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Visual (Mis)Representations of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad

The European representation of Islam, especially from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Age, but also in our times, could in a certain way be classified within what the anthropologist Donald E. Brown (followed by Steven Pinker) calls "human universals". Belief in the supernatural, along with fear, judgment of Others or self-image form some of the universal frameworks that have made the representation of Islam familiar throughout the world. The repetition of certain elements associated with Islam, its prophet and its society have created a prevalent image that in many respects has replaced reality. This phenomenon can be seen in a particular mindset in the representations of the Prophet Muhammad. Not all these representations are the same and not all participate fully in these traits, but the vast majority are loaded with negative connotations. This fear/hate of Islam has meant that the more 'neutral' or 'positive' representations of Muhammad have gone quite unnoticed by the mainstream of distrust of a prophet who challenged the most classical religious beliefs in European history. Many of these representations will be discussed in this essay, in an effort to demonstrate the complexities of going from the representation of the unknown to the representation of the untrustworthy.