

**VOLTAIRE'S AMBIVALENT REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM: AN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY
ANALYSIS OF THE XVIII CENTURY ENLIGHTENMENT****Ahmad Al Ghiffari Tauhid*, Ajid Thohir, Fathia Lestari**

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Abstract

Voltaire's critical stance toward religion constitutes a controversial discourse within Enlightenment intellectual history, particularly regarding his satirical critiques of religious dogma and clerical institutions. However, his position on Islam reveals a unique, non-monolithic characteristic that has rarely been examined as a central theme in Voltaire scholarship. Utilizing the Historical method with an Intellectual History approach, this study conducts a descriptive textual analysis by identifying, classifying, and synthesizing textual representations of Voltaire's ambivalence toward Islam across his corpus within the eighteenth-century intellectual context. The findings indicate that critique and appreciation coexisted simultaneously without a linear chronology, showing no significant shift in his attitude throughout his career. This study challenges previous discourses that have tended to position Voltaire within a dichotomous or chronological framework, offering a more nuanced analytical model that enriches Voltaire scholarship and intellectual history by showing how conflicting representations coexist within a single corpus.

Keywords: Voltaire; Islam; Ambivalence; Intellectual history.

INTRODUCTION

"*Écrasez l'infâme*" (Crush the infamous thing) Few slogans in Western Intellectual History carry the same polemical weight as Voltaire's lifelong battle cry against religious dogma, fanaticism, and clerical authority (Thohir & Sahidin, 2019; Voltaire, 1865). Yet for a figure so thoroughly identified with dismantling religious orthodoxy, his engagement with Islam presents a striking anomaly. Voltaire condemned Islam, but also admired it, not sequentially, nor as a shift of conviction, but simultaneously across decades, genres, and the entire arc of his Intellectual career (Cami, 2013).

The emergence of religious dictatorship or oligarchy that aims to establish theocratic control is a result of inadequate understanding of Theo-humanistic ethics and contextual-integrative methodology in Islamic studies, together with its associated tools. Additionally, there is disagreement between academics who support critical freedom and power, which is frequently repressive, because there is no precise and contextual articulation and no distinction made between responsibilities in the political and religious spheres. The secularism that Turkey has experienced in the past can teach other Muslim nations valuable lessons. Similarly, the detrimental effects of political marginalisation on religious beliefs in Western nations, as demonstrated in the New Order eras of France and Indonesia.

Alexander Bevilacqua characterizes roughly two centuries of the Enlightenment era as marked by the enthusiasm for collecting, translating, and studying Arabic manuscripts among rulers, ministers of culture, wealthy private citizens, and "learned travelers" (Bevilacqua, 2018). Once scholars began to gain direct access to these texts in the primary language, they began to cultivate a more sympathetic view, transforming Islam in the Western mind from a civilization of aggression and a religion of error to a culture of worthy study, praise, and even imitation, a movement Bevilacqua terms the Republic of Arabic Letters (Eigenauer, 2018). George Sale's 1734 edition of the

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Article History | Submitted: 16 June 2026 | Revised: 23 July 2026 | Accepted: 25 July 2026 | Publish: 31 July 2026

HOW TO CITE (APA 6th Edition):

Tauhid, Ahmad Al Ghiffari., Thohir, Ajid., Lestari, Fathia. (2026). Voltaire's Ambivalent Representation of Islam: An Intellectual History Analysis of the XVIII Century Enlightenment. *Juspi: Jurnal Sejarah Peradaban Islam*. 10(1), page.292-301

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.30829/juspi.v10i1.30320>

Koran in English broadened the Western world's understanding of Islam by presenting it as a religious movement worthy of study as a social entity rather than as the object of polemical attack. Yet even when polemic was the goal among the Christian European writers, the effect of this new scholarship was to require "a high standard of truth" based upon evidence from native Islamic sources (Eigenauer, 2018).

By around 1750, the momentum of the Republic of Arabic letters began to wane. Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Gibbon each drew Islamic history into their own writings, leveraging the scholarship built up in the previous one hundred years, but also using it selectively and in a certain sense, polemically (Eigenauer, 2018). However, on the other hand, Rousseau sits uneasily among various theorists regarding "Enlightenment attitudes" toward Islam. He wrote comparatively little about the seven years his father spent in a Muslim society (Istanbul), or what he learned as a child about the Muslim world from so intimate an acquaintance. Instead, Rousseau emphasized the universality of hospitality in the muslim world, claiming that beggars did not exist among the Turks because of the work of the religious institutions of charity that were open to Muslim and non-Muslims alike. "By religious principle," he wrote, "they are hospitable even toward enemy of their faith" (Coller, 2014).

Beyond the well-known critiques that define Voltaire's corpus, controversial works such as *"le fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophet"* (1743) provoked responses from Muslim communities and scholars, who condemned it as a blasphemous assault on Islamic values and the figure of the Prophet (Haciismailoğlu, 2020). Voltaire's critique of Islam exhibits a distinctive form, unlike his more consistently negative stance toward Christian and Jewish dogmatism. While he criticized Muhammad as a Prophet figure, Voltaire simultaneously praised Islamic monotheism, which he considered purer and more rational than the Christian Trinity (Voltaire, 1880, pp. 163-174), and acknowledged the intellectual contributions of the Islamic Golden Age. This ambivalence has rarely been examined as a central theme in Voltaire scholarship, which tends to frame his position as a binary opposition rather than a complex simultaneous coexistence of critique and appreciation (Salda, Rijal, & HM. Yasin, 2022).

The general term "ambivalence" is derived from the Latin roots *ambo* (both) and *valentia* (strength or capacity), and denotes the simultaneous coexistence of two opposed orientations toward a subject, person, idea, or situation (Perakslis, 2020). But in this study, however, within a framework of Intellectual history, ambivalence is used as an analytical category to describe the simultaneous presence of conflicting reactions, beliefs, or evaluations in Voltaire's Corpus; it refers to the coexistence of positive and negative valences toward Islam, rather than a psychological diagnosis of Voltaire (Baggio, 2019; Hodge, 2022).

The ambivalence evident in Voltaire's corpus is not always concentrated in a single work, such as *"le fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophet"* (1743), that play does present a sharply critical portrayal of the figure of Muhammad through Voltaire's characteristic style: allegory, sarcasm, and satire explicitly question certain Islamic values. Yet on the broader scale, *"Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations"* (1756) displays a different approach: as a classic historical-philosophical effort to produce "universal history", Voltaire treats Islam only in a few chapters, situating it among non-European cultures, and it begins before Charlemagne through the age of Louis XIV, while also touching Eastern Histories, colonialism, and non-European societies (Voltaire, 1835). Thus, Voltaire's ambivalence should be understood as dispersed across his corpus, manifesting in fragmentary ways across different texts.

In previous studies, Edwin Cami identifies the presence of ambiguity in Voltaire's representation of Islam, particularly through *"le fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophet"* (1743), where criticism and appreciation toward Islam appear simultaneously within Voltaire's corpus. However, the study mainly offers an interpretative reading of Voltaire's representation of Islam within a particular work, rather than systematically classifying the broader textual manifestations of ambivalence across his corpus (Cami, 2013). Meanwhile, on the other side, Salda et al. interpreted Voltaire's attitude toward Islam within a chronological framework, portraying a transformation from hostility to eventual admiration of Islamic values (Salda et al., 2022). Despite these

contributions, neither study offers a systematic mapping of ambivalence across Voltaire's broader corpus using an intellectual history framework; Cami's reading remains confined to a single work, while Salda et al.'s chronological model overlooks textual coexistence within the same period. This gap, the absence of a corpus-wide, structurally classified account of ambivalence, constitutes the point of departure for this study

However, this study inherently does not seek to explain the ideological motives behind Voltaire's representation of Islam, but rather to identify and classify the textual manifestations of ambivalence of Islam dispersed across several of his writings. This study uses the Historical method with an Intellectual History approach through a descriptive textual analysis. This article aims to demonstrate that criticism and appreciation toward Islam coexisted simultaneously throughout Voltaire's corpus without forming a consistent linear transformation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts the historical method with an Intellectual approach through descriptive textual analysis. Within the framework of Intellectual History, the research focuses on observing ideas, representations, and patterns of thought reflected in Voltaire's writings. Rather than constructing a causal explanation regarding the origins of Voltaire's attitude toward Islam, this study is limited to identifying and classifying the manifestations of ambivalence that appear throughout his corpus (Collini, 1985).

In these terms of method, Intellectual History does not necessarily require an exclusive or an entirely separate Historical method. Stefan Collini maintains that Intellectual Historians generally remain consumers of broader historical methodologies rather than creators of a distinct methodological system. What distinguishes Intellectual History lies in the object of analysis, namely ideas, discourses, and Intellectual developments within historical texts (Collini, 1985). In this context, this article also draws upon the perspective of Robert F Berkhofer Jr., focusing on the necessity of textualism in historical practice. Berkhofer postulates that the construction of history is essentially a process of "textualization," requiring historians to prioritize how a text is composed before deriving broader historical conclusions.

Hence, this research adopts a structured framework for textual analysis, systematically examining textual representations. By being anchored in reflexive textualization, this study privileges textual mapping and descriptive classification rather than speculative interpretative leaps regarding Voltaire's Intellectual motives. This approach anchors the focus to the precise manifestations of intellectual discourse within the structure of the texts themselves (Berkhofer, 1997).

The central sources of this study consist of several writings by Voltaire produced across different periods and literary genres. These include philosophical writings, historical works, essays, letters, correspondence, and a play or drama tragedy that discusses Islamic values. Thus, regarding source criticism, this study relies on differing editions for each primary text depending on their availability, philological reliability, and relevance to textual analysis. Citations throughout this article follow a consistent convention: the year accompanying a work's title upon first mention refers to its original composition or first publication, while the year cited alongside quoted passages refers to the specific edition consulted.

For *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète*, first performed in Lille in 1741 and first published in 1743, this study draws on the digitized facsimiles preserved by the Bibliothèque nationale de France's Gallica digital library, which serves as an archival rather than original source for the text. This is supported by Hannah Burton's English translation, whose accompanying critical notes were consulted to clarify several textually ambiguous passages. For *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, first published in 1756 within Voltaire's *Œuvres complètes*, this study integrates the 1773 and 1962 editions. These three editions are examined comparatively, given the considerable philological complexity of eighteenth-century French orthography and textual variation across reprintings, ensuring cross-verification of passages relevant to the analysis.

And for *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, the first edition (London, 1764) is used alongside the 2002 English edition, allowing the analysis to draw on nuances available in both the original French and its English rendering. For *Lettres Philosophiques*, this study consults three editions: the 2011 digital edition, the 1917 critical edition edited by Gustave Lanson, and the version contained within the 1879 *Œuvres complètes* published by Garnier Frères in Paris. For *Épître à l'auteur du nouveau livre*, the first edition (1769, preserved by Gallica BnF) is the primary reference. This poem responds to *Les trois imposteurs*, an anonymous work whose authorship remains undetermined and which first circulated in 1719; where this study engages with that anonymous work, it relies on the 1846 English republication issued by J. Myles in Amsterdam (Lavaert, 2019).

Further primary sources consulted for contextual and comparative purposes include: *Correspondance complète* (1865 French edition), compiling Voltaire's correspondence with fellow intellectuals and members of the aristocracy; *Le Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers* (1880 edition), a satirical dialogue between Voltaire and the aristocrat Boulainvilliers; *Lettres d'Amabed* (1878 French edition), a series of satirical letters addressing religion and fanaticism; and *Candide ou l'Optimisme*, cited from both the 1917 English translation by William F. Fleming and the 1921 French edition published by Jules Tallandier (volume 17).

The analytical process of this research is conducted in three stages. The first stage is identification, which involves tracing the textual manifestations of Voltaire's ambivalence toward Islam throughout his corpus, including in a chronological distribution. The second stage is classification, namely grouping the identified representations into two major tendencies: critical representations and appreciative representations toward Islam. The final stage is synthesis, in which classified findings are examined to analyze the pattern of ambivalence appearing throughout Voltaire's corpus (Berkhofer, 1997).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Textual Manifestation of Ambivalence

In his tragedy *“Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète”* (1743), a dramatized adaptation loosely inspired by Islamic historical narratives surrounding the prophet Muhammad, Voltaire presents one of his most explicit critical representations of Islam in a single corpus. The play, consisting of five acts with several scenes in each act, may seem to portray Islam and Muhammad through themes of fanaticism, impostor, and political manipulation. One example in the early part of the play; “Qui moi baisser les yeux ses faux prodiges? Moi de ce fanatique encenser les prestiges ? [...] Carasser la révolte & flatter l’imposture! (What! Am I to lower my eyes before his false miracles? Am I to glorify the deceptions of that fanatic? [...] Am I to indulge rebellion and flatter imposture?) ” (Voltaire, 1743, p. 3). Through this passage, Voltaire emphasized his condemnation of fanaticism and portrayed Muhammad as a figure associated with fanaticism and deception.

In other dialogue, terms such as “barbaric” and “violent”: “*Tu veux qu’à ce barbare elle soit accordée? Tu veux que d’un si cher et si noble trésor ses criminelles mains s’enrichissent encore ? Quoi! Lorsqu’il nous apporte la fraude et la guerre*”(You want her to be granted to that barbarian? You want his criminal hands to enrich themselves with such a dear and noble treasure? What! When does he bring us fraud and war?) (Voltaire, 1743, pp. 6-7). Similar manifestations recur throughout the play in various dialogues and narrative developments, in which religious authority is repeatedly associated with coercion, manipulation, and irrational devotion. Such portrayals demonstrate Voltaire's persistent criticism of the form of religious fanaticism represented by Islamic imagery in the drama (Voltaire, 1743). In fact, this work represents an imaginary or alternative story of Muhammad that Voltaire created, beginning with the Hijrah of Muhammad from Mecca to the conquest of Mecca, or well known in the Muslim community as “*fathu makkah*” (Burton, 2013).

“Ce fut certainement un très grand homme [...] *Conquérant, législateur, monarque et pontife, il joua le plus grand rôle qu’on puisse jouer sur la terre aux yeux du commun des hommes*”(He was certainly a very great man [...] Conqueror, legislator, monarch, and pontiff, he played the greatest role that one can play on earth in the eyes of ordinary men). (Voltaire, 1835, p. 75) These kinds of

compliments Voltaire made for Prophet Muhammad in “Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations” (1756) may seem acceptable and charming to Muslims reading, but in fact, compared to the strongly critical representations found in “*Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophet*”, this passage demonstrates a more appreciative representation of Muhammad, particularly regarding his political capability and historical influence. In this writing, Voltaire discusses Islam in several sections concerning the topic of the Arabs, Muhammad, the Qur'an, the Muslims society, and also Islam itself. On the other hand, Voltaire was still consistently of showing his ambivalence, like how he compared Muhammad's courage to that of Alexandre; “*L'intrépidité d'Alexandre*” (The intrepidity of Alexander)” (Voltaire, 1835, p. 76), and he also praised the intellectual capability and political competence of Muhammad, “Ce n'était pas sans doute un ignorant” (Voltaire, 1835, p. 80); however, Voltaire simultaneously continues to employ his critique, like how he still used barbaric terms about Muslims or Muhammad, “tout y ressent *la simplicité barbare des temps qu'on nomme héroïques*” (Everything there reflects the barbaric simplicity of the times that are called heroic) (Voltaire, 1835, p. 81)

Another appreciative tendency also appeared in the poetry genre, in *Épître à l'auteur du nouveau livre: Des trois imposteurs* (1768), a poem written in response to the anonymously circulated in Europe in 1719 “Les trois imposteurs,” and heavily captivated the interest of Enlightenment thinkers (Lavaert, 2019). As Alexander Bevilacqua demonstrates, this era was defined by an evolving perspective of Islam. On one side, Scholars like George Sale, through his 1734 translation of the Koran, initiated a trend of describing Islamic civilization with higher scholarly standards, a perspective mirrored by Rousseau's recognition of Islamic Institutional values. Conversely, figures such as Montesquieu, Gibbon, and Voltaire increasingly integrated Islam into their texts polemically (Bevilacqua, 2018). “*Les trois imposteurs*” portrayed Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as impostors who manipulate religion for deceptive purposes (Anonymous, 1846). This work clearly shows Voltaire's position as a Deist who explicitly rejects absolute atheism.

In response, Voltaire writes, “*Confonds-tu Mahomet avec le Créateur, et les œuvres de l'homme avec Dieu, son Auteur*”. (Do you confuse Muhammad with the Creator, and the works of man with God, their Author?)” (Voltaire, 1769, p. 1). Through the first line of this poem, Voltaire distinguishes between God as the absolute divine being and prophets as human figures who should not be equated with God Himself. This representation simultaneously reflects Voltaire's rejection of radical atheism and his deistic tendency. But in the second line, he states his position as an individual who was opposed to dogmatic religion, where Voltaire emphasizes that many forms of religious authority were “human-created”. These include holy wars, rigid dogmas, and even institutionalized religious practices associated with prophets as human figures rather than divine beings (Anonymous, 1846).

Moreover, in *Lettres Philosophiques* (1734), particularly in Letter VII, Voltaire' already demonstrates critical representations toward, which likely reflected views that had developed during his period of refuge in England between 1727-1729 (Durant, 1965). In this work, Voltaire discusses influential religious and historical figures, yet Muhammad is described more critically, as shown in the phrase: “*Que l'ignorant Mahomet ait donné une religion à l'Asie et à l'Afrique...*” (That the ignorant Muhammad gave a religion to Asia and Africa...) (Voltaire, 2001, p. 23). However, a contrasting representation appears in *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), particularly in the chapter “Mahométan.” In this section, Voltaire explicitly criticizes European misconceptions regarding Islam and defends Muslims' accusations that Islam was merely a sensual and voluptuous religion. He writes: “*Je vous le dis encore, ignorants imbéciles, à qui d'autres ignorants ont fait accroire que la religion mahométane est voluptueuse et sensuelle, il n'en est rien*” (I tell you again, ignorant fools, you whom other ignorant people have led to believe that the Mohammedan religion is voluptuous and sensual, not at all!) (Voltaire, 1764). Through this statement, Voltaire positions himself against stereotypical and polemical representations of Islam circulating in Europe.

Besides his criticism of fanaticism and religious dogma, Voltaire also expressed admiration for several aspects of Muslim civilization, particularly during the Abbasid period and the Islamic Golden Age. In “Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations” (1756), he acknowledged the scientific

contributions of Arab Muslims by stating, "*La chimie et la médecine étaient cultivées par les Arabes. La chimie, perfectionnée aujourd'hui par nous, ne nous fut connue que par eux*" (The Arabs cultivated chemistry and medicine. Chemistry, perfected today by us, was known to us only through them) (Voltaire, 1835, p. 93). Through this statement, Voltaire positioned Muslim scholars as important transmitters of scientific knowledge to Europe, especially in medicine and chemistry. He even added that "*Enfin, dès le second siècle de Mahomet, il fallut que les chrétiens d'Occident s'instruisent chez les musulmans*" (Finally, from the second century of Mohammed, it became necessary for Western Christians to study under the Muslims) (Voltaire, 1835, p. 93), emphasizing how Western Christians once depended on Muslim intellectual traditions for learning and scientific development.

The same tendency also appears in his Novel "*Candide ou l'Optimisme*" (1759), although primarily written to critique Leibniz's Optimism, Voltaire used this fictional world flexibly to present various criticisms and appreciations through his characters. Beyond its main philosophical target, the novel inserts commentary on alternative topics, including Islam, French society, and the arguments of his Intellectual rivals (Voltaire, 1918, 1921). Voltaire specifically places Candide in Istanbul at the end of the story. Although not explicitly discussed as a political argument, the Ottoman settings indirectly reflect a more tolerant social atmosphere compared to the religious conflicts often associated with Europe (Voltaire, 1918, 1921, pp. 153-159). Moreover, *Les Lettres d'Amabed* (1769), another fictional work written by Voltaire that utilizes the satiric epistolary genre. This framework was often used by other Enlightenment thinkers to critique European society through an outsider's perspective, as seen in *Montesquieu's Lettres Persanes* (1721), and *Diderot's Les bijoux discrets* (1748). Voltaire presents a more favorable representation of the Arab world, particularly Mecca, which is described as a prosperous and influential city admired even by Alexander the Great as a potential center of empire. Voltaire writes: "*Mecca, où le grand prophète des musulmans établit le siège de son empire, et où tant de nations de l'Asie..*" (Mecca, where the great prophet of the Muslims established the seat of his empire, and where so many nations of Asia...) (Voltaire, 1769, p. 48). Unlike several of his earlier critical depictions, this passage reflects a more appreciative view toward Islamic civilization and its historical influence (Voltaire, 1878).

From the various texts above, it can be observed that Voltaire's representations of Islam were neither entirely antagonistic nor consistently appreciative. Across different genres of his writings, including drama, tragedy, philosophical works, poetry, historical writings, and others, Voltaire simultaneously expressed criticism toward fanaticism, dogmatism, violence, and religious authority, while also acknowledging the political capability of Muhammad, the intellectual achievements of Muslim civilization, and the historical contributions of the Islamic world. These contrasting representations demonstrate that Voltaire's attitude toward Islam cannot be reduced to a singular or fully linear position. Instead, both critical and appreciative tendencies continued to coexist throughout different periods and contexts of his intellectual corpus (Voltaire, 1743, 1879).

The presence of these diverse textual representations in Voltaire's writings can be mapped alongside the broader scholarly corpus of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. As Alexander Bevilacqua observes in *The Republic of Arabic Letters*, this historical period was marked by an influx of translated Arabic manuscripts and primary sources that established new empirical descriptions of Islamic history, distinct from medieval polemics. In Voltaire's corpus, this wealth of historical data manifests structurally in works such as *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756), where chapters concerning the Abbasid era explicitly list advancements in chemistry and medicine. By identifying these passages, it is evident that Voltaire's texts integrate the precise historical details circulating within the contemporary intellectual landscape, anchoring both critical markers regarding historical simplicity and appreciative records of scientific transmission within the exact same textual units (Bevilacqua, 2018; Eigenauer, 2018).

Classification of Ambivalent Representations

The textual manifestations in the previous section reveal that Voltaire consistently represented Islam through broad and contradictory tendencies: critical representations and appreciative representations. In this way, these dual tendencies appeared across various genres and

periods of writing, in that his views toward Islam cannot be reduced to a singular or fixed position. Rather than forming a coherent linear transformation toward a fixed ideological consensus, these dual tendencies cut across genres and chronological periods. Voltaire's conceptualization of Islam vacillated continuously. This structured ambivalence suggests that his authorial stance cannot be neatly boxed into a single, static position; it operated instead as a fluid rhetorical mechanism calibrated to the immediate polemical stakes and context of each text (Voltaire, 1835).

Voltaire's sharper depictions of Islamic values crystallized primarily around themes of fanaticism, imposture, dogmatism, and the abuses of religious authority hegemony. In *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète* (1743) Islam emerges as a paradigm associated with blind obedience and calculated political manipulation underwritten by sacred authority. Within this specific textual architecture, Muhammad is cast not as a genuine prophet, but as a brilliant, deceptive strategist who weaponized faith for terrestrial political gain (Voltaire, 1743). Voltaire relentlessly targeted religious warfare and irrational devotion throughout his corpus, viewing them as catalysts for civil disorder. These critical representations consistently appear across his writings as recurring textual patterns rather than isolated polemical moments.

Yet, parallel to these critical representations, Voltaire merely celebrated the civilizational achievements of the Muslim world. In his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, the profile of Muhammad undergoes a notable revision, emerging as an enlightened lawmaker, a formidable conqueror, and a transformative historical agent (Voltaire, 1835). Voltaire openly compliments the intellectual achievements of Islamic society, particularly during the Abbasid period, highlighting how Arab scholars preserved and transmitted advancements in medicine, chemistry, and philosophy to Europe. His literary works, moreover, offer favorable embodiments of Ottoman governance, noting its capacity to portray a more tolerant society than European society (Voltaire, 1918). These textual moments demonstrate that Voltaire's corpus contains a consistent strand of appreciation toward specific historical dimensions of Islamic civilization.

The specific objects of his commentary can be distinguished. His critical representations were directed toward dogmatic authority, holy wars, and clerical coercion, while his appreciative representations were reserved for Islamic monotheism, scientific contributions, and Muhammad's historical and legislative influence. This form distinction demonstrates that his ambivalence operated as a structured representational pattern across his intellectual corpus. Crucially, these critical representations did not appear in isolation from Voltaire's broader intellectual position. As a deist, Voltaire consistently opposed clerical control and irrational dogmatic authority across his writings, a position that extended beyond Islam to organized religion in general (Betts, 1984; Voltaire, 1769).

To understand how these critical and appreciative representations structurally operate without collapsing into a total ideological contradiction, the Voltaire corpus must be situated within the broader intellectual landscape of French deism. As C.J. Betts demonstrates in his seminal study, *Early Deism in France* (1984), the emergence of deism in France initially developed through clandestine networks before evolving into a mature intellectual movement, sparked by a rapid wave of publications between 1700 and 1712. This expansive intellectual current was not centered around a single figure; rather, it was embraced and articulated by numerous educated thinkers of the period, including Saint-Evremond, Chaulieu, La Fare, Gilbert, Lahontan, the Militaire philosophe, Gueudeville, and Tyssot de Patot. In addition, Betts categorizes deistic beliefs into two complementary dimensions: a 'positive' (constructive) aspect that sustains a belief in a universal God or natural religion, and a 'negative' (critical) aspect defined by the rejection of exclusive revelation, dogma, and clerical coercion. In this phase of development, Voltaire's early works after 1715 are viewed as both the culmination of this initial phase of French deism and the catalyst for the Enlightenment proper. Hence, the historical framework outlined by Betts provides a crucial foundation for understanding the parameters of Voltaire's thought; his ambivalent representation of Islam operates within the structural confines of French deism, utilizing universal critique to challenge the hegemony of dogmatic institutions while firmly maintaining a rationalist commitment to natural religion (Betts, 1984).

Ambivalence as a Consistent Pattern

The corpus examined through the identifying and classifying process in this study spans a period of approximately four decades, starting from *Lettres Philosophiques* (1734) to *Les Lettres d'Amabed* (1769). A chronological reading of these works reveals no consistent linear trajectory in Voltaire's representations of Islam. To fully capture the consistency of this pattern, the corpus must be evaluated through a structural perspective, rather than a flat, linear timeline. The data shows that sharply contrasting classifications routinely emerged within the same decades of Voltaire's Career.

In particular, during the 1740s and 1750s, the highly critical explicit parameters found in the tragedy *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète* (1743), which lists the terms of "fanatisme" and "imposture", coexisted alongside the highly appreciative framework of *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756). Even within the text of *Essai* itself, the classification is internally ambivalent: Voltaire identifies Muhammad as a "*très grand homme*" (A truly great man) and an enlightened "*legislateur*", yet within the same textual unit, he maintains critical markers, characterizing certain elements as a "*simplicité barbare*" (Barbaric simplicity). This internal friction within a single historical work proves that the critical stance was never completely displaced or dissolved by an appreciative attitude (Voltaire, 1835).

These patterns directly confirm that Voltaire's embodiment of Islam cannot be simply characterized as a developmental arc, moving from hostility toward appreciation or vice versa. Rather, the textual evidence demonstrates a persistent duality: both critical and appreciative representations appeared simultaneously throughout his corpus, across drama, historical writing, philosophical encyclopedias, poetry, and fiction. This pattern satisfies the definition of ambivalence established in the introduction of this study, the simultaneous coexistence of conflicting embodiments within the same intellectual corpus, rather than reflecting indeterminacy or a simple "enemy to lover" transformation of attitude (Salda et al., 2022).

Moreover, the consistency of this pattern is verified by the stable classification of the textual objects targeted by each ambivalence throughout the four-decade span. The critical component consistently isolates and targets textual elements associated with dogmatic authority, claims of revelation, holy wars, and clerical coercion (Voltaire, 1743, 1764, 1917). While the Appreciative component regularly identifies and aims at text segments linked to strict rational monotheism, the religious tolerance of Muslim civilization (specifically the Ottoman Empire), the historical influence of Muhammad, and the scientific contributions of the Islamic Golden Age (Burton, 2013; Voltaire, 1878, 1918).

Thus, these findings stand in direct contrast to the claims advanced by Salda et al., whose reading tends to position Voltaire within a dichotomous framework, reducing his engagement with Islam to either wholesale condemnation or selective appreciation (Salda et al., 2022). As Edvin Cami has noted, Voltaire's attitude may appear increasingly tolerant toward Islam over the course of his career (Cami, 2013); however, as the chronological and textual evidence presented here demonstrates, his critical stance toward organized religion, including Islam, had never ceased to operate simultaneously alongside his appreciative representations. The historical record, when we read through the full breadth of his corpus rather than selectively, reveals a figure whose relationship with Islam was structurally ambivalent rather than linearly transformative (Voltaire, 1879).

In tandem, these findings confirm that Voltaire's ambivalence functioned as a stable structural pattern rather than a transitional or accidental feature of his corpus. Across four decades and multiple genres, the critical component consistently attached itself to a fixed set of textual objects, dogmatic authority, revelation, and clerical coercion, while the appreciative component consistently attached itself to another fixed set, rational monotheism, civilizational tolerance, and scientific transmission. The recurrence of this same binary distribution, regardless of period, genre, or the specific work under discussion, is what distinguishes ambivalence as defined in this study from mere ambiguity or a slow ideological drift: it is the object of critique and the object of

appreciation, not the balance between them, that remained constant throughout Voltaire's intellectual career

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be remarked that Voltaire's ambivalence has been identified and classified across several of his works, which can be considered as split into dual tendencies: critical representations and appreciative representations, which coexisted simultaneously across the genres of writings and decades of his career, not as a linear black-and-white phenomenon or dichotomous transformation, but rather as an ambivalence that existed and never merely diminished throughout ages of his career. The specific academic findings of this study demonstrate that this table pattern of ambivalence is strictly determined by textuality; the critical component consistently targets institutional dogma and clerical coercion, while the appreciative component remains fixed and strict rational monotheism and civilizational contributions. These findings emphasize that Voltaire's engagement with Islam is subject to multiple interpretations, whether as ambiguity, dichotomous transformation, or ultimately, as ambivalence, and this study argues that the latter more accurately reflects what the actual evidence demonstrates. By structuring this descriptive textual mapping, this research contributes a verifiable empirical alternative to existing historiographical debates, successfully challenging the dominant linear, evolutionary frameworks in Enlightenment intellectual history.

This study, however, is not without its limitations. First, the analysis is confined to primary texts available in the editions consulted; certain unpublished or uncatalogued fragments of Voltaire's correspondence fall outside its scope, and future research with access to a wider textual base may refine or extend the classification proposed here. Second, this study is deliberately restricted to identifying and classifying the textual manifestations of ambivalence rather than explaining its ideological or psychological origins; Hence, questions concerning Voltaire's underlying motives, or a broader dialogue with the historiography of Orientalism and the history of ideas, remain intentionally outside the analytical boundaries set in the Introduction. This delimitation is a methodological choice rather than an oversight, and it opens space for subsequent studies to pursue causal or comparative inquiries, building on the textual mapping established here.

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