

# An Early Modern View of Islam (1608)

## Abstract

Early modern European religious divisions extended beyond the conflicts between Reformation Era confessional controversies and violence. Early modern Christians articulated varying opinions about Islam and Muslims, often in openly hostile and racist terms. Both Luther and Erasmus wrote about Islam, often portraying Ottoman Turks as a punishment against ungodly Christians. This excerpt, perhaps written by the engraver of the accompanying image, Christoffel von Sichem, is from a popular illustrated work, first produced as a series of woodcuts, and then expanded with text, which appeared first in Dutch around 1607, and throughout the mid-seventeenth century in German, Latin, and English. Here, the author describes Machometh (Muhammad) as a Christian heretic, a common description used as a way to attack contemporary heretics and describes him in starkly negative terms.

## Source



In the year of our Saviour Jesus Christ 622 [...] began the kingdom of the Saracens in the Orient on 15 July (on which date the Saracens have their annual Alhigera, that is peregrination [pilgrimage] and the first accounted to Mahomet), and their first Amiras or king was Machometh, the son of Abdalla, ... He was born in Arabia, to poor and mean parents. In his youth he was captured and sold by his enemies to a rich merchant from Africa, named Abdimoneplis, with whom, due to his courage, he achieved so much credit and favour that he was not treated as a slave but as a free man in his master's family. And he became the foremost factor over all his business, by which he came into the great acquaintance of Christians and Jews. At the same time a certain monk named Sergius was banned out of Constantinople on account of the Nestorian sect. This one came to Africa, pressing himself into the household of Abdimoneplis, where he came to know Machometh, and became amazed at his sharpness and they got along. Under his [Muhammad's] name they began secretly to build a new sect, which would be neither entirely Jewish nor entirely Christian, but be collected out of both religions and made into one. Then Abdimoneples died

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without children, leaving behind a rich widow, whom Machometh bewitched with strange arts to love him, so she married him and made him lord and master of all of the great wealth that her husband had left her. After she had given him the name of a prophet, thanks to unbelievable practices arising from his falling sickness, the woman passed away, and he thus inherited all of her possessions, having foreseen all. And having gathered around him a crowd of people, he finally declared himself publicly as a Prophet, further he proposed his false and perverse opinions to each one, verifying them with false miracles, and with the force of weapons made them accept and believe. His might he made grow stronger over time, bringing various lands and peoples under his rulership. He was the author of the renowned book called the Alcoran, sometimes called by the Turks as Alfurcan, which he had issued from God through the Angel Gabriel, received over the forty years of his adulthood. It is today regarded by the Turks as very holy, and as dictated from God, divided into many chapters which the Mahumetists call Azoaras. From this Book Machometh says: that he had received it from heaven. That its contents are fixed, concise, unopposable, without falsehood; that the explanation is from God alone, and the wise believe it firmly in its entirety. That in accordance with this Book all disputes must be dropped. That no doctrine is perfect except that which comes from the Old and New Testaments and this Alcoran. That its despisers will be punished and tortured into eternity. That the great sin is to change anything in it, or to do or neglect to do that leads to bringing it into dispute. That this Book is the light of the Holy Scripture. That the power of this Book is so much, that if it were placed on a mountain, it would burst from it.

Other blasphemies I will set aside, apart from that, among other things, he said that the things written in Deuteronomy 18 were fulfilled in his person: "A Prophet like me the Lord your God will awaken; him shall you hear, and from him must be understood." Further, that he was sent from God to the Jews and Christians, in order to teach concisely things that they had known before. That he also had received from God the power to release anyone from an oath, and thereby give to them as many women to marry as they desired. There are many places in his writings drawn from the Old and New Testament, though very much falsified; he has sullied the histories of Noah, Abraham, Pharaoh, John the Baptist, yes even that of our Saviour, with vile fables and coarse lies. They had strange feelings about God, entirely erroneous about Christ and the Holy Spirit [Ghost], denying both their godhead. His opinions about the creation of the world, the angels and demons, humans and their fall, of sin, law, gospel, salvation, faith, good works, further on the resurrection, paradise, hell, and other matters, I will leave aside for brevity's sake. About the Jews, Machometh said: "that they are like an ass which carries a valuable book," since the Jews carry the Old Testament and decorate it with ornaments, but without having any true understanding of it. This child of corruption had also died [...]

[The Caliph] had Muhammad's bones placed in an iron coffin in which lodestones had been secreted, and through their power they hung in the air, whereby the simple people believed that he had entered into his sanctity, and had been resurrected, as he had prophesied.

The simple Arabs, Turks, and Saracens finished with this misunderstanding in 1470 when a lightning bolt struck a great part of this Temple at Mecca, together with the vaulted grave of Machomet, casting the iron coffin to the ground. But it was not long after that it was raised up again, and there it remains to delude the foolish and make credible the lies. [...] However, in the case of Machomet, it was not a matter of heresy in the Christian religion, as it had been with Arius and others succeeding him, but a public enmity between Christ and his religion, whose following [i.e., Muhammad's] has existed for a thousand years since the year 622, seeking through public wars to eradicate it [the church]. Since Machomet has, despite this, truly said that from the first establishment of his Law, a thousand years would pass, then his Alcoran and Alfurca would cease. May God in his foresight make this happen.

Translation courtesy of Gary Waite

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Source: Christoffel van Sichem, *Machomet Ertz-ketzer zu Mecha in Arabia*, woodcut from the book *Historische Beschreibung und abbildunge der fürnembste Haupt-Ketzer*, 1608. Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, <https://nds.museum-digital.de/object/34924>

Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum

Recommended Citation: An Early Modern View of Islam (1608), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:image-5356>> [April 03, 2025].