

The Spiritual Ideals of the Prophet (SAW)

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Muslims locate their moral ideals within the Prophetic example as they see the Prophet to be the best example of the perfect human being (*al-insan al-kamil*). The Prophet was not only a paragon for the Muslims, he was also a spiritual archetype for all humankind. It is this factor that makes him a human being *par excellence*.

The Prophet himself personified the Qur'anic ethics. Stated differently, what the Qur'an was in book form, the Prophet Muhammad embodied that Qur'an in a human form. In the *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam 'Ali best sums up this ideal. He states: "He was of all men the most open-handed, most stout hearted, most truthful of tongue, most loyal in the keeping of his trusts, most serene of mind, and the noblest in friendly discourse. Those who saw him for the first time feared him, but those who got acquainted with him loved him. Indeed, a man like him I have never seen."¹

From the brutal and often oppressive tribal milieu, the Prophet tried to carve out a moral environment by living out the Qur'anic ethical ideal. Thus, in another moving statement in the *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam 'Ali states that the Prophet would sit like an ordinary person, repaired his own shoes, and washed his own clothes. Even though the Prophet could have lived like a king, he chose to live like a simple person." He continues, "A simple and austere lifestyle was not imposed on him, rather, he chose to live an austere lifestyle."²

¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 75.

² *Nahj al-Balagha*, 3rd edition (Karachi: Khorasan Islamic center, 1977), Sermon 163. Shi'is believe that the *Nahj al-Balagha* comprises the sermons of 'Ali.

Humility was one of the most outstanding and sublime characteristics of the Prophet. Infact, the Qurayshis were surprised at the Prophet not because he was extra-ordinary but that he was so ordinary. Thus, 25:7 in the Qur'an states: "They (Qurayshis) say, 'What kind of Prophet is this, he eats food and walks in the street? Why has not angel been sent with him so that he could also admonish?'" The Qur'anic response was that if angels had been walking on earth, then God would have sent an angel as a messenger (17:95).

The Spirituality of the Prophet

The Prophet possessed the quality of piety in its most universal sense, that quality which attaches human beings to God and makes them profoundly pious. He had a sense of uprightness which inwardly attached him to God, that made him place the interest of God before everything else including himself.

Many Muslims attempt to replicate the Prophet's spiritual journey. Spiritual connectedness to the Prophet is correlated to the degree with which a Muslim imitates his spiritual examples. Imitating the spiritual demeanor of the Prophet becomes a replication of his mystical quest. In this way, one can experience Allah in the same way that the Prophet did.

Apart from imitating the different spiritual states of the Prophet, Muslims also inculcate and express deep love for him. In fact, love for God is expressed by loving His Prophet. It is the love of the Prophet, as it is experienced by Muslims, that is the strongest binding force of all Muslims, be they peasants or kings. Due to the veneration of and love for the Prophet, the daily prayers of Muslims in different parts of the world contain

prayers of blessings on the Prophet and his family. Such prayers, are believed to be extremely beneficial to a person's spiritual well-being.

For Muslims, the love of the Prophet is interwoven to the love for God, for the Prophet himself loved God intensely. Thus, in a famous *hadith*, he is reported to have stated, "O Lord Grant me the love of You, Grant that I love those who love You, Grant that I do the deeds that win Your love, Make Your love dearer to me than myself, family and wealth."³

The Prophetic Example of Peaceful Coexistence with the Other

The community (*umma*) that the Prophet established in Medina comprised not only of Muslims but also the Jews who lived in Medina. The Prophet himself articulated and implemented the Qur'anic demand of peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. One of the earliest Prophetic documents that is extant is the constitution of Medina. In this document, the Prophet envisions the Jews as being an important component of the Medinan community and outlines the rights and obligations of the Jews of Medina.

The constitution states, "Whoever of the Jews follows us has the same help and support (as the believers), so long as they are not wronged by him and he does not help (others) against them." The constitution also states, "The Jews of Banu 'Awf are a community (*umma*) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion and to the Muslims their religion." Another article of the document states that, "between the Jews

³ Nasr, *Ideals*, 72.

and Muslims is sincere friendship and honorable dealing, not treachery. There is help for the person wronged.”⁴

There are many other aspects of Prophetic demeanor that exemplify his interaction with non-Muslims, traits that today’s Muslims need to emulate. The Prophet’s character was based on the Qur’anic preference for forgiveness over revenge. He possessed the quality of magnanimity in its fullness. His soul displayed a grandeur which every devout Muslim yearns to emulate. After conquering Mecca in 630 C.E., the Prophet was in a position to exact revenge from those who had opposed and even tried to kill him. Yet, al-Mas’udi tells us, that the Prophet was magnanimous in his victory. He chose to forgive them, stating, “I will speak to you as Joseph spoke to brothers – you are free today.”⁵ It was this genre of demeanor that endeared the Prophet to many people.

When Mu‘adh b. Jabal, a close companion, was going to Yemen to proselytize, the Prophet told him, “Deal gently with the people, not harshly; give them good news, do not repel them.”⁶ It was through his personal character and gentle preaching that the Prophet was able to reach the hearts of so many non-Muslims.

In conclusion, it is correct to state that whereas the Prophet’s charisma may have dissipated after his demise, his knowledge, piety, and spiritual legacy have inspired different groups of Muslims to emulate his outstanding examples. The profound characteristics of the Prophet have left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the Muslims. The Qur’an itself bears the perfume of the soul of the person through whom it

⁴ See Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 221-4.

⁵ ‘Ali b. Husayn al-Mas’udi, *Muru’ al-Dhahab wa Ma’adin al-Jawhar* (Qum: Dar al-Hijra, 1983), 2:290.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 644.

was revealed. As the great philosopher poet ‘Allama Iqbal said:

“You can deny God but you cannot deny the Prophet.”⁷

⁷ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 227.