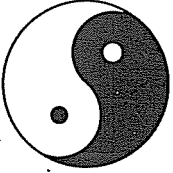
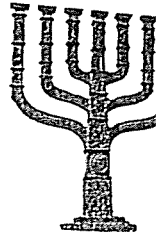


# STUDIES IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE



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## THE PROPHETHOOD OF MUHAMMAD IN THE QUR'AN

### *Introduction*

From the perspective of the Islamic worldview, the prophets are undoubtedly the most important figures in the history of humankind. The prophets are people, chosen by Allah, who attempted to spread monotheism in the world on the basis of the divine commands and the revealed view of justice. Their task was to give spiritual leadership (*Sûra* 3:3), and their sources of knowledge were the divine revelations they received. According to the Qur'an, they correctly proclaimed the revelations they received from Allah to their people (*Sûra* 33: 39).

According to the Qur'an, after the prophet Adam, Allah sent a prophet to every people in accordance with the needs of that people. "He who finds the right path does so for himself; and he who goes astray does so to his own loss; and no one who carries a burden bears another's load. We never punish till we have sent a messenger" (*Sûra* 17:15). From the Muslim point of view, the most reliable information on the lives of the prophets are to be found in the Qur'an and the *hadith*. The classical works on Islamic history discuss world history in a way faithful to tradition via this and other information derived from those sources. The prophets play a pivotal role in this historiography.

The Prophet Muhammad is described as a servant of God and is given the words of the Qur'an. As a person, he is a good example for others (*Sûra* 33: 21):<sup>1</sup> he is gentle and obedient to the commands of his Lord; he has an edifying character and enjoys the blessings of his Lord, who guides him in his life. It is important that people are given reliable information about the Prophet, but we should admit that Muslims often give a standard image of the Prophet, which does not lead to a proper understanding of him. Traditional descriptions of the Prophet cannot escape viewing him either as entirely ordinary or as precisely the opposite, as extraordinarily special. On the one hand, there are flat descriptions that depict him as an ordinary human being; on the other, one finds such exaggerated one portraits of him in which he is no longer a human being but more of an angel.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the article by Fatih Okumus in this issue.

The best source for gaining knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad remains the Qur'an—in Muslim eyes, divine revelation—which informs us that this person was appointed to be a prophet. Whoever investigates what the Qur'an says about the man Muhammad, what commands he was given and how he lived will conclude that the Prophet had a very sound sense of morality and that he also behaved accordingly: he was a perfect human being.

Once again, for Muslims, the Qur'an is the most original and reliable source for describing the Prophet. It is original in that there is no distance between the Prophet and the Qur'an, and it is reliable because the Qur'an is a source of information for every Muslim and, therefore, the only source that is not "suspect." Whoever attempts to form an image of the Prophet without consulting the Qur'an will almost certainly arrive at a false image of him.

The Qur'an shows the prophethood of Muhammad by two means, i.e. his attributes and his tasks. According to the Qur'an, the primary tasks of the Prophet Muhammad are to spread the divine message to the people (*al-tablîgh*; *Sûra* 5: 67) and to explain that message (*al-bayân*; *Sûras* 17: 93-94; 25: 20; 21; 8). We will not discuss these tasks further here but will concentrate on Muhammad's two most important attributes.

### *Humanity*

One of the most important attributes of the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'an is his humanity. He is described as an ideal and special human being. The Qur'an itself says that people from Mecca asked why they should listen to another human being and were given an unambiguous answer. They ask: "Has God sent (only) a man as messenger?" The answer is: "Say: 'If angels had peopled the earth and walked about in peace and quiet, We would surely have sent to them an angel as messenger'" (*Sûra* 17: 94, 95).

The Prophet Muhammad was a human being who felt the need to learn and to be surrounded by knowledge. Allah often commanded him "Read!" and told him often that ignorance and speaking without knowledge were to be condemned (*Sûra* 46: 4). Allah recommended attentive reading, study and praise of God (*Sûra* 3: 61), and indicated to Muhammad that he was to follow his guidance carefully and that, unlike those who have not been "guided correctly," he was perfect (*Sûra* 2: 120). He urged him to pray to his Lord (Allah) to grow in knowledge (*Sûra* 20: 114) and to strive for complete knowledge and insight into what is good.

People have to be able to make free choices in religion; interference in one's personal choices concerning what one believes and those regarding faith is rejected several times (*Sûras* 6: 5; 88: 22; 11: 8; 50: 5). In response, the Prophet surrenders himself freely to the revelation and commandments of Allah. He is told to see

himself as being like other people: "Say: 'I am only a man like you, but it has been communicated to me that your Lord is one and single God'" (*Sûras* 18:110; 41:6).

Some important documents from the *hadith*, the second sources of Islam after the Qur'an, emphasize also the Prophet's humanity, such as the following *hadith* in Ibn Hambal's *al-Musnad*, one of the nine canonical *hadith* Sunni collections:

Thus the messenger of Allah made a mistake one time when he led in prayer. The narrator of this incident said that Muhammad was not sure if he had performed too many or too few elements of the prayer. When the prayer was over, the listeners asked, "O Messenger of Allah! Did you receive a new revelation concerning prayer?" He asked: "Has something happened?" They told him, and he answered: "I am human like you! I forget just like you forget." (Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 1982: I, 379, 3610)

This example shows that the Prophet Muhammad did not hesitate to admit his mistakes and practiced complete honesty. Moreover, such examples constitute a warning to those who want to exalt him above his human status and turn him into a kind of angel. Muhammad was absolutely against any kind of supernatural status being ascribed to him. Just like everyone else, he had feelings of sorrow, happiness, anger, love, cheerfulness, and joy, and joked around when it was appropriate to do so. This combination of being truly human and yet being different from others becomes clear in the following words in *hadith* narrated by Muslim Ibn Hajjâj (d. 261/874) in his *al-Sahîh*, the second most trusted canonical *hadith* collections after the *Sahîh* of al-Bukhârî:

O my Lord! Muhammad is also human. Just as everyone feels rage and becomes angry, so Muhammad also becomes angry. O my Lord, If, contrary to what is right, I curse, scold a Muslim or pronounce a curse over him, let that be an occasion for him for reward, grace and forgiveness. (Cf. Muslim 1982, chapter *Al-Birr*, *hadith* number: 45)

The *Sûra Al-Duhâ*, which occupies a separate place among the passages in the Qur'an that point to the Prophet Muhammad's humanity, refers to the time before he became a prophet: "Did He not find you an orphan and take care of you? Did He not find you perplexed, and show you the way? Did He not find you poor and enrich you?" (*Sûra* 93:6-8).

### *The Prophetic Task*

We discussed above the Prophet Muhammad's humanity, as it unmistakably emerges in the Qur'an. We will now discuss his prophetic office, our actual topic. Muhammad's life as a servant of God is made known before his prophetic task. Before he became a prophet, the Prophet Muhammad adhered to the faith of his ancestor Abraham as far as faith in one God is concerned. The name of this faith

in the Islamic sources is “Hanifitic religion.”<sup>2</sup> After a period of isolation and prayer in the cave of Hira, Muhammad received his first revelation when he was about forty years old. Islamic historical documents say that he did not expect any revelation; the revelation occurred without his willing it, and when it came, he surrendered to it.

After this first revelation, his wife Kadijah brought him to Waraqa Ibn Nawfal, an old and wise Christian who possessed a great deal of knowledge concerning belief in God and the old religious traditions and also he had copied the Bible in Hebrew (see Ibn Hishâm 1995: I, 305; Ibn Kasîr 2001: III, 3-4). Waraqa told Muhammad that the angel who had come to him was, in his view, the same angel (Gabriel) who had come to Moesa (Moses). Waraqa promised Muhammad that if he lived he would help him, but he died a few days later. This is described in detail in the classical Islamic sources (see Ibn Hishâm 1995: I, 305; Ibn Kasîr 2001: III, 3-4), but we will not go into this here.<sup>3</sup>

It has been stated by Muslim writers of the *sîrah* (works on the life of the Prophet) and scholars that the Prophet Muhammad and Waraqa had met each other only once. But it is conceivable that they had met several times prior to the revelation, since Mecca was a small city, and Waraqa was related to Kadijah, the Prophet's wife. Although no information can be found in the early Islamic sources, it is obvious that the Prophet Muhammad had learned about the old religion and earlier prophets from Waraqa and others. But the position of some Western Islamologists, such as Abraham Geiger, Alois Sprenger, Henri Lammens, Leo Caetani, W. Muir and Emile Dermenghem, i.e. that this information was inserted into the Qur'an by the Prophet does not rest on reliable sources.<sup>4</sup>

The Qur'an indicates that there are two aspects to the office of the Prophet Muhammad. The first is that he is the “prophet” (*an-nabiyy*), and the second that he is the “messenger” (*al-rasûl*). Islamic scholars such as Jalâluddîn al-Suyûtî (d. 911/1505) and Badruddîn al-Zarkaschî (died 794/1391) refer to the difference between these two terms. They define *an-nabbiy* as “the receiver of the message”

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<sup>2</sup> According to early Islamic sources, Hanifitic religion was the monotheistic faith of the prophet Abraham. Before Islam, the Prophet Muhammad worshipped Allah according to this religion/faith. The term *hanîf* (plural *hunafâ*) is used in different verses in the Qur'an (see *Sûras* 2: 135; 3: 67, 95; 6: 79, 161; 10: 105; 16:120, 123; 22:31) in two different ways, i.e. as referring to 1) the monotheistic faith of the prophet Abraham, or 2) being against idolatry.

<sup>3</sup> For more details of this discussion see Hıdır 2004: 27-37.

<sup>4</sup> For the details of this discussion see Hıdır 2006: 149-206, 413-80.

and *al-rasûl* as “the one who task it is to pass on this message to others.” (al-Suyûfî 1952: I, 24; al-Zarkashî 1972: I, 208). Thus, according to al-Suyûfî and al-Zarkaschi, the following verse was the first one revealed concerning his prophethood: “Read in the name of your Lord who created” (*Sûra* 96:1), and the first verse revealed concerning his task as messenger was “O you enwrapped in the cloak” (*Sûra* 73:1).

The Prophet Muhammad is the last of the prophets, as a verse in *Sûra Al-Ahzâb* (33:40), makes clear. This also means that the prophethood of persons has been transferred to the Qur’an. For this reason, claims of prophethood by those who come after the prophet cannot be accepted in the Islamic tradition. This issue here is not that someone claims to be inspired but the guarantee that this inspiration comes from Allah. According to the Qur’an, devils can also inspire people and lead them astray (see *Sûra* 6:112, 121; 91: 8). It is important that a prophet have a guarantee from Allah that Allah will protect the inspiration against distortion by devils. The Prophet Muhammad received this guarantee and protection from Allah, according to the Qur’an (see *Sûra* 56:79). If someone has not received such a guarantee and protection from Allah, he cannot claim inspiration by Allah with any justification. Rather, his claim to be inspired by Allah will be used against him: “Who is more vile than he who slanders God of falsehood, or says: ‘Revelation came to me,’ when no such revelation came to him” (*Sûra* 6:93).

For this reason, all prophets who are mentioned in the Qur’an say to their people: “I have been sent as a trusted messenger to you” (see *Sûra* 26: 107, 125, 143, 162, 178, 193). It is as if a large part of *Sûra* 26, *Al-Shu‘arâ*, is intended to express what (true) prophets have in common, namely trustworthiness. According to the Qur’an, one of the central features of the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad is also that he was “trustworthy” (*al-amîn*). This has also been established via information and traditions about his life and prophethood.

An important point concerning the coming of the revelation to the prophet must be emphasized here. The verses that discuss the coming of the revelation to the prophet (see *Sûras* 2: 97; 42:193f.) are not sent with the preposition *ilâ* (to), as in “to your heart” in the sense of *intihâ* (to reach) but with the preposition *alâ* (on), as in “on your heart” in the sense of *istilâ* (possess) (cf. Abû Hayyân al-Andalûsî 1993: 440). For the Qur’an had entirely conquered the Prophet’s heart and everything was received without anything being added or subtracted, exactly as it had been revealed. The pure heart then passes on directly “that which has been received.” But the understanding distorts what is heard through the historical and cultural characteristics of the socio-cultural environment. Thus, the understanding colours what it hears. That is why, during a conversation on the historicity of the Qur’an, the well-known Pakistani Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) described the revelation as the answers that Allah gave via the the understanding of

the Prophet to events that had occurred in history (Fazlur Rahman 1982). But the Qur'an says that revelation was sent on the heart of the prophet and not to his intellect and understanding. The reason that the Qur'an is sent on the heart of the Prophet Muhammad is because the heart, according to the Qur'an, is the centre for intellect (*al-aql*), insight and understanding (see *Sûras* 50: 37; 22: 46). It passes things on as Muhammad had received them.

For that reason, Muslims hold that the Qur'an speaks to the heart in a pure way with divine power, without any historical distortion. Whoever studies the verses in the Qur'an about the connection between revelation and prophet will see that Allah unmistakably provides the information that the Prophet Muhammad passively receives, memorizes and saves the revelation as it came to him. The following verses help to prove this: "Do not forestall (the revelation before its completion) by acting in haste. Surely its collection and recitation are Our responsibility. So, as We recite it, follow its reading" (*Sûras* 75:16-18; 20:16).

One of the attributes of the Muhammad's prophethood in the Qur'an is the fact that he is "unlettered." In the Qur'an, the term "the unlettered/gentile prophet"<sup>5</sup> (*an-nabiyy al-ummî*) is used of Muhammad in two successive verses (see 7:157f.). This expression, to which some Western Islamologists have also devoted a great deal of attention, appears only in these two verses in the Qur'an. It can mean either a) a prophet who does not belong to the people of the Book or b) a prophet who cannot read or write. Despite the circumstance that there is evidence to support the opposite view and that some scholars also hold it—such as al-Jâhîz, a well-known scholar in the Arabic language and Abu al-Walîd Al-Bâjî (d. 474/1081), one of the most important scholars of the Malikite school of law, Sunni scholars agree that the Prophet was unlettered in the sense that he could not read or write and that this fact is important for our knowledge about the Prophet (al-Bayhaqî 1983: 170). Shiites generally take the position that Muhammad could read and write. Some Western Islamologists, such as W.M. Watt and Theodore Nöldeke, also assume that Muhammad could read and write and that the fact that he was "unlettered" referred to the fact that he could not read the old sacred texts. Therefore, their opinion is that even if the prophet could not read and write, he could not read the old sacred texts (cf. Watt 1979: 51-52; Nöldeke 1938: 12-14).

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<sup>5</sup> Muslim and Western scholars translate the term *an-nabiyy al-ummî* differently. A common interpretation of the expression *an-nabiyy al-ummî* by Western scholars is "the Gentile Prophet", meaning that Prophet Muhammad, acknowledging that the previous prophets were all Jews, made a special claim to be an exceptional, non-Jewish prophet. On the other hand, Muslim scholars and writers usually allege that the word really means "illiterate" and that it substantiates the claim that Prophet Muhammad could neither read nor write.

This point is important primarily because it does not leave any room for claims that have been advanced, particularly by Abraham Geiger and since then have been adopted by many Western Islamologists, that the prophet wrote the Qur'an on the basis of what he learned from different religious people during his travels. He did have several encounters with many Christian clergy, such as during his trip to Damascus with the monk, Bahîrah (Sergius/Georgius). As was stated above already, it is well known that Muhammad, after he had received the first revelation, visited together with Kadîjah, the Christian Waraqa Ibn Nawfal to consult him. He also had encounters from time to time with adherents of the "Hanifite religion" and spoke with Suwayd Ibn Sâmî, a noble man from the clan of al-Aws in Medina, who knew the old wisdom literature (see Ibn Hishâm 1995: I, 427). Moreover, he met with some Christian slaves in Mecca and in Medina visited the Jewish prayer house, Bayt al-Midrâs (Bet-ha Midrash) and spoke with rabbis there. Muhammad had possibly acquired some knowledge of the old faith and the old cults from these and other encounters. That could be, but the claim that Muhammad produced the Qur'an as a result of this does not rest on such facts.

It is also a fact that, especially after some Jews and Christians, became Muslim in the early period of Islam—such as Abdullah Ibn al-Salâm, Salmân al-Fârisî, Ka'b al-Akhbâr and Wahb Ibn al-Munabbih—certain information from the Jewish and Christian writings also appeared in a very natural process in the literature other than the Qur'an, such as history, commentaries and even in the *hadith* literature.<sup>6</sup> Passages in the Qur'an that showed agreement with the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Hinduism can also be explained by stating that in the revelations of the Qur'an God provided the prophet with information on the same universal truths. The Prophet Muhammad, of whom no one had seen or heard anything previously, and who had never before written anything on faith or philosophy or ethics, is an unlettered messenger, according to the Qur'an, who passed on the revelation that he received from Allah in its pure form to others. When this task was placed entirely on his shoulders, he was very alarmed, but when the revelations persisted "on" him, he understood that prophethood was not his choice but Allah's. When he accepted the divine nature of his appointment to the office of prophet, the earlier revelations were given a preparatory function with respect to messages still to be received. It was expected that he would recover internally and that his heart would remain strong, for a great responsibility would always be laid on him with the revelation "O you enfolded in your mantle" (*Sûra* 74:1), that the average person could not bear. The temporary interruption of the arrival of the revelation, that, according to tradition, would

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<sup>6</sup> For the role of Jewish-Christian converts in the early period of Islam in transmitting the Judeo-Christian culture to Islamic literatures see Hidir 2005.



take six months to a year, was not a true interruption, as the world implies, but a period of preparation for receiving new messages.

The Prophet Muhammad, who did his best to fulfill his task as messenger, was warned, when he began to lose hope because very few people believed in him, by this verse: "You may perhaps wear out your heart because they do not come to belief" (*Sûra* 26:3). His responsibility was twofold. Like all prophets, he had a certain responsibility to humankind as a teacher and as a student of Allah. Through the verse "So, you and those who turned to God with you, should walk along the straight path, as you have been commanded" (*Sûra* 11:112), he was made aware of his responsibility. To the remark of his most faithful friend, Abû Bakr, who told him according to a *hadith* narrated in *Jâmi' al-Tirmidhi*, one of the Sunni six *hadith* collections, "O messenger of Allah, your hair has gone grey, you have gotten old," he replied, referring to the *sûras* that had been sent to him in the last part of the Meccan period: "These messages have made me old" (al-Tirmizî: 1982, chapter *Tafsîr*, sub-chapter 6). His life and work was dominated by his message and prophethood. It was always in his thoughts, and his attention was focused entirely on receiving, spreading and explaining the revelation. The verse "O Prophet, announce what has reached you from your Lord, for if you do not, you will not have delivered His message. God will preserve you from (the mischief of) men; for God does not guide those who do not believe" (*Sûra* 5: 67) emphasizes that the responsibility for spreading the message and explaining it were the most fundamental responsibilities of his office.

The verse must not be understood as if the prophet Muhammad wanted to conceal parts of Allah's message. The comment by his wife, 'Aisha, on this verse was intended to prevent such a misunderstanding of his prophethood: "Whoever thinks that Muhammad held something back of the Book of Allah has expressed the most serious insinuation against Allah that is possible."

The feature of his prophethood is the wish to spread the message of the Qur'an; that is the true task of the Prophet that he, despite all difficulties, had to endure. The Prophet was to take responsibility for his prophethood and for the proclamation of his message. In this way the Prophet of Allah always kept in mind the verse "We shall question the people to whom We had sent Our apostles, (if they followed their teachings), and will question the apostles" (7: 6), and in all situations he proclaimed the divine truths. But from time to time he was also concerned that he would not be able to proclaim the message optimally. During the "Goodbye Pilgrimage (*al-Hajjatu al-vadâ'*)" he looked at the crowd after his sermon and asked them: "O people! Did I bring you the message?" From ten thousand people he received the answer: "Yes, you have brought us the message, O messenger of Allah!" After this answer, the prophet called upon Allah as wit-

ness and said, "O my Lord, be a witness to this!" (al-Bukhârî 1982: chapter *al-Hajj*, sub-chapter 123).

It was within this frame of mind that the Prophet Muhammad attempted to live and therefore he always proclaimed the message of the Qur'an among the people until the end of his life.

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