

Muhammad's Iconography and the Antichristian Evil in William Langland's "Piers Plowman"

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Abstract

This paper examines the image of Muhammad, and the Muslim at large, as delineated by William Langland in his "Piers Plowman". Langland draws on Muhammad's traditional iconography as established by medieval polemicists. At the center of this iconography is the idea that Muhammad is typologically an Antichrist type and hence epitomizes the root of the Antichristian evil—cupidity. As such, in his deception of the heathen, he becomes a parody of Christ, and a symbol of the Antichrist's two traditional natures: deception and hypocrisy. As the book is based on the charity-cupidity thesis, Muhammad's life becomes a metaphor for the movement from charity to cupidity, in that he was a cardinal, a member a Church, but he became a heretic, an enemy to the Church and hence to the Christians. In this sense, he becomes a ready metaphor for the English clergy, who, in their corruption and cupidity, lead people away from the Christian truth.

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تدرس هذه المقالة الصورة التقليدية لمحمد (عليه السلام) بوصفه رمزاً للمسيح الدجال كما تصورها القصة الأليغورية (بيرز بلاومان) لمؤلفها ويليام لانغلاند. يعتمد لانغلاند في تصويره لمحمد على الصورة التقليدية التي ترسخت في زمنه في العصور الوسطى، فحسب تلك الصورة يمثل محمد شكلاً من أشكال المسيح الدجال، فهو يجسد الشهوة والطمع والجشع. وحسب هذه الصورة فهو حين قام بخداع الوثنيين ليؤمنوا به صار في ذلك يحاكي المسيح في دعوته الناس للإيمان وأصبح رمزاً للطبعيتين المرتبطين بالمسيح الدجال، وهما الخداع والنفاق، وبما أن القصة بأكملها تقوم على فكرة الجشع مقابل الاحسان، فإن لانغلاند يسوق حياة محمد باعتبارها رمزاً للتحويل من الإحسان إلى الجشع، فهو حسب الصورة النمطية الزائفة التي سادت في العصور الوسطى في الغرب كان كاردينالاً مسيحياً وجزءاً من الكنيسة المسيحية ولكنه صار مهرطقاً وعدواً للكنيسة والمسيحيين، وبهذا أصبح رمزاً لرجال الدين الإنجليز الذين تمرغوا في الفساد والجشع وأضلوا الناس عن دينهم.

In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said said that to have knowledge of the Orient is for the West “to have authority, which means for ‘us’ to deny autonomy to it, since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it.” Knowledge about the Oriental qualities, character, culture and history gives power since it can be “contained and represented by dominating frameworks.” “This reservoir of accredited knowledge,” Said goes on to say, “designed the East morally, geographically and culturally and has been employed by Western writers such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pope and others”

Said’s idea of knowledge and power is pertinent to the main discussion of this study. Knowledge about Islam and Muslims was formulated and accumulated through the theological polemics against Islam, which, for the most part, tried to represent and contain Islam as a confusing phenomenon that seemed both familiar and alien at the same time. This authority not only shaped the attitude towards Islam and the Muslims, but also silenced and situated them against the Christian West in some coherent and comprehensible way to the Western mind? In the process of gaining this knowledge, Islam and the Muslims were deconstructed and created anew so that they would fit the diabolic Antichrist tradition. Hence every detail of Muhammad’s life, every detail in the Islamic history found an ample explanation in the ready-made Antichrist tradition. In short, Islam and the Muslims were tailored to fit this image.

This dialectics between knowledge and power created what Normal Daniel calls “a deformed image of Islam” in the European conscious mind. This paper studies the deformed image of Muhammad and his iconography as Antichristian evil in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. Coupling Muhammad with Lady Meed as a symbol of cupidity, Langland could speak of Muhammad and be understood by his Christian audience. However, whether this iconography corresponds to reality is irrelevant to this world.

Most scholars agree that the main theme of *Piers the Plowman* is the disparity between charity and cupidity, between the love of God and worldly love, and the failure of the contemporary clergy of the fourteenth century to practice charity. The opening scene is set in a wilderness—heaven and hell with the middle earth in between-- as a locale where man must choose which of the other he will go to after

death. For Langland, this is exactly the predicament of the churchman. The solution for this predicament is communicated to us through Anima, the soul of conscience, in Passus XV. As Anima tells us, the clergy are the root and the cause of the good as well as the evil in the whole community. Their holiness makes it holy and their viciousness makes it viscous, because lay people understand their teaching through the clergy's example. Hence the transformation of the society is contingent upon the reformation of the clergy. The simple layman who truly believes will not be blamed by God for the defective performance of their priests. Concurrent with this theme is the hope expressed by Anima that one day the clergy will follow the examples of the early Christian saints and recognize the importance of charity in regaining the Church's unity and order. However, the Church is in a chaotic state because the churchmen are mire in their cupidity and sins, and thus invert the basic principles of the Christian creed. In actuality, these clergy, instead of leading a Christ-like life, follow the principles of the Antichrist. Thus the whole work presents an apocalyptic view of history, which moves from perfect biblical past, to the present turmoil of the church and looks forward to the future salvation of mankind when the clergy amend and unify the Church through the principles of charity.

The traditional iconography of Muhammad is interwoven with this theme in two central scenes of the work. In Passus III, Muhammad is associated with Lady Meed—an allegory of cupiditas—and both are adumbrated as powers that corrupt the clergy and the laymen and stand between man and the salvation of his soul. In order to see the associations attached to Mohammad, it is important here to examine the context in which Mohammad's iconography is brought. In the scene, Meed is led by the beadles and the bailiffs to stand trial before the King for her crimes. While Meed is waiting to be brought into the presence of the King, a confessor (friar) comes to hear from her. After confessing her sins, Meed hands him a piece of gold and the friar without delay gives her absolution. He also asks her to provide money for the glass of the gable, and, in return, her name will be engraved on the windowpane of the church. Meed replies that she is willing to pay any amount of money if the friar agrees to absolve anyone whose main concern is to gratify their carnal desires. She is especially concerned that the friar absolves the deadly sin of

lechery. This scene forms the heart of Langland's attack on the moral decay of the institutional church. The corruption of the confessional by friars is adumbrated. The friar is also guilty of simony in offering spiritual gains in return for money, as is Meed in attempting to buy salvation with gold.

This scene is followed by another in which a group of retailers are to stand trial on charges of making excessive profit. Lady Meed interferes on their behalf and suggests that they make cash-offerings as a consideration for supporting their cause. "Loue hem echone," Lady Meed told the mayor, "and suffer hem selle somdel ayeins reson"(III:91-92).⁽¹⁾ Langland here attacks the deadly sin of greed; he believes that to exceed a "just price" for commodities, and therefore exploit the poor, is one of the gravest sins.

The King gives Lady Meed pardon provided that she marries Conscience. Meed gladly consents to the proposal, but Conscience does not and starts pleading his case against Meed. Her main vices, according to Conscience, are that she has direct access to the pope and other clergymen and that she has married the clergy to greed. At this point, Conscience, in an apocalyptic vision, predicts the state of the Millennium when reason and peace rule and Lady Meed will no longer hold sway. At this Second Coming, when Jews and Muslims will worship God and acknowledge the truth of the Christian creed, it will be an evil day for Meed and Muhammad for a good name in heaven would be worth more than the earthly treasures. That day will witness the end of Muhammad, the apostate and servant of Satan and the forerunner of the Antichrist, who misled the Muslims:

And er this fortune falle fynde me shal the worste
Be sixe sonnes and a ship a half shef of Arwes;
And the myddel of the Moone shal make the Iewes torne
And Saresins for that siȝte shul shul synge Gloria in
excelsis,
For Makometh and Mede myshappe shul that tyme,
For Melius est bonum nomen quam diuicie multe.' (III:
325-330).

However, before the Second Coming, the Christians will go through trials and tribulations as a chastisement for their sins. The portents to precede the establishment of the new order are based on the medieval

prophecies of the signs of Last Days. Langland's allusions here are faithfully in accord with the medieval apocalyptic view of history. The crucifixion took place at the time of the full moon (myddel of the Moone) and introduced a new order. The new order of which Conscience speaks will begin at the time of the Paschal moon. The Jews then will be converted, and the Muslims at the sight of the moon will advance to a full belief in the Christian Trinity and the Holy Ghost.⁽²⁾

Langland draws on the traditional iconography of Muhammad established in medieval polemics against Islam, in which he is identified as an Antichrist type who mislead the heathen from the path of salvation. As Michael Paul rightly notes, the heathens are defined in *Piers Plowman* as the people who, by nature, should be part of the Church as they believe in the First Commandment, but they have gone against their nature when they reject the divinity of Christ and the Trinity. As a result, they are denied charity or salvation. The culprit who made the heathen go astray is Muhammad.⁽³⁾ As the leader of the heathen, Muhammad became then an idol made of gold—the golden calf of the Biblical desert⁽⁴⁾ (Meltiziki 208).

Pertinent to this idea is the formulaic coupling of Muhammad with the root of Antichristian evil, Lady Meed, who allegorizes cupiditas. Indeed, Muhammad's cupidity is derived from a long tradition of interpreting his life. In this tradition, he is conceived of as a man who licensed promiscuity and introduced sexual perversion into this world; who learned necromancy and magic to satisfy his greed and gain control and power over his people; and who spent his life accumulating wealth. In other words, Muhammad's life exemplified for Langland the adoption of a worldly attitude towards religious matters, a theme that lies at the heart of *Piers Plowman*. As such, we are meant to see the Muhammadan traits in the Confessor who absolves Lady Meed in return for gold, and in the retailers who risk the salvation of their souls in return for worldly gains, and, at large, in Lady Meed who promulgates carnality and leads people away from the Christian charity. His iconography is embodied in all of these vice figures because through his carnality and cupidity he caused the heathen to deny their nature and reject the Christian truth. In this sense, as Paul puts it, Muhammad "looks backward to lady Meed and forward to the coming of Antichrist."⁽⁵⁾

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In Passaus XV, Langland expands on this theme. Muhammad is here presented in contrast with the early Christian saints, like St. Thomas, Anthony, Peter Andrew and Mary Magdalene, who led a life based on the principles of poverty and charity. In this scene, Anima laments that the clergy his day have ignored the examples of these saints. As a consequence of the corrupt clergy, the nature of the universe appears to be in disharmony. For example, sailors, shepherds, and sowers can no longer predict the weather and the children are taught envy instead of grammar, which, according to Augustine, is the fundamental principle in the comprehension of God's law.⁽⁶⁾ In such a state, the time of the Antichrist and the eschaton is approaching.⁽⁷⁾

At this point, Mohammad is introduced as the Christian cardinal the heathens, both the Saracens and Jews, away from the unity of the Church. To illustrate the perfidious nature of Muhammad, Langland presents an episode from Muhammad's life, as interpreted by medieval Christian historians and polemicists. According to Anima, the Muslims share with the Christians the basic belief that there is an all-powerful person. However, it was the viscous act of a human being—Muhammad—which led the Muslims of Syria into infidelity and heresy. Langland tells the reader that Mohammad was a good Christian who went corrupt because of his cupidity and creed. Upon the request of the Church, Muhammad goes to Syria in order to convert the heathen there. In return for this service, the Church promises him that he will become pope when the current pope dies. Muhammad succeeds in his mission to convert the Saracens; however, the Church does not fulfill its promise and appoints another cardinal pope. Thwarted in his ambitions, Muhammad leaves Rome and travels back to Syria where he leads a heresy and hence creates a schism in the Church. To convince people of the truth of his revelation, he trained a white dove to pick corn from his ear and claimed it was God's messenger:

A[c]oon Makometh, a man, in mysbileue
Brouȝte Saraȝens of Surree, and see in what manere.
This Makometh was cristen [man], and for moste noȝt ben pope
Into surrie he souȝte, and thoruȝ hise sotle wittes
Daunted a dowue and day and nyȝt hire fedde (XV:397-401).

This stinking image of Muhammad as a selfishly ambitious Christian priest forcefully indict contemporary English churchmen. The English clergy are corrupt because they adopt the way of living of Muhammad, their fellow brethren. Like him, the dove they feed is called Greed⁽⁸⁾:

[Ac] for drede of the deeth I dar noȝt telle truthe,
How englisshe clerkes a coluere fede that coueitise hiȝte,
And ben manered after Makometh that no man vseth
trouthe (XV:414-416).

Langland ends this scene in a crusading tone. There is a need for an action of charity to reverse Muhammad's action of cupidity and convert the heathens.

Obviously Langland draws on Muhammad's traditional iconography as established by medieval polemicists. At the center of this iconography is the idea that Muhammad is typologically an Antichrist type and hence epitomizes the root of the Antichristian evil—cupidity. As such, in his deception of the heathen, he becomes a parody of Christ, and a symbol of the Antichrist's two traditional natures: deception and hypocrisy. As the book is based on the charity-cupidity thesis, Muhammad's life becomes a metaphor for the movement from charity to cupidity, in that he was cardinal, part of the Church, but he became a heretic, an enemy to the Church and hence to the Christians. In this sense, he becomes a ready metaphor for the English clergy, who, in their corruption and cupidity, lead people away from the Christian truth.

Notes

- 1 Piers Plowman: The B Version, eds., George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, (London: The Athlone Press, 1975). Hereafter cited in the text.
- 2 Pearsall's note on these lines, William Langland, Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-Text, ed. Derek Pearsall, (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).
- 3 Michael R. Paul, "Mahomet and the Conversion of the Heathen in Piers Plowman," English Language Notes. X (1972), p.2. The epithets "pagan," "heathen" and "heretic" were all used to refer to the Muslims, as they meant according to the OED all non-Christians. Peter the Vulnerable, for instance, showed undecidedness on whether to call the Muslims pagan or heretics; however, he concludes that either epithets make them non-Christian and excludes them from the people of the Church, in that they deny the divinity of Christ and the Trinity. Even in Langland, the term heathen is used to describe the Muslims and the Jews, while at the same time he describes Mohammad a Christian heretic. This tendency is also seen in Mandeville who some times describes the Muslim as misbelievers, other times as heathens, while admitting that, apart from the divinity of Christ and the Trinity, Islam is so similar to Christianity that, with slight modifications, it will match all of its tenets. In the mystery plays, Mohammad is presented as a pagan god. In the Middle English romances, the Muslims are presented as uniformly heathen who worship the pagan god Mohammad and other gods. Generally, the tendency in medieval literature, more than it is in the polemics and historical accounts, is to present the Muslims as heathens. That is probably because as Norman Daniel (Heroes and Saracens: An Interpretation of the Chansons de Geste, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP., 1984, pp. 122-123) suggests paganism is a literary convention created by the poet to arouse and hold the interest of the audience and hence poem takes out the undesirable kind of tension by defining what is right and what is wrong. Along the same line it is interesting to notice that even the word "Saracen,"

familiar in England since the time of Bede, by 1300 extended its meaning from "Arab" or "Muslim" to any non-Christian or heathen or pagan. Many of the "Saracen" characters in the English metrical romances have nothing to do with Muslims or Arabs. For instance, in *King Horn*, the Saracens are Viking marauders; in *Arthur and Merlin* they are plain Saxons (See Beatrice White, "Saracens and Crusaders: From Fact to Allegory," in *Medieval Literature and Civilization*, eds. D. A. Pearsall and R. A. Waldron, London: The Athlone Press, 1969, p. 171).

4 Dorothy Meltzki, p. ?

5 "Mahomet and the Conversion of the Heathen in *Piers Plowman*," p.2.

6 Michael Paul, p. 2.

7 Bloomfield, p. 114.

8 This is also reminiscent of John Wycliff who gives the figure of Mohammad an immediacy for fourteenth century England. Muhammad becomes for him a metaphor for the god the corrupt clergy follow; he becomes symbolic of the cupidity that divides the Church.

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