

Charles  
Tieszen

## The Christian Encounter with Muhammad

*How Theologians have  
Interpreted the Prophet*



BLOOMSBURY

### **Book Review:**

## Making Space for Prophet Muhammad in Christianity

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Faith  
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Book Review:

## **Making Space for Prophet Muhammad in Christianity**

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Craig Considine, Ph.D.



***Christian theologians have long tried to make sense of Muhammad (d. 632), the prophet of Islam, and his place in history. Some of these Christians have questioned or denied Muhammad’s prophethood, while others have found space for him to appear alongside other prophets in Christianity.***

Charles Tieszen, a historian on Christian and Muslim encounters throughout history, considered these matters and more in *The Christian Encounter with Muhammad – How Theologians have Interpreted the Prophet* (Bloomsbury 2021).

Two of the texts examined by Tieszen – *Letter to a Muslim Friend* (ca. 1200), written by Melkite Bishop Paul of Antioch, and *Letter from the People of Cyprus*, authored by an anonymous Christian in the early fourteenth-century, offered favorable views on Muhammad. Tieszen concluded that Paul of Antioch “found space for [him] in Christianity” (p. 106). The latter text, based on the earlier text written by Paul, effectively gave Muhammad a “conscious nod” regarding the validity of his

prophethood. Tieszen concluded that both texts stressed that Muhammad was sent by God in “some authentic way” (p. 97).

Paul, nevertheless, claimed that God sent Muhammad only to Arabic speakers who had no previous knowledge of the one, true God (p. 97). Paul of Antioch, as Tieszen contended, believed that Muhammad’s primary purpose was merely to confirm “Christian truth” and that his prophethood represented the finality of Christianity rather than the beginning of Islam. This sort of recognition to Tieszen made Muhammad “redundant” in the eyes of a number of Christian theologians (p. 104).

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***Patriarch Timothy proclaimed that “Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people... He walked in the path of prophets, and trod in the track of the lovers of God.”***

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Tieszen also examined the works of Timothy (d. 823), the East Syrian Patriarch who appeared to honor Muhammad even more than Paul of Antioch. Patriarch Timothy proclaimed that “Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people... He walked in the path of prophets, and trod in the track of the lovers of God.” Tieszen acknowledged Timothy’s positive view on Muhammad, but he also made it clear that Timothy did not view Muhammad as a prophet. He rather identified him as someone with “prophet-like qualities.”

Mary Fisher (d. 1698), an English Quaker from Yorkshire who had converted to Quakerism in the early 1650s, is another Christian examined in *The Christian Encounter with Muhammad*. Fisher's views on Prophet Muhammad were expressed in *False prophets and false teachers described*, a Quaker text published in 1652, which described a prophet as someone who is approved by God "in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in prisons, in tumults, in watching, by fastings, by [purity], by knowledge, by long suffering, by kindnesses, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the Power of God" (p. 113-114).

Around the year 1658, Fisher was hosted by Mehmed IV (d. 1693), the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, in Istanbul. Mehmed IV told Fisher to openly speak about her Quaker faith without anxiety or fear, because the members of his royal court had "good hearts." Fisher explained to the Ottomans that according to Quaker thought, later prophets would come in the same spirit as those discussed in Deuteronomy and that they would "minister in the light of the Prophet, Jesus" (p. 117). Fisher thus claimed that the "Spirit of God" had been poured onto everyone, Muhammad included.

Fisher's encounter with Sultan Mehmed IV stands in stark contrast to her treatment by other Christians in the Western hemisphere. In 1655 Fisher traveled to Barbados where she preached Quakerism. She arrived to Boston a year later, making her one of the first Quakers to visit New England, which was governed by Puritans at that time. Fisher's arrival in Boston was originally rejected on the grounds

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that she was a heretic. When she arrived to Boston her collection of books was seized and subsequently burned. After spending five weeks in prison on the grounds of heresy, the authorities deported her back to Barbados. Tieszen made it clear that Fisher did not meet the same “ferocious response and punishment” for her religious views in her encounter with the Ottoman Sultan as she experienced in England and England’s colonies in the Western hemisphere.

Christian theologians throughout history have nevertheless taken an antagonistic approach to Muhammad’s prophethood. These Christians, as Tieszen pointed out, aimed to assert the alleged superiority of “Christian truth” by engaging in what he referred to as “counter-history,” or a version of history that contradicts or opposes another group’s version of historical events. Tieszen argued that Christian theologians used the tactic of counter-history to deny the identity of Muhammad as a prophet, as claimed by Muslims, by decontextualizing and misconstruing information arising out of traditional Islamic sources.

Tieszen turned to the views of ‘Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, a West Syrian Christian leader, to highlight the effects of counter-history. To him, Al-Kindi’s central argument in his lengthy *Risala*, an early ninth century text, was that Muhammad was a “scheming trickster” who lacked the characteristics of a prophet, like being able to perform miracles or demonstrating foresight in military endeavors. Al-Kindi also accused Muhammad of grabbing power by marrying Khadijah, a successful merchant and trade caravan owner, and duping his peers into believing that he was a prophet.

Similarly, the *Istoria de Mahomet*, a short biography of Muhammad written in Al-Andalus between the years 750 and 850, depicted the prophet of Islam in a negative, if not demeaning light. The text stated that Muhammad, nearing his death, predicted his resurrection three days after his death by the Angel Gabriel. When no

resurrection occurred and Muhammad's body began to rot, *Istoria de Mahomet* claimed that dogs followed the scent of Muhammad's rotting body and devoured his side. The author of the text claimed that the unsavory end to Muhammad's life was appropriate for someone who led so many people to hell (p. 62-63). These kind of "counter-history characterizations" of Prophet Muhammad are counterproductive in fostering stronger bonds between Christians and Muslims. Dishonoring Muhammad, a figure revered by the global Muslim population, only fans the flames of hate and inhumanity.

*The Christian Encounter with Muhammad* covered an impressive and informative range of Christian views on Prophet Muhammad. To some Christian theologians, Muhammad was similar to other prophets in Christianity, while others viewed him as a "false prophet." A more common trend in Tieszen's analysis is that Christian theologians saw Muhammad as someone sent only for Arabs. The book ultimately shows that the coexistence of prophet-like individuals served as a similar dilemma throughout history that it is today. Reflecting on the views of Christian theologians outlined by Tieszen sets the stage for continuing and expanding the educational process surrounding Prophet Muhammad that Christians and Muslims desperately need today.

## **About CFG**

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating semi-academic analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

## **About the Contributor**

Dr. Craig Considine is an award-winning professor and the best-selling author of *The Humanity of Muhammad – A Christian View* (Blue Dome Press, 2020). He is recognized as an authority in interfaith dialogue, particularly Christian and Muslim relations. Dr. Considine has written seven books for the field of Islamic studies, including *People of the Book – Prophet Muhammad's Encounter with Christians* (Hurst & Oxford, 2021), *Muslims in America: Examining the Facts* (ABC-CLIO, 2018), and *Islam, Race, and Pluralism in the Pakistani Diaspora* (Routledge, 2017). Dr. Considine's articles have appeared in *Sociology and Religions* and his op-eds have been published in *Newsweek* and *Foreign Policy*. He also directed the critically acclaimed documentary film *Journey into America*. He holds a Ph.D. in sociology from Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, an MSc in international relations from Royal Holloway, the University of London, and a BA in international relations from American University.



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