation. Sale's comfort with multiple perspectives on what were held to be sacred truths, which allowed him to propose multiple, but equally valid, chronologies for the story of the flood, displeased the *Universal History's* readers, many of whom were middle-class professionals allergic to that sort of speculation.⁷²

Sale's translation of the Qur'ān, where his learning and the intellectual skills honed by his work on the aforementioned projects served him very well, made him famous. Although he did not reproduce the Arabic text, Sale stopped at nothing to produce a balanced and informative rendition of the Qur'ān, so much so that the few anti-Muslim statements that one runs across in his paratexts come across as being perfunctory and insincere. (The anti-Catholic statements, however, seem to be heartfelt.) The translation, which is copiously annotated (there are footnotes and footnotes to the footnotes on every page), is preceded by a long “Preliminary Discourse” (the title is a riposte to Marracci's *Prodromus*) in which Sale presents the history and

geography of seventh-century Arabia, the rise of Islam, the history of the revelation and collection of the Qur'ān, as well as a cursory map of the doctrines and schools of thought of Islamic theology. Sale clearly acknowledges his debt to the previous generation of Orientalists – Marracci and Pococke in particular – but the results of his research and skill as a translator are unparalleled.

Sale's method in the "Preliminary Discourse" draws on a number of contemporary trends to produce an authoritative introduction to Islam. The multiple footnotes and annotations imply that Islam is to be read against two axes: philosophy and history. The critical function is probably inherited by Sale's reading of Bayle and Spinoza (see below), while the historical dimension bears witness to the new sort of historiography that was spreading across Europe, citing sources while critically evaluating them, and making a point of backing up every claim.⁷³ What distinguishes Sale's "Preliminary Discourse" from the work of Pococke and D'Herbelot is precisely the fact that it is not a compendium or a series of translations: far from simply amassing or translating facts, Sale is interested in interpreting and re-presenting them. The predominant question in the "Preliminary Discourse" seems to be "Where does Islam come from?" Sale avoids the facile answers that satisfied his forebears (Islam is a heresy invented by an impostor) to locate Islam as a system of belief rooted in time, place, and, most significantly, the text of the Qur'ān.

Sale drew and added to a rapidly developing image of Muhammad as a statesman and legislator. Here again, he was writing against *The True Nature of Imposture*. Prideaux's loud denunciations of Muhammad as an impostor are underlined by the sense that the deception of the masses by a clever manipulator could take place in any period of moral laxity, be it seventh-century Arabia or eighteenth-century England. Unless the licentiousness that he associated with deism came to an end, a new "impostor" would almost certainly appear and threaten Christendom – a lesson that found widespread appeal both in Europe and the American colonies.⁷⁴ Over against this discourse, the image of Muhammad as a legislator that appears in the eighteenth century owes much to the revaluation of all values underway as part of the Enlightenment. Henry Laurens sums up the situation thus:

Dans une société qui commence à s'interroger sur une possible refonte globale de ses structures, tout antécédent historique sert

d'exemple et de révélateur du problème. Mahomet devient, plus que tout autre personnalité historique, l'exemple même du surhomme au-dessus des lois et doté de tous les pouvoirs, ce qui constitue l'une des solutions envisageables. Il occupe dans la conscience occidentale du XVIIIe siècle une place qu'il ne pouvait avoir avant, et qu'il n'aura plus après. Mais ce personnage a un champ d'action géographique qui lui était propre. L'Orient est le lieu d'élection du grand homme, qu'il soit conquérant, législateur ou fondateur de religion. Le propre de Mahomet est de posséder ces trois aspects.

[In a society that is starting to ponder a fundamental transformation of its structures, every historical precedent acts as a revealing example of its problems. More than any other historical character, Muhammad exemplifies the *Übermensch* who stands above the law and is endowed with superhuman powers, thereby constituting one conceivable solution. In the eighteenth-century Western imagination, he holds a place that he did not before and will not be able to afterwards. But he had his own field of geographic action. The Orient is the preferred location of the great man, whether he be a conqueror, legislator or founder of a religion. Muhammad's essential quality is the possession of these three aspects.]⁷⁵

Much ink is spilled during this period on the opposition between the impostor and the legislator, with the term "legislator" enjoying a strong positive spin.⁷⁶ Accordingly, the attribute that Sale most frequently attributes to Muhammad is that of "legislator." This distinction is accompanied by the development of an English tradition stretching from Henry Stubbe to John Toland that re-wrote the history of the three monotheisms as one of reforming legislators.⁷⁷ Henry Stubbe commended Islam for its rationality and prudence in his *Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometism*, which was completed in 1671 but only circulated as a clandestine manuscript for the next fifty years, only seeing publication in the early twentieth century. After presenting Christianity as a Jewish heresy in his opening chapter, Stubbe narrates the rise of Islam from the "decay and debauchery" of Eastern Christianity; essentially a purified version of the "Doctrines of the Nazarene Christians and the Arrians."⁷⁸ Taking one element of anti-Muslim polemic, Stubbe argues that Muhammad was a Machiavellian operator who capitalized on the geopolitical lay of the land to found a new religion and empire, concluding that he was "the Wisest Legislator that ever was."⁷⁹ Stubbe dwells on Muhammad's political skill, adding sententious observations to

frame a particular incident (“It is one of the most difficult parts of a Prince to adjust Employments to their Ministers, and to make use of suitable instruments for carrying on each Affair”)⁸⁰ all with a view to emphasizing the complexity of Muhammad’s mission and his intelligence in dealing with it. His creed depends on simplicity and common sense:

This is the sume of Mahometan Religion, on the one hand not clogging Men’s Faith with the necessity of believing a number of abstruse Notions which they cannot comprehend, and which are often contrary to the dictates of Reason and common Sense; nor on the other hand loading them with the performance of many troublesome, expensive and superstitious Ceremonies, yet enjoying a due observance of Religious Worship, as the surest Method to keep Men in the bounds of their Duty both to God and Man.⁸¹

Finally, Stubbe demonstrates that Muhammad’s legislative powers outdid those of his predecessors, and even if some of his moral precepts were legislated for political reasons, their rational character ensures their success. Muslim religious duties are “plainly laid down, which is the cause that they are duly observed, and are in themselves very rational, tho’ perhaps some of them were retained or instituted partly upon a political Account, as has been don by the wisest Legislators in all Ages.”⁸² Stubbe also comments at length on the many Christian legends that circulated about Muhammad, showing them to be mere fables, thereby anticipating the task that would be performed with greater precision by Reland. Although it is far from perfect, and contains more than a few errors, Stubbe’s account is well informed nonetheless, with frequent references to Pococke, the cutting edge of Orientalist scholarship at the time. It emblemizes the uses of Islam in freethinking circles during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: by inscribing Islam in the history of Judeo-Christianity, and by describing Islam as a return to a set of beliefs that had been corrupted by the church, Stubbe makes a strong case for Trinitarian Christianity as a form of imposture and religion as a human activity with a worldly, historical, and political dimension.⁸³ Sale’s Qur’ān is distinguished by its reliance on, and dialogue with, the freethinking tradition that stretches from Stubbe to Toland.

The process of translating the Qur’ān – indeed the very act of translation – might usefully be compared to what Clifford Geertz,

following Gilbert Ryle, calls “thick description,” a term that Geertz applies both to the construction of meaning in both ethnography and reading. From this perspective, readers, ethnographers, and, I would add, translators must work their way through and find a way to render a “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another.”⁸⁴ The task of the translator is to analyze these strata of meaning in the text and convey them to the reader in a suitably thick description. Thick description is what sets Sale and Marracci apart from their predecessors, especially Du Ryer, who “introduces” his translation of the Qur'ān with a six-page “Sommaire de la religion des Turcs” and then relies on the language of his translation to convey the complexity of the Qur'ān, with marginal notes being kept to the bare minimum. To a certain extent, Du Ryer is responding to the expectation of the French reading public of the first half of the seventeenth century, who see the translator as a *littérateur* and who expect any text, be it the Qur'ān or Tacitus, to be made to sound like the language that has the sanction of the *Académie*, regardless of the emendations or “improvements” that the translator might bring to the original. Indeed, there is no gainsaying the role played by unfaithful translations (the “belles infidels”) in the formation of French classicism.⁸⁵ The paradigm at work here is the same one that would later see in Louis XIV's France the rival, indeed the superior, of Greece and Rome, and lead Perrault to declare “C'est nous qui sommes les anciens.” [“It is we who are the ancients.”] This view minimizes the distance between the cultures and ages in play, as evinced by the triumphant claim in Racine's preface to *Iphigénie* that common sense is the same always and everywhere, and that “le goût de Paris s'est trouvé conforme à celui d'Athènes.”⁸⁶ [“The taste of Paris turned out to be in conformity with that of Athens.”] The idea that the past is not necessarily a foreign country informs both the translators of the Qur'ān and its readers, many of whom would probably have agreed with Voltaire's opinion that “L'homme, en général, a toujours été ce qu'il est.”⁸⁷ [“Man, in general, has always been what he is.”] It is precisely this belief in the contemporaneity of the past and the relative youth of the universe that allows a perspective on the Orient radically at odds with our own: Muslims might be different, but not so different as to be incomprehensible. This sense of similarity informs both the belligerence of Marracci, for whom the Crusades and the wars of religion are of a piece (but his co-religionists have somehow picked on the wrong enemy), and the

goodwill of Sale. What exoticism there is in early Orientalism – in Galland, D'Herbelot, or elsewhere – does not necessarily translate into an essential difference between Muslims and Christians as different species, but simply as peoples who have had different histories that may well have been interchangeable. As Henry Laurens put it, the register of early Orientalism is one where the Athens of Pericles, Baghdad of Al-Ma'mūn, and France of St Louis are identical.⁸⁸

George Steiner relates this isochronic outlook, whereby Parisians, Athenians, and Persians are not seen as being altogether very different, to the link between linguistic and geometric translation; the isomorphic mapping of a set of points from one locus to another and making of culture “the translation and rewording of previous meaning.”⁸⁹ It is this sort of trans-lation, of carrying over from one physical and cultural space to another, that helps locate the difference between Du Ryer, Marracci, and Sale. There is nothing – apart, perhaps, from a concern with current standards of taste – to prevent Du Ryer from “thickening” his description either with a longer, fairer introduction, or more meaningful footnotes. Marracci and Sale, on the other hand, provide thick descriptions, and in Sale's case this in no way contravenes the production of a readable, fluid translation. Both Marracci and Sale seem to project the strata of meaning that they work through on to the format that they present to the reader – long introductions about Islamic history, theology, and law (the *Prodromus* and the “Preliminary Discourse”), the vocalized Arabic text with verse numbers (Marracci), translations, footnotes, citations, and footnotes to the footnotes (Sale) – so that the visual layout of the text actually reproduces the layers of meaning it is trying to render. The difference between Sale and Marracci, however, is that the latter's obstinate use of multi-page “refutations” of the pericope he is translating operates as a thinning agent, rendering what would otherwise have been an excellent thick description somehow irrelevant. Why, the reader is tempted to ask, provide all of this information if it is just going to be dismissed as being false anyway?⁹⁰

Thus the differences between the translations and the surrounding descriptive framework depend on the political and theological stance of the translator. The history of the translation of the Qur'ān is bound inextricably with conflicts within the West rather than between the Muslim world and the West. In this the history of the translations is moving in line with the major trend that made confessional

rivalry the primary motor of cultural change in Europe by the mid-seventeenth century.⁹¹ The early modern study of Islam – like the early modern study of comparative religion generally – owed much to confessional quarrels that defined the “enemy” not as a Muslim but a Christian of a different denomination (and for some, *ipso facto*, no longer a Christian).⁹² This curious situation is summed up nicely by Peter Harrison:

While much comparison of “religions” took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of it was motivated not by any deep interest in the religious faith of other peoples, but by the desire to score points from theological adversaries. For this reason, the so-called religions of the Orient were made in the image of their presumed Western counterparts. Unfortunately, the paradigms of these new “religions” were the undesirable religious forms of Christendom – be it papism, Calvinism, Socinianism, deism, Presbyterianism, or episcopacy.⁹³

For better or worse, confessional conflict, with all of its political ramifications, became a key site in the production of knowledge about the Orient, and nowhere more so than in the opposition between the Catholic and Protestant study of the Qur'ān.

Given the prevalence of such conflicts during the late seventeenth century, one might wonder why it is that Sale's reading of Islam only became possible in 1734 when much of the intellectual groundwork was ready some fifty years earlier. Apart from the reasons outlined above, including the advances made by Reland and Gagnier, and the sheer mass of material made available through the Marracci translation, it is important to note the impact of Spinoza and Spinozism: no longer a name but an entire climate of opinion by the turn of the eighteenth century.⁹⁴ The doctrine of the single substance, the denial of miracles, and the equivalence of all revealed religions as products of imposture paved the way for certain discursive practices that would have been otherwise impossible. Works based on Spinoza enjoyed remarkable diffusion despite their sometimes questionable quality. Chief among these is the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, also known as *L'Esprit de Spinosa*, a key vector in the spread of Spinoza's ideas in Europe alongside Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, where the article “Spinoza” is by far the longest.⁹⁵ The appearance of the *Traité des trois imposteurs* is symptomatic of a profound change in the European attitude toward monotheism, one that goes well beyond the efforts of the Socinians

and Richard Simon at subjugating Christianity and scripture to the demands of reason and Cartesian philosophy.⁹⁶ The *Traité* enables the same sort of translatability that was once ascribed to the polytheistic religions to be allowed to operate among the monotheistic ones, albeit in a register of denunciation.⁹⁷ There is more at stake than a plea for toleration that would become common later in the eighteenth century: the *Traité*, like a great deal of Spinozistic literature, presents a strong critique of religion, parts of which would be put to good use by Sale.⁹⁸ Following this model, intercultural translatability depends on the assumed validity of the religions in question. With the publication of the *Traité des trois imposteurs* comes the idea that such translatability also works across cultural distinctions if one assumes the falsity of all the religions in question. The only instance in which there is a failure of translation is in the confrontation of a false with a true religion. As Jan Assmann put it, “False gods cannot be translated.”⁹⁹ It is only once such equivalence is envisaged, if not actually established, in the minds of some, that an accurate reading of Islam becomes possible. In the case of Ludovico Marracci, we are faced with the impossibility of translation: the god of Islam is false (even though everything seems to indicate that it is the God of Abraham), and therefore no reconciliation with the Qur'ān is possible. In the case of Sale, the cultural boundary between Islam and non-Islam becomes sufficiently porous to enable translation of the older, “polytheistic” sort. The irony is that Sale relied on Marracci to a very large extent, and that he was a very committed Protestant, far from the vehement anti-religious tone of the *Traité*. Two radically different translations of the Qur'ān are enabled by the same data.

Thus the very possibility of seeing Islam as a legitimate religion (or at least set of laws worthy of respect) grows out of the leveling perspective adopted by the radical Enlightenment. If the *Traité des trois imposteurs* passed off all revealed religions as the products of imposture and manipulation, George Sale turned the argument on its head and made the case that all religions are thereby worthy of serious study instead of polemical dismissal. Furthermore, Sale's repeated description of Muhammad as a legislator on par with Minos and Numa adds further emphasis to the idea that certain aspects of Muslim life and law might usefully be compared to their counterparts in Greece and Rome – and, finally, that the Muslim state is less a monstrous scourge on humanity than a republic that gains from being compared with Rome and Venice.

Spinoza's name occurs once in the Sale translation, in the section of the "Preliminary Discourse" dealing with the Sunni–Shī'a split, and its political embodiment in the form of the conflict between Persia and the Ottoman Empire. Sale is amazed at Spinoza's ignorance:

It seems strange that Spinoza, had he known of no other schism among the Mohammedans, should yet never have heard of one so publicly notorious as this between the Turks and Persians; but it is plain he did not, or he would never have assigned it as the reason of his preferring the order of the Mohammedan church to that of the Roman, that there have arisen no schisms in the former since its birth.¹⁰⁰

In the footnote, Sale quotes a line from Spinoza:

Ordinem Romanæ ecclesiæ – politicum et plurimis lucrosum esse fateor; nec ad decipiendam plebem, et hominum animos coercendum commodiorem isto crederem, ni ordo Mahumedanæ ecclesiæ esset, qui longè eundem antecellit. Nam à quo tempore hæc superstitio incepit, nulla in eorum ecclesia schismata orta sunt. (*Opera Post.* P. 613)

[I grant the political and financial advantages that accrue from the order of the Roman church, and would believe it better designed than any other for the deception of the common people and the domination of their souls, were it not for the Mohammedan church, which surpasses it by far. Indeed since the start of that superstition (i.e. Islam) there has never been any schism in their church.]¹⁰¹

The statement is taken from a long letter that Spinoza wrote to Albert Burgh, a former disciple who travelled to Italy and converted to Catholicism, eventually becoming a Franciscan friar, in 1675. Spinoza's letter was written in response to a lengthy missive by Burgh in which the latter attacks his system and defends the doctrine of the church. Both letters were published as part of Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma*, which is where Sale would have seen them, immediately becoming twin foci for religious polemic and debate in the ensuing years.¹⁰² That Sale would have been drawn to one of Spinoza's more vehement anti-Catholic moments is hardly surprising. What is striking about Sale's reference to Spinoza is not, or not only, his defense of Islam, but rather the fact that he was sufficiently familiar with it to have it on his mind as he composed his account of Muslim sects and schools of thought.¹⁰³ Moreover, Spinoza's view of Islam as the

religion best organized to dupe the masses and coerce them into submission and hence suffer no schism whatsoever is prominent throughout the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, so Sale's return to this point at this moment in the "Preliminary Discourse" indicates that he was conversant with the ideas current in Spinozism and heterodox literature.

Two other names associated with this trend recur repeatedly in Sale's translation, bearing witness to the intellectual risks he was willing to take: Toland, whose name has already been mentioned, and Boulainvilliers. The latter is especially interesting as a case study in the conversion of a French nobleman from a "moderate" Cartesian outlook to a more radical set of beliefs, culminating in his *Vie de Mahomed*, a biography that faced difficulties so substantial that subscribers were asked to pay for the publication.¹⁰⁴ Both Prideaux and Sale were among the subscribers. The fact that the list of subscribers contains names associated with such divergent views demonstrates the reach of radical thought in debates about religion and Islam during the early eighteenth century. Boulainvilliers' text is less history than polemic, arguing that Islam is the purest of the three monotheisms and adapting Spinoza's mistaken claim about the absence of splits in Islam to "prove" its superiority over Christianity. Under Boulainvilliers' pen, Muhammad becomes an early avatar of Spinoza, bringing forms of belief so far superior to his predecessors that he singlehandedly changed the face of history and destroyed the mightiest empires of his day.

Having lived through the "domestication" of the French nobility by Louis XIV and the upheavals that accompanied the turn of the eighteenth century, Boulainvilliers spent much of his life looking for certainty and well-defined origins.¹⁰⁵ So it is with the *Vie de Mahomet*. Boulainvilliers emphasizes the happy state of the Bedouins before Muhammad's arrival, projecting on to them his view of what he supposes early French nobility must have been like before absolutism, referring to the "exclusion de rois, ou de chefs absolus."¹⁰⁶ In this golden age, genealogies were respected and bloodlines remained pure (which is why the Bedouins were necessarily not numerous). The Arab genius was neither intolerant nor excessively violent. Islam, far from being a religion of the poor, as was Christianity, attracted Mecca's best and brightest, who were drawn to its utter reasonableness: "Il [Muhammad] est venu à bout, non pas d'amener les hommes grossiers à une doctrine mystérieuse ... mais les plus sublimes héros de

leur siècle, en valeur, en générosité, en modération et en sagesse.”¹⁰⁷ [“He [Muhammad] managed to attract to a mysterious doctrine, not savage men... but the most sublime heroes of the age in valour, generosity, moderation and wisdom.”] In other words the proud freedom-loving Bedouin were the raw material that Muhammad turned into the greatest people that the world had ever seen. Muhammad was a true prophet who gave his people the best laws that it was possible to have short of being Christian: “sans la grâce de la révélation chrétienne ... il n’y auroit système de doctrine si plausible que le sien, si conforme aux lumières de la raison, si consolant pour les justes, et si terrible aux pêcheurs.”¹⁰⁸ [“Without the grace of the Christian revelation ... there would be no doctrinal system as plausible as his [Muhammad’s], in such conformity with the light of reason, so comforting to the righteous, and so terrible to sinners.”] Indeed, Muhammad’s example proved that a religion could be true independently of Christianity.¹⁰⁹ So controversial were Boulainvilliers’ claims that they displeased conservative and liberal alike: Jean Gagnier refers to the *Vie de Mahomet* as being closer to a novel than a history, and strenuously denied claims that it was he who completed the work, which was unfinished at the time of its author’s death. Nevertheless, Boulainvilliers’ tone makes itself heard throughout the second part of Sale’s “Preliminary Discourse,” dealing with the life of Muhammad.

John Toland started out attempting to refute Spinoza and ended up not only becoming a radical Spinozist himself, but also the one who did most to popularize the term “pantheist.”¹¹⁰ Apart from priestcraft – the corrupt, all-powerful clergy who worked with a tyrannous authority to forge “mysteries” that keep the masses in check – Toland’s *bête noire* was the Catholicism that he abandoned in his youth, calling it “the insupportable Yoke of the most Pompous and Tyrannical Policy that ever enslav’d Mankind under the name or Shew of Religion.”¹¹¹ Toland seems to have made his mark on Sale through his *Nazarenus, or Jewish, Gentile and Mahometan Christianity, containing the history of the antient gospel of Barnabas and the modern Gospel of the Mahometans, attributed to the same apostle* (1718). As its title implies, Toland’s text argues for the possibility that all of the Abrahamic monotheisms are but variations on a theme, and can thus all be considered forms of “Christianity.” Toland’s text relies in part on the so-called Gospel of Barnabas, a forgery (unbeknownst to Toland) written apparently to vindicate the Qur’ānic account of Jesus. The impact of the *Nazarenus* is such that Sale not only returns to it in his translation

of the Qur'ān – both in the “Letter to the Reader,” and in a passage on the name of Muhammad – despite his awareness of its forged status, but also in his seeming adoption of Toland’s outlook, whereby information about religion should be disseminated to the greatest possible number and other religions should be seen through a framework of similarities and differences rather than rivalry and enmity.¹¹²

The second part of Sale’s “Preliminary Discourse,” dedicated to the state of Christianity on the eve of Muhammad’s birth, is very much of a piece with Toland’s critique of clerical corruption, attributing the rise of Islam to the hapless state of Christendom and the error of its ways. The passage is a marvelous record of the anxieties surrounding the question of Christianity versus Islam, especially with respect to the rapid spread of the latter. Furthermore, it combines many of the discourses that have been described above, showing how they feed into Sale’s account of early Christianity, Islam, and the Qur'ān:

If we look into the ecclesiastical historians even from the third century, we shall find the Christian world to have then had a very different aspect from what some authors have represented; and so far from being endued with active graces, zeal, and devotion, and established within itself with purity of doctrine, union, and firm profession of the faith, that on the contrary, what by the ambition of the clergy, and what by drawing the abstrusest niceties into controversy, and dividing and subdividing about them into endless schisms and contentions, they had so destroyed that peace, love, and charity from among them, which the Gospel was given to promote; and instead thereof continually provoked each other to that malice, rancour, and every evil work; that they had lost the whole substance of their religion, while they thus eagerly contended for their own imaginations concerning it; and in a manner quite drove Christianity out of the world by those very controversies in which they disputed with each other about it. In these dark ages it was that most of those superstitions and corruptions we now justly abhor in the church of Rome were not only broached, but established; which gave great advantages to the propagation of Mohammedism. The worship of saints and images, in particular, was then arrived at such a scandalous pitch that it even surpassed whatever is now practised among the Romanists ...

This corruption of doctrine and morals in the princes and clergy, was necessarily followed by a general depravity of the people; those of all conditions making it their sole business to get money by any means, and then to squander it away when they had got it in luxury and debauchery ...

It has been observed by a great politician [i.e. Machiavelli], that it is impossible a person should make himself a prince and found a state without opportunities. If the distracted state of religion favoured the designs of Mohammed on that side, the weakness of the Roman and Persian monarchies might flatter him with no less hopes in any attempt on those once formidable empires, either of which, had they been in their full vigour, must have crushed Mohammedism in its birth; whereas nothing nourished it more than the success the Arabians met with in their enterprises against those powers, which success they failed not to attribute to their new religion and the divine assistance thereof.¹¹³

Although the critique of the Church of Rome had become standard by the early eighteenth century, and some of Sale's arguments reiterate those found in Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, what sets Sale's critique apart is its general tone: every Christian sect is guilty of corruption, and is therefore responsible for Europe's losses before the Muslim armies. Furthermore, the reference to Machiavelli bears witness to Sale's ability as a *bricoleur*, drawing in multiple sources and traditions to make the case that Muhammad is not necessarily justified by his victories, but his behavior, as well as that of the Muslims, makes sense from the perspective of *realpolitik*. This is a much more satisfying explanation of Islam than the endlessly repeated charges of imposture, violence, and lust.

The translation of the Qur'ān quickly became synonymous with Sale's name, despite the fact that he died only two years after it was published, leaving his family in difficult financial circumstances. Eventually, myths began to emerge and circulate among the readership: Voltaire claimed that Sale had spent twenty-five years living in the Arabian desert, a mistaken impression created in part by the authentic sound of the text. The English translation was re-edited four times in the eighteenth century, and some sixty times in the nineteenth.¹¹⁴ Naturally, re-translations quickly followed the publication of the first edition in 1734, with versions appearing in German (Theodor Arnold, 1764), Russian (Alexei Kolmakov, 1792), and Hungarian (Istvan Szokoly, 1854). Eventually, the "Preliminary Discourse" was translated and published separately in Dutch (Amsterdam, 1742), French (Geneva, 1751; Algiers, 1846; Paris, 1850), and Swedish (Stockholm, 1814), and coupled with the Du Ryer translation in an edition published in 1775. Remarkably, the "Preliminary Discourse" was also translated

into Arabic in 1891, ostensibly to “prove” that the Qur’ānic account of the death of Jesus was not only correct, but actually accepted by certain Christians.

Once again, Sale’s broadmindedness was held against him. Some, like the antiquary Thomas Hearne, who was a staunch supporter of Jean Gagnier, took issue with the vast amounts of information that Sale added to frame his translation, while others, like James Porter, who had served as ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1746 to 1762, criticized his tendency to “apologize” for the Qur’ān.¹¹⁵ Worse yet, the translation that made him famous seems to have aggravated his relationship with the organization that did so much to make it possible, with which his contact became very infrequent after 1734. But his reputation as the man who produced a translation of the Qur’ān in line with the values of the Enlightenment, and one that can be read with profit to this day, remains intact.

The Sale translation is distinguished as a locus that combines multiple perspectives, from early Orientalism to radical philosophy. It is to this translation and its reception – the intellectual genealogies and exchanges that occurred around Sale, as well as the impact of this book on the subsequent history of the eighteenth century – that we now turn. Of necessity, this study is far from exhaustive, but it will hopefully give the reader an idea of the near-ubiquity of the translated Qur’ān in the project of the Enlightenment and the making of the modern world.