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THE IMAGE OF ISLAM IN EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VOLTAIRE'S AND KANT'S PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: The present paper analyzes the representation of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and Arabs in the philosophical discourse of Immanuel Kant and Voltaire. Even though both scholars were part of the European Enlightenment period, the ways in which they viewed Islam differed greatly according to the genres and aims of their writings. This paper focuses on a problem not discussed much in the literature; specifically, while there have been many studies analyzing separately the remarks by Kant on Islam or the writings of Voltaire about Muhammad, not enough works analyze the comparison of the representation of Islam in the philosophical discourse of both authors within a single framework. The aims of this study include: (1) identifying the statements of Kant and Voltaire regarding Islam, the Prophet, and Arabs; (2) distinguishing between their polemic and philosophical positions, on one side, and historical and theological

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accounts on the other; (3) comparing their views on revelation, paradise, morality, rituals, and conquest. The methods of analysis include qualitative comparative analysis of relevant primary sources from Kant (Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime; Critique of Practical Reason; Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason) and Voltaire (Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète; Essai sur les mœurs; Philosophical Dictionary). These primary texts are interpreted alongside established historical scholarship on European images of Islam. The study indicates that these thinkers used both positive and negative descriptions, employed European sources in preference to Islamic ones, and relied on Islam as a tool: Voltaire's criticism of fanaticism and Kant's explanation of his moral religion theory and theory of national character in which Islamic sources are just cited. In conclusion, it is stated that the Enlightenment universalism was inconsistently employed concerning Islam and that the bias left over from the past played both writers.and frequently used Islam to advance their own philosophical arguments.

Keywords: Kant; Voltaire; Islam; Muhammad; Arabs; and Enlightenment.

Introduction

The Enlightenment in Europe valued reason, tolerance, and the critical examination of authority. Nevertheless, the philosophers of this movement inherited a long-standing tradition of suspicion of Islam from Christianity, which had been nurtured through the centuries by polemics and the memory of the periods of Muslim conquest. The relationship between the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment and Islam, thus, becomes an important test of whether their universal principles could be extended to the nations and religions outside Europe. The two representatives of this movement are most illustrative

in this respect: Voltaire—the well-known critic of religious fanaticism—and Immanuel Kant.

The approaches taken by these two figures towards Islam are greatly dissimilar. Voltaire's treatment of Islam can be described as public and rhetorical, epitomized by the portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in his play *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète* as a manipulative character. Later historical and philosophical works of his, however, introduce new ideas about Islam, which focus on the monotheistic aspect and the virtues of discipline and charity (Tolan, 2024; Quinn, 2008). On the other hand, Kant's references are much shorter and appear in work such as the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime, Critique of Practical Reason, and Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* where he discusses the Arab character, symbolisms of paradise, the impact of conquest on the spread of Islam, and the morality of almsgiving occurs. Because the means and objectives of the two authors differ so much, scholarship has generally treated them in separate studies, and, to the best of the author's knowledge, their ideas on Islam have rarely been analyzed together; this is the gap that the present paper addresses.

This paper addresses that gap. In section 2 below, a discussion is held concerning what Kant has written about the Arabs and their religion. Then, section 3 is concerned with Voltaire's comments. The fourth section is an analysis of their opinions in relation to six issues. These include Muhammad as a historical person, miracles and revelations, paradise, ethics and rituals, warfare and conquests, and Arabs as a people and the treatment accorded to them and their religion. The following main question emerges from such an analysis: did the appeal to reason and tolerance in the Enlightenment lead to a fair understanding of Islam and Muslims, or did inherited prejudice and second-hand knowledge continue to constrain critical judgment? The

paper argues that both thinkers used Islam instrumentally in their philosophical arguments.

Note on Terminology and Quoted Material. Several passages quoted in this paper contain statements about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad that Muslims regard as inaccurate and offensive. They are reproduced only as historical evidence of how Islam was represented in eighteenth-century Europe; they are not offered as accounts of Islam or of the Prophet's life. Each is attributed to its author, a short explanation of why it is quoted precedes or follows it, and wherever a claim conflicts with the Islamic sources or with modern historical scholarship, this is stated explicitly. The terms "Mohammedanism" and "Mohammedans" were used by European authors of the period; they are rejected by Muslims, who worship God and not Muhammad, and they appear here only when reporting the philosophers' own usage.

Kant's perspective on Islam and the Arabs

1. Background and Sources

Kant does not consistently distinguish between Muslims and Arabs, and at times does not distinguish among Arabs, Turks, and Mongols. This lack of differentiation produces an imagined collective and carries over several biases and oversimplifications about peoples who differ in faith and, in some cases, in language and custom. It is also at odds with the Universalist and critical standards of Kant's own philosophy. Kant's discourse on Islam and the Arabs contains several passages that present their faith and traditions as being in tension with rationality, and that emphasize traits such as nomadism, an excessive reliance on imagination that culminates in the sublime, and a "pathological" application of reason and emotion. This section presents some of them, emphasizing traits such as nomadism, an excessive reliance on imagination that

culminates in the sublime, and a pathological application of reason and emotion (Scaglia, 2025).

Kant apparently uses the term "Islam" only once, in the pre-critical Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1764); elsewhere he writes "Mohammedanism". His philosophical discourse regarding Arabs, their ethics, religion, and Prophet is dispersed across various writings, including *Essay on the Maladies of the Head* (1764), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), *On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy* (1796), *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797*), The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), and the Lectures on Metaphysics and Lectures on Ethics, which are based on student transcripts (Al-Meskini, 2015).

2. Kant and the Arabs

The German thinker Immanuel Kant inscribed the Basmala, the introductory phrase of the Quranic chapters, in Arabic writing on his PhD certificate, which he received in 1755 CE. (Bobzin,1993) The context surrounding Kant's endorsement, or "Muslim" signature, on his early doctoral dissertation is unknown; nonetheless, the principle of good faith, discussed by language analysis philosophers, could serve as a philosophical tool for interpreting this action (Scaglia, 2025).

In his Lectures on Metaphysics, presented from 1775 to 1780, Kant includes the Arabs as one of the nations that "acquired" philosophy from the Greeks, alongside the Persians. However, their function extends beyond mere passive involvement; Kant noted in their philosophical contributions the responsibility of rejuvenating philosophy following its deterioration. He is reported to have stated:

> *"In the end, the essence of culture was extinguished among the Romans, leading to the emergence of barbarism, until the Arabs arrived, inundating sections of the Roman Empire, and*

> *in the seventh century, committed themselves to the sciences, elevating Aristotle to a significant status. As Western sciences emerged from their dormancy, Aristotle was revered like a master."* (Kant, 1780).

This passage comes from Kant's university lectures at Königsberg in the late eighteenth century, and it shows the account of the Arabs' role in cultural history that was presented to his students. On this account, the Arabs preserved learning from decline after the fall of the Romans by committing themselves to the sciences; Europe later followed, after a phase of slavish adherence to Aristotle, the philosopher whom the Arabs had revived after a long period of stagnation. (Almond, 2010), summarizes this attribution as crediting the Arabs with a universal mind rather than with universal rituals

Kant's early essay *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) contains a mixed characterization of the "Arab" within a broader moral and anthropological assessment of the national characters of the principal peoples of his time (Kant, 1764). It combines praise with stereotype, as the following passage shows:

> *"Should we now survey those other regions of the globe, we would discover the Arab, the most esteemed individual in the East, yet one whose emotions frequently lead to perilous adventures. He is welcoming, magnanimous, and truthful; nonetheless, his narratives, anecdotes, and overall sentiments are invariably infused with an element of the extraordinary. His fervent imagination depicts reality in bizarre and warped manifestations, and the expansion of his faith was indeed a significant adventure. If the Arabs represent the Spaniards of the East, then the Persians symbolize the Franks of Asia. They are skilled poets, sophisticated, and possess outstanding taste and grace. They are not strict followers of Islam, and they*

permit their voluptuous nature to adopt a mild interpretation of the Qur'an." (Kant, 1764)

The passage praises the Arab as welcoming, magnanimous, and truthful, but it also attributes to him a heated imagination, a taste for the marvelous, and a tendency toward adventure, and it describes the spread of his faith as an adventure as well. It is therefore best read as a stereotyped typology that mixes admiration with condescension, and not as a neutral description.

Kant also writes that "The beautiful is either enchanting and poignant or humorous and entertaining." He attributes this kind of feeling to the Italians and the French. Regarding the sublime, he writes:

"In the national character that embodies the sublime, it manifests either as an awe-inspiring quality that leans toward daring ventures, or as a sentiment of nobility, or potentially as something magnificent. I am convinced that I have justifications for attributing the initial type of sentiment to the Spaniards, the subsequent one to the English, and the final one to the Germans." (Kant, 1764)

The remarks on the Arabs thus belong to Kant's anthropological typology of national characters, which described Europeans as well (Spaniards, English, Germans, Italians, and French) in terms of generalizations. The typology does not display the theological hostility found in earlier Christian polemic against Islam, but it rests on stereotypes. Kant himself qualifies his intention:

"My intention is not to portray the intricacies of national temperaments; instead, I aim to outline certain characteristics that convey a sense of the sublime and the beautiful consequently, the reproach that may occasionally be directed at a nation for its shortcomings is such that any nation can

target it like a projectile at its neighboring nation." (Kant, 1764)

3. Kant on Paradise in Islam

In the Critique of Practical Reason (1788) and in Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793), Kant refers to what he calls the "Muhammadan" paradise in two apparently conflicting ways, and the philosophical implications of this difference need to be examined. In 1788 the reference concerns the sensory and imaginative representation of paradise, which Kant sets alongside the idea of "dissolving into the divinity," an idea that associates with the Illuminationists (Ishraqis) and the Sufis (Al-Meskini, 2015). In 1793, by contrast, Kant observes that Muslims, as Reland had shown, know how to give a spiritual meaning to the otherwise sensory description of their paradise.

The 1788 passage is quoted here because the meaning of the reference depends on its argumentative context. Kant writes:

"Indeed, to the extent that practical reason underpins this issue, and is pathologically conditioned—essentially dictated—by the desires of the passions within the sensory framework of happiness, this significant obligation cannot be imposed upon speculative reason. Mahomet's paradise, or the fanatical union with the divine, alongside the enthusiasts and others, as their spirits long for and their intellects envision, are subjects that burden rational thought, and it may be preferable to forgo reason than to subject it to such illusions and reveries" (Kant, 1788).

In this passage, Kant's target is not the content of Islamic belief as such. His argument is that if practical reason were conditioned by sensuous inclinations and the desire for happiness, speculative reason could not be asked to

accommodate it, and the fantasies of "Mahomet's paradise" or of mystical union with the deity would then be imposed on reason. He goes on to argue that pure reason can itself be practical, as shown by the consciousness of the moral law, so that reason remains a single faculty that judges by a priori principles. "Mahomet's paradise" therefore serves as an illustrative example of a sensuous, reward-oriented conception of the afterlife; it is not an account of Islamic doctrine.

Furthermore, in Kant's argument, "Mahomet's paradise" is treated as an example of practical reason that cannot be pure because it is "pathologically conditioned," catering to desires governed by the sensual principle of happiness. This is Kant's critique of any morality based on the expectation of sensory reward, rather than a description of Islamic theology. If reason is determined empirically, Kant contends, it cannot determine the will in accordance with the moral law. Consequently, Kant implies that a person who acts solely to obtain otherworldly reward cannot fully realize the categorical imperative. This conclusion reflects Kant's own deontological moral philosophy and his broader critique of religious enthusiasm; it should not be read as an established assessment of Muslim belief or practice (Haq, & Karim, 2015).

4. Kant on Almsgiving in Islam

In Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, Kant also comments on the five principal tenets of the "Muhammadan" faith and on which of them merits philosophical attention. He states:

> *"This is exemplified in the Muhammadan faith, which encompasses five principal tenets: purification, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage to Mecca; among these tenets, almsgiving warrants an exception when it is performed with genuine virtuous and religious intent, fulfilling a duty of virtue. It indeed merits recognition as a method for acquiring*

> *God's approval. However, as this doctrine suggests, it can be justified alongside the plunder of others of what is presented as a sacrifice to God through the impoverished, so it should not be regarded as an exception."* (Kant, 1793),

It is noteworthy that Kant emphasizes charity, treating it as the sole religious act potentially exempt from mere statutory ritualism in the Islamic faith. Kant posits that charity, when bestowed with sincere intent—specifically, a virtuous and religious motivation concurrently—and for the fulfillment of a moral obligation, merits God's approval. Kant asserts that charity cannot originate in the plunder of others, as "offering to God through the impoverished" what has been taken by plunder constitutes larceny rather than generosity.

Kant's remark that almsgiving might be combined with plunder is consistent with the European image of Islam as a religion of conquest. In Islamic law, by contrast, almsgiving (*zakat*) is an obligatory duty owed to the poor and to other designated recipients and is not defined as a sacrifice made from plunder.

5. Analysis of Kant's perspectives on Islam

The gesture attributed to the German Enlightenment philosopher Kant—writing the Basmala in Arabic script at the beginning of his 1755 doctoral dissertation—is often cited in contemporary discussions to exemplify the universal reach of Islamic culture. In Kant's view, Muslims hold a distinct status; indeed, "the Arab is the most esteemed individual in the East." Kant's subtle remarks regarding Muslims demonstrate, balance-wise, his aim to link religion with morality through tolerance and the recognition of other faiths. Secondly, they reveal his engagement with the Islamic faith—even though Kant exclusively used the historical European designation "Mohammedanism" rather than "Islam" across his works. His philosophical references and comments concerning the

Arabs—their morals, religion, and Prophet—are scattered throughout numerous texts, such as Essay on the Maladies of the Head, Critique of Practical Reason, Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, the essay On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy, The Metaphysics of Morals (specifically the "Doctrine of Virtue"), The Conflict of the Faculties, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, Lectures on Metaphysics, and Lectures on Ethics.(Al-Jabri, 1999). A point worth noting—and one that presents a nuanced question—is whether Kant directly influenced Arab-Islamic thought, or whether he was intellectually stimulated by its historical contributions.

Kant's references to Islam do not indicate any desire to convert to Islam; Al-Meskini rightly rejects this interpretation, since the issue is not an attempt to "Islamize" Kant. This point sufficiently responds to commentators who have overstated the historical claim concerning the Basmala. What may be gleaned from these references is Kant's intellectual interest in Oriental and Arab-Islamic culture, expressed in a restrained philosophical manner. The role of Arab-Islamic scholarship in preserving and transmitting philosophy was recognized during the Enlightenment, an era that emphasized the productive use of reason. Consequently, Kant's acknowledgment of the "other" may reflect a desire to enrich philosophical memory by engaging civilizations that offered distinct approaches to theology and the existence of God. Alternatively, it may have served to show that his moral philosophy extended beyond narrowly Christian parochialism. In Al-Meskini's view, addressing alleged "Eurocentrism" in the history of philosophy requires an objective reassessment of such intercultural intersections (Cherkaoui, 2016). When Kant states, "As for the religion of Muhammad (der Mohammedanismus), it is distinguished by pride; for instead of miracles, it found validation for its faith in victories … and all its rituals of worship are of a

courageous nature," his aim is not necessarily to express theological hostility, but to classify national and religious temperaments within his anthropological framework. Kant revisited this tradition in Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793), stating: "The Mohammedans know—as Reland demonstrated—how to impart a spiritual meaning to the description of their paradise, which is otherwise characterized by sensory depictions …" He adopted a comparable analytical perspective in the Critique of Practical Reason (1788) (Al-Tamamy, 2014).

Kant analyzed Islamic representations of the afterlife as an attempt—through a sensory-imaginative mode—to comprehend the Absolute. However, rather than endorsing mystical "dissolution into the Divine" (which Kant critiqued as fanatical Schwärmerei), Kant evaluated how sensory language functions within practical reason. Kant states in the Critique of Practical Reason: "In reality, insofar as practical reason is made the basis of this matter—specifically when it is pathologically conditioned, meaning it merely serves the interests of the passions under the sensory principle of happiness—such an onerous demand cannot be imposed upon speculative reason" Whether regarding Mahomet's Paradise or mystical union, these notions confront the intellect with daunting speculative challenges. It is preferable to preserve rational boundaries than to yield to mystical phantasms. Yet, if pure reason is capable of being practical, it is because it remains a unified faculty governing according to a priori principles, applying it to practical objectives without compromising its speculative coherence (Al-Jabri, 1999).

Voltaire's Perspective on the Prophet's Biography and Islam

Voltaire's views on Islam and on the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) changed over the course of his career and moved between criticism and admiration.

Sections 3.1 and 3.2 report his early and most polemical statements, and Section 3.3 follows the later development of his views. These statements are Voltaire's own polemical and literary representations, written in a dramatic or polemical context and drawing on European sources. They are reported here as historical evidence of how Islam and the Prophet were portrayed in Enlightenment Europe, and not as established historical facts. Where they conflict with the Islamic sources or with modern historical scholarship, this is noted. The idea that Muhammad was a conscious impostor, which Voltaire adopted at this stage, was a standard element of medieval and early modern Christian polemic (Tolan, 2024; Quinn, 2008).

1. Voltaire's Early Portrayal of the Prophet in *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète*

Voltaire's first major representation of the Prophet is the play Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète ("Fanaticism, or Muhammad the Prophet"), written in the 1730s and first staged in Lille in 1741 and in Paris in 1742. Describe the work as full of falsehoods and as a distortion of the historical record. According to them, the plot of the play is Voltaire's own invention and not a record of any historical event. It presents Muhammad as a manipulative figure driven by desire and unbridled ambition who pretends to be a prophet. This image was not new: it drew on earlier Christian polemic against Islam (Tolan, 2024; Quinn, 2008).

The assaults on our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) persist in correspondence with the King of Prussia regarding 'The Tragedy of Muhammad,' wherein Voltaire articulates his interpretation of the Prophet's persona, asserting, "To me, Muhammad is merely a hypocrite wielding a weapon" (Voltaire, 1756). Voltaire saw the Prophet Muhammad as an exemplar of religious zealotry and autocratic governance, manipulating the emotions and simplistic convictions of the general populace to fulfill its

objectives. He articulated his malevolent intentions to his acquaintances, stating. Voltaire declared

> "*I envision Muhammad as a zealot, aggressive, and duplicitous individual... a shame upon humanity, who transitioned from a trader to a prophet, lawgiver, and sovereign... (Muhammad) epitomizes the peril of fanaticism)*" (Voltaire, 1756)

In these letters the character is presented as an exemplar of religious zealotry and autocratic power that manipulates the emotions and simple convictions of ordinary people. These are Voltaire's characterizations of a dramatic figure; they are not statements about the historical Muhammad that the Islamic sources or modern scholarship support.

Despite expressing some dissenting views in the *Essay on the Manners* (*Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, 1756), Voltaire could not fully free himself from the traditional view of the Christian West, which was characterized by anti-Islamic anxiety. He called Islam "the Mohammedan religion" and Muslims "Mohammedans" and rejected the claim of revelation. He believed that the ideas of heaven, hell, angels, and destiny in Islam were ancient Jewish and Christian beliefs. He criticized the legal prohibition of wine, pork, and blood, and believed that these prohibitions were inappropriate in the cold climate outside the Arabian Peninsula and that Muslims could not abandon them (Al-Sharif, 2016).

2. Voltaire's Critique of Muhammad's Prophethood and of Islamic Doctrines

The statements summarized in this section are Voltaire's polemical claims. They are reported here to document the Enlightenment image of Islam, and they are not accepted as historical or theological fact. Voltaire sought to instill skepticism regarding the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) through his writings on Islam; he

repeatedly describes Muhammad as merely a "claimant" of prophet hood who introduced nothing novel. He contends that those who contemplate the Qur'an will recognize that its author exhibited complete ignorance of physical substances and principles, a common error among all who assert prophet hood (Elmarsafy, 2014). Voltaire says: that the ethics of Muhammad's followers resembled those of the ancient Arabs, characterized by a penchant for warfare and violence under the guise of religion, as well as a constant search for profit and subjugation. He enforces it upon his peers, presuming that the viewpoint is the the only truth that ought to be disseminated.

These claims reflect Voltaire's own rationalist and deist assumptions and the sources available to him. The charge that Muhammad was a conscious impostor is a polemical judgment and not a historical finding. The early Muslim conquests are treated by modern historians as the product of political, economic, and religious factors, and not simply as plunder carried on under a religious cover.Voltaire claims that ancient civilizations, including the Chinese, Persians, Indians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and particularly Christians, incorporated concepts of punishment and reward—like the belief in heaven and hell—in their religious doctrines. He contends that Muhammad, whom he calls the self-proclaimed prophet, simply extracted representations of paradise and damnation from the Talmud, the Torah, and fire-worshippers, and that the imagery of heaven as gardens and the figure of the Maidens of Paradise originated from these sources (Ali Shah, 2021). Muslim theology, by contrast, understands such parallels as continuity within a single line of revelation, since the Qur'an presents itself as confirming earlier scriptures, and modern scholars continue to debate the relationship of the Qur'an to earlier Jewish, Christian, and Iranian traditions. In addition Voltaire argues that the Qur'an has established itself as a legal framework for

"Mohammedan" nations; This generalization was later qualified by Voltaire himself, and it is not supported by Islamic sources or by historical scholarship.

3. Development of Voltaire's Views on Islam and Muhammad

Voltaire's viewpoint on Islam and Muhammad transformed over the years, indicating a gradual shift in his ideology. At first, his depiction of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in his play Mahomet was sharply critical and polemical, intended (as he stated) to confront religious extremism and the alleged deficiencies of organized religion, especially within the Catholic Church. It has been argued that he used Muhammad as a vehicle for this critique of religious authority in Europe. The play was prohibited in Paris following its third performance in 1742 (Ouzgane, 2006). Voltaire admitted that his play was not factual or historical, but rather a work of satire and drama. He conceded that "Mahomet, I recognize, did not genuinely perpetrate that specific offense which is the focus of this tragedy" (Gunny, 1996).

In subsequent years, Voltaire progressively praised the religious tolerance associated with Islam and its Prophet, in contrast with the bigotry that incited the religious wars in Christian Europe. In his extensive historical work, the Essai sur les mœurs, he portrays Muhammad as a legislator and a leader (Joubin, 2000). In his later works he began to defend Islam and partly absolved the Prophet of conventional European prejudices. His development is apparent in his expressions of regret: he acknowledged that he had portrayed Muhammad as more malevolent than he truly was in Mahomet. (Ouzgane, 2006). Nonetheless, while contesting the assertion that Muhammad was unlettered—a topic he addressed in Chapter VI of the Essai sur les mœurs—Voltaire offers some commendatory remarks regarding the founder of Islam:

> *"How can one conceive that an individual who was a trader, poet, lawmaker, and ruler could not inscribe his own name? If his book is inappropriate for our era and for us, it was indeed valuable for his peers. His faith was superior. We must acknowledge that he effectively liberated all of Asia from idolatry. He instructed on the oneness of God and vehemently condemned those asserting that God had associates. He prohibited the usurious exploitation of outsiders and mandated the practice of charity. Prayer is an essential necessity; the acknowledgment of everlasting edicts invigorates everything. It is hardly unexpected that a doctrine so straightforward and sagacious, propagated by an individual consistently triumphant in battle, gained dominance across vast regions of the globe. In reality, Muslims gained as many adherents via persuasion as through force, encompassing Indians and several Africans. The Turkish invaders also embraced Islam."* (Voltaire 1756).

Voltaire's doubt about the Prophet's illiteracy contrasts with the Islamic tradition, in which the Prophet is described as *ummī* (traditionally understood as "unlettered"; and the Qur'an is attributed to God and not to Muhammad.

Nonetheless, Voltaire's perspectives on Islam extend beyond the aforementioned critical comments; he also articulated favorable opinions in many of his writings. In his *Philosophical Dictionary*, he endeavors to rectify the misunderstandings of Islam, which he designates as "Mohammedanism," prevalent in the Western Christian context. He contends—opposing the assertions of monks and priests—that Muhammad's religion is not hedonistic, and that rituals like fasting, almsgiving (*zakat*), and pilgrimage (*hajj*) are more challenging than generally perceived (Meçin, 2021). He expresses this in the following passage:

> *"I say to you, misguided individuals who—influenced by the rhetoric of other uninformed persons—believe that Muhammad's religion is hedonistic: your assumption is unfounded. You have been deceived over this matter, similar to how you have been on numerous other occasions. Oh, clerics, ministers, and ascetics! If you were mandated to adhere to a religious edict that necessitated fasting from all sustenance for eighteen hours—from dawn until dusk—during July; if you were prohibited from engaging in gambling with the admonition that transgressors would face eternal damnation; if you were denied wine under the same threat; if you were required to undertake a pilgrimage through blistering deserts; if it became a religious obligation to donate a minimum of two and a half percent of your earnings to the impoverished as charity; and if, after being accustomed to having twelve wives, you were suddenly limited to four—would you genuinely label such a faith as carnal?"* (Voltaire, 1764).

Here Voltaire addresses his Christian critics directly and uses the demands of Muslim practice to challenge the charge of sensuality that he himself had repeated at an earlier stage.

4. Analysis of Voltaire's Perspectives on Islam

The play *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète* has been read by several authors as evidence of the latent hostility of the Christian West toward Islam. According to the sources cited here, the play treats the union of the Prophet Muhammad and Zaynab, the wife of Zayd, in a fabricated and inaccurate way. In the Islamic sources, the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh after her divorce from Zayd is presented as a divinely sanctioned step that abolished the prohibition on marrying the former wife of an adopted son . The play's portrayal of the Prophet as ambitious and deceitful has overshadowed the favorable views of Islam in Voltaire's other writings. Despite the play's discrepancies

with historical facts, the intent behind Voltaire's composition remains disputed (Ouazzani, 1987). In 1745 Voltaire dedicated a copy of this play to Pope Benedict XIV, writing:

> *"I trust your Holiness will pardon the leader of a genuine faith for corresponding with the originator of a spurious and savage religion, therefore presenting his theatrical work."* (Voltaire, 1745)

The Pope expresses his delight at having read this admirable tragedy and extends his congratulations to Voltaire. Voltaire subsequently communicated in a correspondence to King Frederick II of Prussia that the primary objective of his play was to illustrate the detrimental effects of fanaticism, although he anticipated significant backlash for selecting this narrative style. Voltaire observed that the play was regarded and contested as sacrilegious not only in the Islamic realm but also by Jansenism Catholics, leading to its prohibition after three showings in Paris (Ouazzani, 1987).

More importantly, Voltaire redirected his criticisms of Christianity, based on its impediments to reason and science, toward Islam. In this piece, devoid of rationality, humanity, or comprehension of tolerance, Voltaire is entirely contradictory to his own principles. Some analysts of Voltaire's correspondence with Frederick II contend that his primary objective, akin to his other writings, was to dismantle ecclesiastical institutions that incited fanaticism and extremism in the medieval Christian realm (Cherkaoui, 2016). However, rather than addressing these critiques head-on, Voltaire has opted for an indirect approach via Islam, the perennial adversary of the West. Nonetheless, this evaluation, as it overlooks the correspondence Voltaire addressed to the Pope reading the work, fails to accurately reflect Voltaire's genuine aims. To assert that Voltaire

employed Islam as a defense while attacking Christianity, and that he harbored no issues with Islam, is, in our view, an inaccurate evaluation. It is more precise to assert that Voltaire undermined his own principles that shaped the Western intellectual tradition and perpetuated the enduring animosity toward Islam in the Western world.

Voltaire's thoughts on Islam are similar to his attitude towards the general concept of religion. While he offered neutral interpretations on some aspects of Islam, a holistic view reveals a subtle irony in his approach. It is important to note that there are two main reasons for his inability to form a definitive opinion on the subject and his occasional condescending and unrealistic interpretations. Firstly, he was raised as a Christian and was a member of Christian culture. This, despite his advocacy of tolerance and opposition to bigotry, prevented him from freeing himself from prejudice. Secondly, he lacked comprehensive knowledge of Islam. Especially considering his statements about the Prophet Muhammad, it seems plausible that the philosopher learned about Islam from sources written from the perspective of Western culture, which he criticized for being biased and lacking accurate information (Başçı, 2002). While Voltaire may not have achieved complete objectivity in his analysis of Islam, it is worth noting that he acknowledged the positive aspects of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad.

His references to Qur'anic verses on certain issues concerning Islamic law and Muslim life, and his willingness to acknowledge Islam as a religion of mercy and forgiveness, are notable aspects of his work (Ali Shah, 2021). It is also possible that some of the inaccuracies in his assessments were not intentional, but rather that he researched Islam from sources written with prejudice and hostility towards Islam. In particular, the negative image of Islam in Western thought, and the impression created by

the Ottoman Empire's conquests, led to a latent exclusion of Islam in Voltaire's mind, as it did throughout the West.

Comparative Analysis of Kant's and Voltaire's Perspectives on Islam

Kant and Voltaire interpreted the concept of Islam using the principles of the Enlightenment, relying on reason, moral norms, and tolerance to assess religion. Both were outsiders and neither was a specialist nor a practitioner. Their use of the word "Mohammedanism" instead of "Islam" indicates that they understood Islam through the lens of Western Christian sources. If Voltaire's misinterpretations are considered as products of the biased descriptions of Islam by some European authors (Joubin, 2000), Kant's reference to Reland indicates his use of a European author to get to know about Islam. In both cases, the concept of Islam is used for other purposes. Voltaire resorted to the idea of Islam to fight religious fanaticism, while Kant referred to it as a means to prove his point about moral religion.

There is a marked difference between Voltaire's and Kant's approaches towards the subject of study. Voltaire's approach is dramatic and personal, with Muhammad taking center stage; in *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète* the Prophet is depicted as a hypocrite and a greedy impostor, whereas in the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Philosophical Dictionary* Voltaire gradually reconsiders him as a significant figure who liberated many parts of Asia from idolatry (Tolan, 2024; Joubin, 2000). Kant, on the contrary, did not express his opinion on this figure as boldly and deeply, and the Prophet was mentioned only in an indirect way, either in footnotes, which do not bring together an immense amount of information, or in critical studies where he considered Islam not as the invention of a particular individual but as a particular aspect of religion.

Thus, Voltaire personally expressed his opinion on the subject while Kant remained abstract.

Their interpretation of revelation also differs. Voltaire raised doubts regarding the prophethood of Muhammad, viewed the Qur'an as a human creation, and claimed that the book's views on heaven, hell, and other-worldly beings have their origins in Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Voltaire thus questioned the origin and authenticity of the religion. In contrast, Kant did not claim that Islam is untrue. According to him, unlike Christianity, Islam seeks legitimacy via success and conquest of other nations rather than through miracles (Elmarsafy, 2014; Al-Sharif, 2016). this account does not reflect the Islamic view of the Qur'an as the Prophet's principal miracle.

The same difference can be seen in their views towards paradise. Voltaire posed the question of where the Islamic idea of paradise originates from and answered with the statement that it is taken from older traditions. In contrast, Kant posed the question whether the will which is motivated by a certain reward can be moral. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant uses "Mahomet's paradise" as an example of a practical reason that is "pathologically conditioned," meaning that it depends on the wish to be happy and therefore is incapable of providing a basis for the categorical imperative (Scaglia, 2025). this is an argument about motivation and is not an account of Islamic belief about paradise.

Both recognized the importance of morality and ritual; however, both made their evaluations by employing different criteria. Voltaire at first characterized Islam as a hedonistic religion devoid of moral principles and later retracted this assertion in his dictionary, stating that Islam cannot be called hedonistic thanks to such practices as fasting, the prohibition of drinking and gambling, pilgrimage, and charity. In other words, he mainly evaluated the practices, while Kant evaluated the reasons

for performing them. In Kant's opinion, the five pillars of Islam were mere external practices, though he acknowledged that charity can be an exception to this rule provided that it is performed due to moral values and religious motivation, but cautioned that charity that is financed through robbery is no charity at all (Kant, 1793) Thus, both philosophers paid particular attention to almsgiving: Voltaire presented it as one of the demanding obligations of Muslim practice, while Kant treated it as the one practice that could have moral worth if performed from a sincere motive.

Their opinions about violence and conquest differed as well. Initially, Voltaire denounced jihad as meaningless violence but later acknowledged that Islam gained as many adherents by persuasion as by force. Kant called the religion proud and brave, thus contrasting it with the "faintheartedness" which he attributed to the Indian religion; what he said can be interpreted as commenting on temperament rather than passing moral judgment. Still, Kant also wrote about the Arabs as a people, whom he described as hospitable, generous, and honest, though still somewhat prone to exaggeration, and he attributed the revival of philosophy after the fall of Rome to the Arabs. As for Voltaire, he did not seem interested in the Arabs as a people, focusing mainly on the founder and doctrine. However, to some degree both treated Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and Muslims as one group (Al-Sharif, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the opinions of Kant and Voltaire on Islam and observed similarities and divergences in their methods, approaches, and attitudes. Both philosophers evaluated religion by the standards of reason as well as morality and referred to the term "Mohammedanism." Their evaluations of Islam were influenced by Western ideas and not by Islamic ones, which

implies that neither philosopher assessed Islam for its own sake. Voltaire made use of Islam to prove that the Christian society is superstitious and Kant used it to support his concepts of national character and legitimate morality.

Voltaire made a more personal interpretation of the theme as he focused on Muhammad and his views of Islam range from satire to respect. He doubted the truthfulness of the divine revelation and gave credit to some earlier religious traditions as sources of Islamic ideas. Kant viewed religion from a different angle and did not challenge the concept of revelation from the historical perspective; he rather attempted to find out how faith can justify itself and whether the motivations of a person can be moral if he acts because of the hope for a reward. When it came to rituals, Voltaire compared their difficulty while Kant was concerned about why those rituals were being followed. Voltaire's views changed over time and have to be followed chronologically, whereas Kant's remarks are fewer and are scattered across works of different periods. In the case of Kant, he wrote about the Arabs as well and gave them credit for preserving philosophy after the fall of Rome, which Voltaire ignored.

Both thinkers fail to practice what they preach. Voltaire was openly biased and this can be seen in a play he wrote that distorted the life of the Prophet for the sake of drama. Kant's bias was more structural: it was gentle, yet it indicated that he considered the modern European way of thinking to be an example of all other believes, thinking of Arabic, Mongolian, and Muslim peoples as one. Nevertheless, both authors paid a tribute to their respect for Islam, Voltaire recognizing the monotheism and discipline of the religion, and Kant paying a tribute to the intellectual role of the Arabs and the moral importance of sincere charity. What these two accounts can demonstrate is that the universalism of the Enlightenment was implemented in an inconsistent way, and the relations between the two

religions were influenced by historical prejudices and second-hand sources. Further research is needed to find out if later Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers took these examples in their works, and how those in the Islamic world reacted to them.

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Author Contributions

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