

## The *Nabī-Rasūl* in Arabian/Semitic Religious Tradition: Qur'ānic Monotheism, Prophet Muḥammad and the Shaping of Muslim World View

IMTIYAZ YUSUF\*

### Abstract

*As the carriers of the message and practice of monotheism defined differently in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the nabī and rasūl translated as prophets occupy a central position in the Arabian/Semitic history of religion and its geographic space. This paper is based on the theory of history of religions. It views Arabia—the expanded geographic land space between Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Arabian Peninsula, which is the home ground of the religious contest between monotheism and polytheism—as a religious territory and not as a map. The contest between monotheism and polytheism in Arabia lies at the heart of religious, social, and economic disorder, chaos, and injustice, which obstructs the sustenance of equality, justice, and fraternity based on monotheism. The paper focuses on the religious role of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as a post-Judeo-Christian prophet in Arabia by expounding on the meaning of revelation in Islam as being a scripture and the role of Prophet Muḥammad as a human exemplar. The last part of this paper explores the humanness of Prophet Muḥammad and the divineness of an unseen, imageless Allah—two religious dimensions of the Qur'ānic world view, which shape the daily life of a Muslim as an individual, his/her piety, and social engagement—representing life and thought.*

### Keywords

Arabia, monotheism, polytheism, history of religions.

### Introduction

Classical Muslim scholars such as Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī (d. 1050 CE); Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 1158 CE); Rashīd al-Dīn Hamadānī (d. 1318 CE), and Ḥāfiẓ-i Abrū (d. 1430 CE) as well as

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\* Deputy Dean, Students Development and Community Engagement Co-ordinator, Islam and Buddhism Program, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC-IIUM), International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

modern-age Muslim historians of religion such as Professor Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (d. 1986) made significant contributions to the history of religions. In continuation of this tradition, the present paper delves in construing the Arabian/Semitic concept and religious personage of a *nabī-rasūl* in relation to the Qur'ānic monotheism, prophethood of Muḥammad (peace be on him) and its impact on shaping the Muslim world view. Writing in 1965, Professor al-Faruqi pronounced that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' Western contributions to the field of the history of religions shunned the study of Islam. This largely resulted from the Western pursuit of a hot colonialist war against Islam, supported by the missionaries and the comparatists for whom Christianity superseded all religions; thereby they discouraged serious students of comparative religion from studying Islam. Another reason was the secular Islamic discipline that was developed by scholars like Ignac Goldziher (d. 1921), Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), Arthur J. Arberry (d. 1969), and Hamilton Gibb (d. 1971), who totally eclipsed and disqualified the study of the Islamic religio-culture. Such an aptitude hindered the Western historians from being well versed in the study of Islamics. Consequently, Islam could never be regarded as an integral part of the subject matter of history of religions.<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to address this lacuna by offering an understanding of the Arabian/Semitic concept and religious personage of a *nabī-rasūl* in relation to the Qur'ānic monotheism, the prophethood of Muḥammad, and its impact on shaping the Muslim world view from the perspective of history of religions. It thereby argues that studies of the rise of Islam in Arabia/Semitic world should be an integral part of the studies of history of religions.<sup>2</sup>

The Qur'ānic reference to religious functionaries of Arabia describes them as *nabī* and *rasūl*, which are translated as prophets in English. The term prophet is a Greek derivative, which refers to the cultic functionaries who spoke on behalf of a god who was present in a sanctuary. The term prophet came to be used in English language with reference to the Arabian/Semitic religious functionaries as a consequence of its adoption by the Jewish and Christian translators of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ismail Raji A. Al Faruqi, "History of Religions: Its Nature and Significance for Christian Education and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue" *Numen* 12, no. 1 (1965): 39–40. Some later attempts in relating Islamic studies to the history of religions are Richard C. Martin, *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1985); Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, eds., *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Isma'il R. al-Faruqi, "Towards a Historiography of Pre-Hijrah Islam," *Islamic Studies* 1, no. 2 (1962): 65–87.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard and William E. Herbrechtsmeier, "Prophecy: An Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd. ed. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2004),

In ancient Arabia, the Hebrew term *navi* was employed to refer to persons whose person, being, and behaviour were stimulated and overcome by Yahveh's spirit. The *navi* played the role of an ecstatic person and independent social critic. The *nevim* (pl. of *navi*) received oracular revelations as messages from God, which were written down and accepted as storehouse of divine messages and instructions.

Apart from the Hebrew *nevim*, the Persian religious personality of Zarathustra (d. ca. 1500 BCE-1000 BCE), the Babylonian Mani (d. 274 CE), and Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 CE) from peninsular Arabia are all considered *nevim* and commonly translated as prophets in English.<sup>4</sup>

The tradition of the *nevim* has a long Arabian history, beginning with Prophet Adam and culminating in Prophet Muḥammad of Arabia as a *nabī*. In Arabic, the term *nabī* refers to a person who has an audition of God or is a giver of news from God. A *nabī* is also called a *rasūl*—a warner sent by God to humanity. They received messages from God just as did Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.<sup>5</sup> A difference is also made between a *nabī* who as a religious functionary teaches without a new *sharī'ah* (law), and a *rasūl* who receives revelation (revealed book) and the *sharī'ah* (law).<sup>6</sup> However, both the *rasūl* and *nabī* were recipients of divine revelations from God.

Prophet Muḥammad was elected as a *nabī* and *rasūl* by God and received revelations from God through angel Gabriel. These revelations were collected as the Qur'ān, the main purpose of which was to restore monotheism in Arabia after it lapsed into polytheism. For the Muslims, the Qur'ān is the embodiment of revelations collected as scripture. It is the highest form of religious expression, which Muslims memorised, preserved, and collected since the time of Prophet Muḥammad's election as a prophet—*nabī* and *rasūl*—hence, the persistent Muslim claim that the Qur'ān that they possess today is the same as the one that was sent down during the lifetime of Prophet Muḥammad. This Muslim-faith claim has been subject to much discussion and debate, into which I will not enter here.

From the Qur'ānic perspective, all the genuine prophets were raised amidst humanity and preached the same message that there was only one God/Ultimate Reality whom humans should worship and serve and should

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11:7423–24.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert R. Wilson, "Prophecy: Biblical Prophecy," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MA: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 11:7429–38; Marilyn Robinson Waldman and Bruce B. Lawrence, "Nubūwah," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MA: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 10:6733–39.

<sup>5</sup> Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier, "Prophecy," 11:7426.

<sup>6</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, MI: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 57.

never worship the non-God, which they created or invented on their own. They were the false gods, whose worship amounted to polytheism, which in turn led to formation of many types of gods. The Qur'ān lays stress that if there had been many gods, the world would have been in a chaotic condition.<sup>7</sup>

### Geography of Religion

Religion is a universal phenomenon defined differently based on the religious diversity. In several places, the Qur'ān describes religion as *al-dīn*, a divinely revealed way of life based on the belief in Allah and acting righteously by free choice in order to attain success in the hereafter. It is reported that about 4,200 faith communities exist today,<sup>8</sup> but out of them, only five to ten religions dominate the world scene today.

Geography, its related existential questions, the quest to learn about what it means to be human, and liberation from the toils of life resulted in expressing the responses in a variety of ways around the world through different types of religious functionaries regardless of whether they were shamans, gurus, teachers, sages, prophets, etc.

In Islam, the prophet—known as *nabī* or *rasūl*—is a human messenger of God to humanity. As a male or female person—as in the case of Mary, the mother of Jesus—prophets were the carriers of revelation from God, the Creator. In the case of Islamic tradition, Prophet Muḥammad is the last of the monotheist prophets.

The paper emphasises the concept of the prophet in Islam as a human being who receives revelation from God and serves as an example of how to achieve perfection of religious belief and good practice in life. The famous Qur'ānic verse describes the Qur'ān as “a revelation from Him who has created the earth and the high heavens.”<sup>9</sup>

Prophet Muḥammad was a human being and is an exemplar for the Muslims to emulate in their lives. Islam is the religion of *imitatio Muhammadi*, that is, emulating Prophet Muḥammad's example of how to live a life centred around the worship of God and practice of serving humanity while keeping the duality of reality—i.e., separation between God and the cosmos—intact.

The prophets played a necessary religious and social role in the Near Eastern societies since antiquity.<sup>10</sup> Elected by God as an act of mercy on

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<sup>7</sup> Qur'ān 21:22.

<sup>8</sup> “World Religions Religion Statistics Geography Church Statistics,” <https://www.adherents.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Qur'ān 20:4.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel E. Fleming, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Sabatino Moscati, *Ancient Semitic*

unguided humanity, the prophets brought the message about the criterion of what was good and what was bad for human beings and their societies and shook human conscience out of moral forgetfulness, directing them towards piety and virtuous living. They delivered messages and teachings, which were not only of local relevance, but also universal importance as eternal guidance for humanity. Prophet Muḥammad is the last in the line of the Semitic prophets. He was a human being and died a natural death while God does not die. In Islam, the life mission of human beings is to worship (*ibādah*), obey, submit, and devote themselves to God alone, with Prophet Muḥammad being a model of how to worship and practice the religious belief of monotheism in all aspects of life.

Say: "I am but a man like yourselves, (but) the inspiration has come to me, that your God is one God: whoever expects to meet his Lord, let him work righteousness, and, in the worship of his Lord, admit no one as partner."<sup>11</sup>

Muḥammad is no more than a Messenger: many were the Messengers that passed away before him. If he died or were slain, will ye then turn back on your heels? If any did turn back on his heels, not the least harm will he do to Allah; but Allah (on the other hand) will swiftly reward those who (serve Him) with gratitude.<sup>12</sup>

### God and Prophet Muḥammad: Their Relationship and the Role of Muḥammad

From the Qur'ānic perspective of history of religion, Allah is the creator of the universe and everything and Muḥammad is the *rasūl*— the messenger and prophet.

Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare the praises and glory of Allah—the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Exalted in Might, the Wise. It is He Who has sent amongst the Unlettered a messenger from among themselves, to rehearse to them His signs, to sanctify them, and to instruct them in Scripture and Wisdom—although they had been, before, in manifest error.<sup>13</sup>

The above verse highlights the central role played by the prophets in the history of the monotheistic religious traditions culminating in the finality of the prophethood of Prophet Muḥammad.

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*Civilizations* (New York, NY: Capricorn Books, 1960); Henri Frankfort, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1946); Sabatino Moscati, *The Face of the Ancient Orient* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Vallentine, Mitchell, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> Qur'ān 18:110.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:144.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 62:1–2.

***The Qur'ān: Revelation as a Message of Wisdom and Knowledge from God through Muḥammad, the Prophet***

The Qur'ān—as a message and teaching of wisdom and knowledge—was expressed in the first revelation received by Muḥammad during a meditation session in the cave of Ḥirā' located outside the city of Mecca during the month of Ramaḍān, the month of fasting, as follows: “Proclaim! (or read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created—Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful—He Who taught (the use of) the pen—Taught man that which he knew not.”<sup>14</sup> The main characteristics of the Qur'ān are as following: (1) It is a revelation from God. (2) It is a guidance to humanity about dual reality of nature, which brings peace (*salām/shalom*) to the hearts and lives of Muslims. It offers guidance and answers to the existential questions of life. (3) The Qur'ān is the foundation of the cosmological view of Islam and forms the world view of Muslims. (4) The term Muslim does not refer to an ethnic or racial identity; rather, it means the believer in God/Ultimate Reality/Truth since immemorial times before philosophy. (5) It identifies the paths that lead to the heaven, success, or failure in life. (6) As the Word of God in oral form, the Qur'ān is the foundation of Muslims' lives and is exemplified in the life of Prophet Muḥammad, its carrier and practitioner. (7) The Qur'ān is a book of principles about how to live personal and social life. (8) For Muslims, it is an ultimate source of truth, the criterion. (9) The Qur'ān is the last of several heavenly books of guidance. It is the substance of all previous revelations. (10) It is a miracle both in terms of its content and form. (11) The Qur'ān has been preserved intact in the hearts of the Muslims who have memorised it and practiced its teachings as exemplified in the life of Prophet Muḥammad. (12) It is recorded in varied forms of media—textual and virtual—from the time of its revelation until today.<sup>15</sup>

We have sent down to thee the Book explaining all things, a Guide, a Mercy, and Glad Tidings to Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

Verily this Qur'ān doth guide to that which is most right (or stable), and giveth the glad tidings to the Believers who work deeds of righteousness, that they shall have a magnificent reward.<sup>17</sup>

We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 96:1-5.

<sup>15</sup> Labib As-Said, *Recited Koran: A History of the First Recorded Version* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1975), 65-126.

<sup>16</sup> Qur'ān 16:89.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17:9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15:9.

The Qur'ān, which was sent down to Prophet Muḥammad was revealed at the highest stage of human rationality when the human being reached the highest state of rational maturity and ability to grasp and understand belief in an unseen God. The Qur'ān often reiterates that it is a book for the people who contemplate. However, if Muslims fail to achieve this, it is not fault of the Qur'ān, but it results from Muslims' inability and their socio-economic and political conditions in which they find themselves.

*Dual View of Reality: Separation between God and the World*

In Islamic cosmology, God is seen as transcendent and separate from the creation of which the humans are the perfect beings who are endowed with the faculty of reason, which enables them to distinguish between the good and the evil. This dual view of reality emerged in the Arabian religious theater extending from Mesopotamia, Palestine, and the Arabian Peninsula where the two religious ideas of monotheism and polytheism—associating others with God and worshipping, praying, and seeking aid from non-divine entities be they humans or other objects of nature—constantly contested.

The reality is made of two basic, opposed, and irreducible principles, that is, God and the cosmos. Hence, Muslims claim that the greatest religious gift of the Arabs to the world of religions entails three streams of Jewish-Christian-Islamic monotheism. The message of monotheism was conveyed by the prophets throughout the history.<sup>19</sup> Belief in previous prophets and revelations is an integral part of Islamic creed.<sup>20</sup> The Qur'ān proclaims that there was a guide for each nation.<sup>21</sup> Allah sent many prophets before Prophet Muḥammad, but He did not inform His Prophet about all of them.<sup>22</sup>

In this monotheistic word view, the reality is of dual nature made of the Creator—who is non-personal—and the creation made of multitudes of seen and unseen beings and worlds of which Prophet Adam is the human prototype.

There is a clear and distinct separation between the God, the Creator and the creation. They cannot be mixed. This is expressed as the contest between monotheism and polytheism—worshipping of the creation.

The creation is described in the Islamic theology in two ways:

First is the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd*, the oneness or unity of being as elaborated by the Andalusian Sufi and theologian Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240 CE) through his school of theoretical mysticism. For him, the Qur'ānic message is

<sup>19</sup> Isma'īl Ragi A. al-Faruqi, *On Arabism* (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> Qur'ān 2:285.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 13:7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 40:78.

about a contest between monotheism and polytheism, which is centred on making distinction between God being impersonal “nondelimited delimitation,” which was conveyed by all the Arab/Semitic/Abrahamic prophets. Ibn al-‘Arabī opines, “God possesses Nondelimited Being. . . . He possesses all delimitations, so He is nondelimited delimitation.”<sup>23</sup>

Second is the common understanding of duality of nature expressed in its popularised definition by Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624) through the doctrine of *waḥdat al-shubūd*, the unity of consciousness, which views the creation as being the proof or witness to the experiential unity of God.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the human or Adam is born with the faculty of reasoning and language, he/she is the best of the creation, the trustee (caliph) over all other creations in nature. The human being is the ambassador of God to earth.

However, since the human being was forgetful of his/her noble position of being a trustee, God sent several prophets, twenty-five of whom appeared in Arabia and are mentioned in the Qur’ān to remind the human being of it. Moreover, there are other unnamed prophets who came to different parts of the world, speaking the languages of their people. They were endowed with the moral mission of being good human beings who lived and struggled to promote the principle of “promoting the good and prohibiting the evil”<sup>25</sup> in their locales. The point to be made here is that in the Qur’ān, the prophets are the saviours of humanity from the state of suffering and loss as well as liberators of human beings from suffering and *kabad* (struggles and hardships of life).<sup>26</sup>

### **Muḥammad as a Human Prophet and Islam as a Religion of Moralistic Monotheism**

Born as an orphan and grown up in an unjust tribal Arabian society, Prophet Muḥammad was much disturbed about the conditions of religious, social, and political life around him, which was contaminated with polytheism and its

<sup>23</sup> William Chittick, “Ibn Arabi,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), accessed June 10, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/ibn-arabi/>.

<sup>24</sup> Abdul Haq Ansari, “Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī’s Doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Shubūd*,” *Islamic Studies* 37, no. 3 (1998): 281–312; Mehdi Aminrazavi, “Mysticism in Arabic and Islamic Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), accessed June 10, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/arabic-islamic-mysticism/>. Also see, Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, 12–56; Isma‘il R. Al-Faruqi, *al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Qur’ān 3:110.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 90:4.



unjust social consequences such as religious rivalry, degradation of females, female infanticide, slavery, etc. Thus, he would often withdraw from the bustling city of Mecca for spiritual contemplation in the cave of Ḥirā' outside Mecca, the place where the first revelation of the Qur'ān occurred to him as a religious experience.

This landmark event marked the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'ān—the holy book of Islam being a collection of revelatory messages from God—and also the beginning of the election of Prophet Muḥammad as a *nābī* and *rasūl*—the prophet of Islam and the last of the Semitic prophets. The Qur'ān is the book that delivered the message of moralistic monotheism as a path to reform Arabian society in particular and the entire humanity in general.<sup>27</sup>

For Prophet Muḥammad, monotheism relates to socio-economic justice, which makes it moralistic monotheism.<sup>28</sup> With this spirit of mission, he faced many challenges and undertook a long struggle to end Arabian polytheism, which was main cause of social injustice in Arabia, rooted in rebellious nature of the human being. The Qur'ān says,

Nay, but man doth transgress all bounds,  
In that he looketh upon himself as self-sufficient.  
Verily, to thy Lord is the return (of all).  
Seest thou one who forbids—  
A votary when he (turns) to pray?  
Seest thou if he is on (the road of) Guidance?—  
Or enjoins Righteousness?  
Seest thou if he denies (Truth) and turns away?<sup>29</sup>

It continues,

Seest thou one who denies the Judgment (to come)?  
Then such is the (man) who repulses the orphan (with harshness),  
And encourages not the feeding of the indigent.  
So woe to the worshippers  
Who are neglectful of their prayers,  
Those who (want but) to be seen (of men),  
But refuse (to supply) (even) neighbourly needs.<sup>30</sup>

With persistence in instilling belief in God and doing good—the two main principles of the Qur'ān—Muḥammad as the prophet sought and struggled to

<sup>27</sup> Fazlur Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'ān," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1983): 170–85.

<sup>28</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, MI: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Qur'ān 96:6–13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 107:1–7.

restore religio-social equilibrium in Arabia. The Qur'ān often stresses on the importance of maintaining balance—as criterion of belief and justice and preventing corruption. The Qur'ān reiterates, “In order that ye may not transgress (due) balance.”<sup>31</sup>

Prophet Muḥammad transformed the polytheistic society of his time to a monotheist one based on morality and justice where the principles of equality, justice, and fairness were of paramount importance as were principles of law, social equanimity, social order, and maintenance of peace. If these characteristics are not found in the contemporary Muslim world, which is suffering from severe clashes, conflicts, and violence, it is largely due to the presence of inequalities and political oppression; it is not the fault of the message of the Qur'ān nor the example of Prophet Muḥammad.

The first followers of Prophet Muḥammad generally included exploited, downtrodden, suffering, and young people. After reception and continuation of revelation, his social struggle for faith-based reform while challenging the oppressors of Arabia was a saga of struggle to establish justice and remove injustice for the sake of liberation of Arabia from its darkest stage in history. Hence, the Qur'ān's prohibition of usury-based economic practice and its insistence on the obligation of paying *zakāb*—the annual poor tax paid by the rich for the needy—were aimed at building a just social order.

Prophet Muḥammad's exercise in the establishment of just and peaceful society is seen in his forming of social contract of Medina—also called the constitution of Medina—which regulated the rights and duties of all the inhabitants of the city, which included Muslims, non-Muslim tribes, Jews, and Christians.<sup>32</sup>

Prophet Muḥammad realised the importance of implementing the teachings of the Qur'ān in the society. That is why, like the Buddha in his post-Nirvana active life, Prophet Muḥammad too did not remain in the cave of Ḥirā' after receiving the first revelation. Rather he started to proclaim his message and alleviate the sufferings of the people of his community. This resulted in establishing the city of Medina as an example of Islamic social order based on the principle of brotherhood and equality. This is also seen in the Qur'ān's non-exclusivist vision of salvation, as it teaches that all past Christians, Jews, and others who believed in God and the Last Day and did what was right would be saved.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 55:8.

<sup>32</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, *First Written Constitution in the World: City State of Madinah at the Time of the Prophet*, 3rd ed. (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1975).

<sup>33</sup> Qur'ān 5:69.

Prophet Muḥammad's stress on the importance of the Qur'ānic teachings of humanitarianism, egalitarianism, socio-economic justice, righteousness, and solidarity is evident in his last sermon given to the nascent Muslim community during his pilgrimage, months before his demise.

### *The Last Sermon of Prophet Muḥammad*

This sermon was delivered on the ninth day of Dhū 'l-Ḥijjah, 10 AH (632 CE) in the 'Uranah valley of Mount Arafat in Mecca. It was the occasion of annual rites of ḥajj. It is also known as the Farewell Pilgrimage (*Ḥajjat al-Wadā'*).

After praising and thanking Allah, the Prophet began with these words:

“O People! Lend me an attentive ear, for I know not whether after this year I shall ever be amongst you again. Therefore, listen carefully to what I am saying and take these words to those who could not be present here today.”

“O People! Just as you regard this month, this day, and this city as sacred, so regard the life and property of every Muslim a sacred trust. Return the goods entrusted to you to their rightful owners. Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that He will indeed reckon your deeds.”

“Beware of Satan, for the safety of your religion. He has lost all hope that he will be able to lead you astray in big things so beware of following him in small things.”

“O People! it is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under Allah's trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers. And it is your right that they do not make friends with any one of whom you do not approve, as well never to be unchaste.”

“O People! Listen to me in earnest, worship Allah, say your five daily prayers, fast during month of Ramaḍān, and give your wealth in *zakāb*. Perform ḥajj if you can afford it.”

“All mankind is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor has a non-Arab any superiority over an Arab. Moreover, a white has no superiority over a black nor has a black any superiority over a white except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly.”

“Do not, therefore, do injustice to yourselves. Remember, one day you will meet Allah and answer your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone.”

“O People! No prophet or apostle will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well, therefore, O People! and understand words that I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, the Qur’ān and the *sunnah* and if you follow these you will never go astray.”

“All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again; and may the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly.”

“O Allah, be my witness, that I have conveyed Your message to Your people.”<sup>34</sup>

As part of this sermon, the Prophet recited to them a revelation from Allah, which he had just received, and which completed the Qur’ān, as it was the last passage to be sent down.<sup>35</sup>

This day have those who reject faith given up all hope of your religion: yet fear them not but fear Me. This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.<sup>36</sup>

The last sermon of Prophet Muḥammad quoted above in length conveys message of moralistic monotheism and its relevance to humanity. The main features of moralistic monotheism entail practicing the fundamental values of the Qur’ān, such as belief (*imān*), surrender (*islām*), truth (*ḥaqq*), God consciousness (*taqwā*), justice (*‘adl*), doing good to others (*iḥsān*), compassion (*raḥmah*), and wisdom (*ḥikmah*), which are the essential teachings of Islam. These are also the names/attributes of Allah. The sermon teaches that living and practicing the values of Islam involves rights and duties, including rights of God (*ḥuqūq Allāh*), rights of human beings (*ḥuqūq al-‘ibād*), and rights of the world (*ḥuqūq al-‘ālam*), which involve respect for life and property, gender equity, safety, security, and that practicing the pillars of Islam, such as devotion, justice, and racial equality comprises the principles of moralistic monotheism.

Prophet Muḥammad was not an angel; he was a human being. He ate, slept, fasted, got married, and had children. He walked through the streets, prayed, helped, and assisted everyone even his wives in doing household chores, and died a natural death. His mission in life was to liberate human beings from the curses of tribalism, slavery, and female infanticide, which

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<sup>34</sup> The text of the last sermon is scattered in the authentic collections of the Prophetic traditions. The translation has been adopted with slight variations from “The Last Sermon of Prophet Muhammad (SAW),” accessed May 6, 2019, <http://www.iium.edu.my/deed/articles/thelastsermon.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Qur’ān 5:3.

were rooted in pre-Islamic polytheistic beliefs and caused human suffering and hardship. The social evils of injustice, exploitation, and human arrogance were rooted in polytheism—the main source of human cruelty and heartlessness, which led to civil strife, corruption, and socio-economic brutalities of pre-Islamic Arabia. Prophet Muḥammad removed these evils and replaced them with the practices of the principles of moralistic monotheism mentioned above.

Finally, Prophet Muḥammad struggled to end evils that were caused by human beings and not by God. God is the source of the good; human actions lead to the evil.<sup>37</sup> This also fits many contemporary Muslims who have abandoned practicing the above-mentioned Qur'ānic values and involved instead themselves in politics of tribalism, arrogance, cruelty, exploitation, materialism, and injustice, which are the root causes of the rise of radical Muslim youth deprived of justice, welfare, and economic equality.

### **Prophet Muḥammad and the Shaping of Muslim World View**

There are numerous books on Prophet Muḥammad in different languages of the world written by the both Muslims and non-Muslims, which interpret his personality and role from different perspectives, some of which are negative as well.

In the 1440 years of Islamic history, the role of Prophet Muḥammad has been interpreted in the Muslim tradition in a variety of ways, which include sectarian, orthodox, philosophical, and mystical representations.<sup>38</sup> Each of these traditions has interpreted him in a particular way. Yet, all of them constitute a part of the variety in the vast Islamic tradition in their own ways.

The personality of Prophet Muḥammad is central to Muslim world view. He occupies a central place in the Islamic tradition similar to the status of the founders of other religions in different traditions. Therefore, any act of insulting, mocking, or ridiculing his personality in electronic, print, or social media as seen in several recent episodes is not tolerated by the worldwide

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 4:79.

<sup>38</sup> Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Isma'il Ragi Al-Faruqi (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 2005); Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, rev. ed. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006); Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, new ed. (Chapel Hill, CA: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Fazlur Rahman and Michael A. Sells, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*, rev. ed. (Chicago, MI: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Tariq Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009); Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007); S. H. M. Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Muslim community. It is said that Muslims may tolerate ridiculing God, but do not tolerate ridiculing Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>39</sup> For, the main principle of religious freedom and tolerance in Islam is based in the Qur'ānic teaching of "To you be your Way, and to me mine,"<sup>40</sup> which is the paramount part of the Muslim world view.

Apart from normative religious interpretations of the person of Muḥammad, there are also geographical-linguistic-cultural varieties of the interpretations and image-portrayals of Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>41</sup> One may divide the Muslim world into following cultural-linguistic zones where in spite of commonality of faith, the personality of Prophet Muḥammad is interpreted and portrayed in a variety of ways. This illustrates the unity and cultural variety of Islamicate-Muslim regions of the world:

1. The Arab Middle East including non-Arabic regions such as Iran, Turkey, Kurdistan, and Afghanistan
2. Africa—the Maghreb or North Africa, West Africa, and East Africa
4. Central Asia—comprising of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan
5. South Asia—Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka
6. Southeast Asia—Indo-Malay Archipelago and mainland Southeast Asia
7. China—Hui and Uighur
8. Balkan—Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania
9. Muslim Diaspora in Europe and North America

This explains the unity and diversity of the Muslim world that is comprised of 1.6 billion people.

## Conclusion

This paper has illustrated an example of how to pursue the study of Islam and its Prophet from the perspective of the study of history of religious tradition. It is an area of research to which Muslim scholars have contributed little, largely due to their own neglect or not being trained in this field as seen from the current state of studies and research in Islamic studies.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Lyons, *Islam through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009); R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>40</sup> Qur'ān 109:6.

<sup>41</sup> Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Ismail al-Faruqi's Contribution to the Academic Study of Religion," *Islamic Studies* 53, no. 1-2 (2014): 99-115.

The role of Prophet Muḥammad in human history of religious salvation and his example have been much praised by historians and others. His religious achievement of bringing an end to polytheism—the root of injustices in Arabia—has been applauded by many. Moreover, he stands among the most influential persons in human history, as Michael Hart placed him at the top of the list, before many other great persons in history who deeply influenced the world and humanity.<sup>43</sup> However, Prophet Muḥammad never claimed any kingship or high status for himself except that he was a religious functionary in the human history of religion by being a medium of revelation of the Qur’ān—a book of guidance to humanity, having a universal import. The Qur’ān—when viewed from the universal dimension of history of religions—describes him as a blessed prophet of mercy for humanity.<sup>44</sup>

The role of Prophet Muḥammad in human history has been described as combining prophethood and statesmanship.<sup>45</sup> He should be judged not only by his unblemished character and self-effacing personality who attributed everything to God, but also by the religious wisdom of Islam, which he contributed to the world of religions. Wisdom mainly entails promoting the good and prohibiting the evil to solve the problems faced by humanity.

This paper has tried to portray the role of Muḥammad in the history of religions as a prophet who left a lasting impact on human history and who continues to offer a living example of how to be a human in the age of globalisation, in which humanity is edging towards the rise of religious fascism, which is more dangerous than nationalist fascism. Resolutions for this should come from the solidarity of religions and not from their provincialisms as being witnessed today.




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<sup>43</sup> Michael H. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, rev. ed. (Secausus, NJ: Citadel, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> “We sent thee not, but as a Mercy for all creatures.” Qur’ān 21:107.

<sup>45</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).