

Muhammad

Muhammad : A Muslim Perspective

By Dr. Hamid Mavani

“We only sent you as a mercy for creation” (Qur’an, 21:107)

Muslims consider Prophet Muhammad as a model of piety and an icon of their faith whose exemplary conduct and teachings or *sunnah* constitute the blue print of human conduct that they try to emulate. He is the last in the chain of prophets totaling 124,000, according to Muslim tradition, all of whom preached the same universal message of obedience to God and compassion to His creation. Muhammad is viewed as the paradigmatic personality and is referred to as an excellent example (*‘uswah hasanah*) in the Quran, 33:21, who received the epithets of “the trustworthy” (*al-Amin*) and “the truthful” (*al-Sadiq*) even before he proclaimed the commencement of his prophetic ministry in 610. The image of the Prophet is derived from the classical Islamic traditional literature (the *Qur’an*, *sirah* [biographical works], and *hadith* [statements, actions and tacit approval of Muhammad]) and from mystical sources. The image that one derives from the sources portrays Prophet Muhammad as a multi-dimensional person with a spectrum of possible interpretations on his life. This multi-faceted nature of the Prophet has enabled Muslims, with varied understandings of Islam, to forge a relationship with him that is dynamic, ongoing and applicable in every age. The historical Muhammad and the Muhammad of faith are inextricably linked and it is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate the two.

The etymological meaning of Muhammad is ‘the glorified’ or ‘the praised one.’ He was born in Mecca on the 12th, according to the Sunni sources, and the 17th, according to the Shi’i sources, of the third month of the Islamic calendar, Rabi’ al-Awwal, in 570. This is the same year in which the Abyssinian army led an expedition with the intention to destroy the Ka’bah in Mecca with the use of the elephants and, consequently, the year of the birth of Muhammad is also called the Year of the Elephant.^[1] He was born into the prestigious clan of Hashim, the child of Abdallah and Aminah. Muhammad’s father did not live to see his son’s birth and his mother passed away when he was six years old. The loss of his parents at a tender age engraved permanent imprints on Muhammad which reflected in his compassionate treatment of the orphans. Muhammad was entrusted to a wet-nurse, as was customary in the Arab culture at the time, by the name of Halimah, who was his foster-mother for a period of six years in the countryside. Upon his return to Mecca and the subsequent death of his mother, Muhammad was entrusted to his grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muttalib, who treated him with great affection and love. The guardianship of ‘Abd al-Muttalib lasted only about two years leaving the orphan in his eighth year. He was subsequently entrusted to the brother of Muhammad’s father, Abu Talib, who was given a directive from ‘Abd al-

Muttalib to treat Muhammad with care and tenderness. He faithfully lived up to this dictate by providing support and protection to Muhammad in the face of great hostilities from the Qur'aysh once Muhammad began to preach the message of monotheism and social justice.

When Muhammad was twelve years old, he accompanied Abu Talib on a business trip to Syria where a Christian monk by the name of Buhayrah had prophesied that Muhammad would become a prophet, based on the mark that he observed on the back of his shoulder, at the center.

He undertook many trade journeys and acquired a reputation of being an honest and a fair businessman possessing the ethical trait of integrity. His fame and reputation of outstanding character reached Khadijah, a wealthy and noble merchant, who enlisted Muhammad to take care of her business affairs. Muhammad accepted the offer and conducted the expedition with adherence to justice and fairness. This greatly impressed Khadijah from the tribe of 'Asad who sent out a marriage proposal to Muhammad. He accepted the proposal and got married to Khadijah who was forty years old and himself twenty-five. He loved Khadijah passionately and never opted to marry a younger woman or enter into a polygamous relationship so long as Khadijah was alive. Muhammad confided in her and she was one of the first persons to attest to the validity of Muhammad's message in the year 610. She bore him two sons, who died in their infancy, and four daughters according to the Sunnis and one daughter, Fatima, according to the Shi'is. The latter figures prominently in Shi'ism as she married 'Ali the son of Abu Talib and they are the parents of the chain of the divinely-designated imams or leaders and successors to Muhammad, in Shi'ism.

Muhammad had a proclivity towards meditation and contemplation and thus it was customary for him to retreat to the Cave of Hira, overlooking the Ka'bah, at a distance of about three miles north of Mecca. During his retirement, he would reflect upon the spiritual malaise of the Meccan society that manifested in the practice of pagan cult, obsession with economic gains and harsh treatment of the weak and the disenfranchised. The presence of Christians, Jews and *hanifs*, those who believed in the presence of one compassionate God, were a source of comfort and solace to Muhammad.

When Muhammad was forty years old, he received the first revelation comprising the first five verses of chapter 96 of the Qur'an during his retreat in Mount Hira. The Angel Gabriel commanded him to 'recite' (or 'read') with the imperative form of '*iqra*' (recite!) in Arabic (Q. 96: 1-5). This was the start of a process that was to last for twenty-three years suggesting that it was intimately related to the life of the society of the seventh century Arabia. On different occasion and under varying circumstances, the Prophet would receive a revelation in response to particular issues or for general guidance for the community. The entire corpus of these revelations constitutes the Qur'an which is viewed by the Muslims as the timeless and the inerrant Divine Word that has been preserved in its original form without undergoing any distortion or adulteration. The Qur'an became the foundation of their society and its constitution.

The first experience of receiving the revelation was overwhelming and onerous on the heart and mind of Muhammad. He was certain that it was a bona fide revelation from God and that he was not possessed by the psychic force or *jinn*. Khadijah, further consoled him and reassured him by consulting her cousin, Waraqah b. Nawfal, who had read previous Scriptures of the People of the Book. The latter confirmed that the prophecy contained in the previous Scriptures was going to crystallize in the person of Muhammad.

The message of Muhammad was met with scorn and contempt, along with intense persecution of his followers. This led to the first migration of the early Muslims to Abyssinia who were afforded refuge and protection by the Christian king, Negus. The intense opposition of the Meccans led Muhammad to explore the possibility of moving to other towns, such as Ta'if. Once again, he was pelted with pebbles and chased out of the town and returned back to Mecca. During these troubling times, he experienced a spiritual ascent (*mi'raj*) to the heaven, and this has become a source of great commentaries in mystical literature.

An event of singular importance occurred during the pilgrimage season in 622, when a small group of pilgrims from Medina extended an invitation to Muhammad to join them and act as the arbiter in resolving their factional feuds. Muhammad secretly left Mecca under the cover of the night and successfully reached Medina and this journey is referred to as *hijrah* (migration) and is the starting point of the Islamic calendar. Upon arrival in Medina, he drafted the Constitution of Medina. This document, which has been authenticated by scholars, was a social contract voluntarily entered into by the parties in Medina to provide support and protection to each other along with an enumeration of the rights and duties. What is remarkable is to observe that this diverse group in Medina of different religious orientations, constituted an *ummah* or a community with identical rights and duties, and enjoyed religious autonomy under the Islamic State. This model provides us with a formula to develop a civil society in Muslim countries that is based on the equality in creation in which the privilege of citizenry attaches equally to Muslim and non-Muslim, entailing inclusive political, civil, and social membership in the community.

In Medina, the nascent Muslim community faced the threat of extinction from the Meccans who continued their military campaigns. In response, the Qur'an grants permission to the Muslims to engage in self-defense but to be careful not to transgress the limits. The three major battles are: Badr fought in 624, Uhud in 625 and Khandaq (Ditch) in 627. The apparently harsh treatment that was meted out by Muhammad to the three major Jewish tribes—Banu Nadir, Banu Qaynuqa and Banu Qurayzah—has been a source of contention and no definitive conclusion has been reached to resolve this issue. It is important to take note that the judgments handed down to these three Jewish tribes were based on political grounds and had little or nothing to do with religion or race. This is attested to by the fact that the other seventeen Jewish tribes of Medina had an amicable relationship with the Muslim community and lived in peace and harmony. In any event, these rare instances must be viewed as anomalies and exceptions to the general rule prescribed in the Qur'an of religious freedom and

according high respect and reverence to the People of the Book: “Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve” (Q. 2:62).

In 628, Muhammad entered into a peace treaty with the Meccans at a place called Hudaibiyyah that provided for peace and tranquility. The conducive atmosphere afforded Muhammad with a fertile ground to engage in dissemination of his message and collaboration with the Meccans. Two years later, the terms of the Pact of Hudaibiyyah were violated by the Meccans and Muhammad was able to enter Mecca with a daunting force and, as a result, overpowered the Meccans without any violence or bloodshed. When the Prophet entered Mecca in 630 after having undergone years of persecution at the hand of the Meccans, he expressed no desire to take revenge or even the scores. In the place of rancor and revenge, he was filled with humility and magnanimity. He granted immunity and forgiveness to the people of Mecca. He asked the Meccans: “O Quraysh, what do you think that I am about to do with you?” They replied, “Good. You are a noble brother, son of a noble brother.” The Prophet said: “Go your way for you are the freed ones.”

In the year 632, the Prophet made the first obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca which is referred to as the farewell pilgrimage. He informed the public that his ministry had come to an end and he would be returning back to His Lord. He outlined for them the rules of conduct and behavior in their horizontal (divine—human) and vertical (human—creation) relationships. Of great significance for the Shi’is is the Prophet’s statement at a place called Ghadir Khumm in which he introduced Ali as the *wali* of the Muslim community. The Shi’is interpret this word as explicit evidence of the Prophet’s designation of Ali as his successor and trustee. The Sunnis do not dispute the veracity of this historical incident but interpret it as an admonition to the public to provide due respect and honor to Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali. These two divergent interpretations ultimately crystallized into two major expressions of Islam: Sunnism and Shi’ism.

Muhammad: Christian Perspectives

By Rev. Steven McMichael

In Muslim-Christian dialogue, a major focus has been on the similarities and differences between the different understandings of Jesus and his role in the in the history of revelation and salvation history. There are also similarities and differences in the perceptions of Muhammad within the same revelatory and salvific history.

From the Roman Catholic perspective, there is a great difficulty in appreciating Muhammad in the working of providence in history. The first Christian response to Muhammad (eighth century) was to see him as a Christian heretic because he denied that Jesus was the Son of God, Lord and Savior. In the middle ages, Muhammad was depicted in literature and art not only as a heretic but also as a false prophet, idolater, a sexual deviant (polygamist), a drunkard, a violent and ambitious person, and the Antichrist. These images of Muhammad sprang from a polemical mindset that plagued Christian-Muslim relations throughout history, especially in the middle ages during the time of the crusades.

Even in recent times, though the religion of Islam has been positively spoken of in official Vatican documents, Muhammad's name is not mentioned in these writings. For example, in paragraph three of *Nostra Aetate*, the 1965 Second Vatican Council declaration which set a new course for Christian-Muslim relations, it states that the Church looks with esteem on the faith and religious practice of Muslims, but does not mention Muhammad's name. Nor is Muhammad mentioned in any of the talks that Pope John Paul II has given to Muslims. Rather, the Pope has focused attention on Islam as a religions and current issues in the dialogue, especially those associated with social justice and peace.

The Pontifical Council for Interrreligious Dialogue published a document entitled "Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims" in 1981 that tells us why there is such a difficulty in mentioning Muhammad's name in official church documents. On a positive note, the document points out that "Christians should fully respect the deep affection which Muslims feel and manifest toward their Prophet." The difficulty is that Christians do not credit Muhammad with the attributes that Muslims give to him: the Seal of the prophets, infallibility and sinlessness. Christians believe that Muhammad made certain mistakes and important misapprehensions (especially in regard to Jesus and Mary) during his life that undermine his credibility in light of the Christian religious tradition.

On the positive side, the "Guidelines" also point out that Christians "are inclined to perceive that Muhammad was a great literary, political and religious genius, and that he possessed particular qualities which enabled him to lead multitudes to the worship of the true God." The document points out that Muhammad brought the multitude to monotheism, a life of prayer, an awareness of the Day of Judgment, a hope in the resurrection of the dead, a moral life, charity in the form of almsgiving, and fasting. All of these religious aspects are highlighted in *Nostra Aetate*, 3.

The "Guidelines" states that Christians should renounce the incorrect and insulting statements that have been made about Muhammad, especially those that arose during the middle ages when Christians did not have accurate knowledge of the identity and role of Muhammad within Islam. The Guidelines therefore states that "Christians should assess in an objective way, and in consonance with their faith, exactly what was the inspiration, the sincerity and the faithfulness of the Prophet Muhammad, making their

judgment within their framework, first, of his personal response to the commands of God, and then, on a wider scale, that of the working of providence in world history.”

The main difficulty of Christians with Muhammad is the Muslim belief that he was the intermediary of revelation (Qur’an), especially because this revelation is not in harmony with the essential teachings of Christianity, e.g., the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus.

Christians along with Muslims believe that a major component of providential history is the life and teachings of the prophets. The main difficulty for Christians is that they hold a different definition of what constitutes a true prophet. In spite of this difference, is it possible for Christians to see in the life of Muhammad positive values that all prophets have held? For example, Muhammad preached monotheism to people who lived in a polytheist environment. He proclaimed that the one God was the Creator of the world and its Judge. This God, named Allah, was the God of compassion and love. (Christians who speak Arabic still use the name of Allah when referring to God). He spoke of the oneness of all believers who belonged to a single universal community (*umma*) under the one God that transcended tribal bonds.

Muhammad also spoke of God’s judgment that would come to those who did not follow the commands to love their neighbors, to do justice, and to act honestly. He preached, like the Old Testament prophets and Jesus, against the socioeconomic inequalities because of such things as economic corruption, cheating, prostitution, usury, and false contracts. He addressed the issue of the equality and basic rights of women. Most importantly, he spoke against the neglect and exploitation of orphans and widows.

He also preached about other themes that were familiar to Christians: the future Day of Judgment and the resurrection the dead. Muhammad believed that all humanity would be called to ultimate justice for their intentions and behaviors.

Points of Agreement

Christian and Muslim scholars can probably come to agreement on the main historical events of Muhammad’s life. Indeed, both Christian and Muslim scholars have written lives of Muhammad (see Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: a Prophet for our Times*; Martin Lings, *Muhammad: his Life Based on the Earliest Sources*). Beyond this, however, there is little agreement, especially in regards to Muhammad’s prophetic vocation.

Points of Disagreement:

The main areas of disagreement concern Muhammad’s prophetic call and his character. Christians have traditionally not granted that Muhammad was a prophet, much less the Seal of the Prophets. Another area of disagreement concerns Muhammad’s character.

According to Muslims, Muhammad was the ideal prophet, husband, father, political leader, and war leader, “whose exemplary conduct and teachings or *sunnah* constitute the blueprint of human conduct they try to emulate” (Mavani article, above). Traditionally, however, in Christian literature, Muhammad has been seen in more negative terms, largely because the traditional literature is almost entirely polemical. Only in recent times do we see attempts at a more sympathetic understanding of Muhammad by Christians (see the “Guidelines” quoted above by Father McMichael).

Points for Further Discussion

The points of disagreement referred to above are also the main points for further discussion. To what extent can Christians affirm that Muhammad was a prophet? Granted, this discussion would have to be conducted with the recognition that Christians and Muslims have different conceptions of prophethood and prophets (see article on “Prophethood” on this website). For most Muslims, a prophet is infallible, and possibly sinless; for Christians, this is not so. Again, to what extent can Christians affirm that Muhammad was an exemplary role model in the many roles that he played in his lifetime? Traditional Christian literature in both these questions is of almost no help, because (as Fr. McMichael notes) it is so polemical. In a sense, this discussion has to be begun anew in the 21st century, in an atmosphere in which both sides seriously attempt to put aside the prejudices of the past, and look at the subjects with fresh eyes, and with the tools of modern scholarship.

[1] Reference to this incident is made in the Qur’an in chapter 105.

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