

THE PROPHET AND PROPHETIC TRADITION— THE LAST PROPHET AND UNIVERSAL MAN*

The Prophet as the founder of Islam and the messenger of God's revelation to mankind is the interpreter *par excellence* of the Book of God; and his *Hadith* and *Sunnah*, his sayings and actions, are, after the Quran, the most important sources of the Islamic tradition. In order to understand the significance of the Prophet it is not sufficient to study, from the outside, historical texts pertaining to the his life. One must view him also from within the Islamic point of view and try to discover the position he occupies in the religious consciousness of Muslims. When in any Islamic language one says *the Prophet*, it means Muhammad **(S.)** whose name as such is never iterated except that as a courtesy it be followed by the formula "*sall' Allahu `alayhi wa sallim,*" that is, "may God's blessing and salutation be upon him."

It is even legitimate to say that, in general, when one says *the Prophet* it means the prophet of Islam, for although in every religion the founder, who is an aspect of the Universal Intellect, becomes *the Aspect*, *the Word*, *the incarnation*, nevertheless, each founder emphasizes a certain aspect of the Truth and even typifies that aspect universally. Although there is belief in incarnation in many religions, when one says *the Incarnation* (in the Abrahamic context) it refers to Christ who personifies this aspect. And although every prophet and saint has experienced "enlightenment," *the Enlightenment* refers to the experience of the Buddha which is the most outstanding and universal embodiment of this experience. In the same manner the prophet of Islam is the prototype and perfect embodiment of prophecy and so in a profound sense is *the Prophet*. In fact in Islam every form of revelation is envisaged as a prophecy whose complete and total realization is to be seen in Muhammad **(S.)**. As the Sufi poet Mahmud Shabistari writes in his incomparable *Culshan-I raz* ("The Secret Rose Garden"):

The first appearance of prophethood was in Adam, And its perfection was in the "Seal of the Prophets."

(Whinfield translation)

It is difficult for a non-Muslim to understand the spiritual significance of the Prophet

and his role as the prototype of the religious and spiritual life, especially if one comes from a Christian background. Compared to Christ, or to the Buddha for that matter, the earthly carrier of the Prophet seems often too human and too engrossed in the vicissitudes of social, economic and political activity to serve as a model for the spiritual life. That is why so many people who write today of the great spiritual guides of humanity are not able to understand and interpret him sympathetically. It is in a sense easier for a non-Muslim to see the spiritual radiance of Christ or even medieval saints, Christian or Muslim, than that of the Prophet, although the Prophet is the supreme saint in Islam without whom there would have been no sanctity in Islam whatsoever.

The reason for this difficulty is that the spiritual nature of the Prophet is veiled in his human one and this purely spiritual function is hidden in his duties as the guide of men to and the leader of a community. It was the function of the Prophet to be not only a spiritual guide but also the organizer of a new social order with all that such a function implies. And it is precisely this aspect of his being that veils his purely spiritual dimension from foreign eyes. Outsiders have understood his political genius, his power of oratory, his great statesmanship, but few have understood how he could be the religious and spiritual guide of men and how his life could be emulated by those who aspire to sanctity. This is particularly true in the modern world in which religion is separated from other domains of life and where most modern men can hardly imagine how a spiritual being could also be immersed in the most intense political and social activity.

Actually, if the contour of the personality of the Prophet is to be understood, he should not be compared to Christ or the Buddha whose messages were meant primarily for saintly men and who founded communities based on monastic life which later became the norm of entire societies. Rather, because of his dual function as "king" and "prophet," as the guide of men in this world and the hereafter, the Prophet should be compared to the prophet-kings of the Old Testament, to David and Solomon, and especially to Abraham himself. Or to cite once again an example outside the Abrahamic Tradition. The spiritual type of the Prophet should be compared in Hinduism to Rama and Krishna, who, although in a completely different traditional climate, were avatars and at the same time kings and householders who

participated in social life with all that such activity implies as recorded in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

This type of figure who is at once a spiritual being and "a leader of men" has always been, relatively speaking, rare in the Christian West, especially in modern times. Political life has become so divorced from spiritual principles that to many people such a function itself appears as an impossibility in proof of which Westerners often point to the purely spiritual life of Christ who said, "My Kingdom is not of this world." And even historically the Occident has not witnessed many figures of this type unless one considers the Templars and in another context type and in another context such devout kinds as Charlemagne and St. Louis. The figure of the Prophet is thus difficult for many Occidentals to understand and this misconception to which often bad intention has been added is responsible for the nearly total ignorance of his spiritual nature in most works written about him in Western languages, of which the number is legion. One could in fact say that of the major elements of Islam the real significance of the Prophet is the least understood by non-Muslims and especially by Occidentals.

The Prophet did participate in social life in its fullest sense. He married, had a household, was a father and moreover he was ruler and judge and had also to fight many wars in which he underwent painful ordeals. He had to undergo many hardships and experience all the difficulties which human life, especially that of the founder of a new state and society, implies. But within all these activities his heart rested in contentment with the Divine, and he continued inwardly to repose in the Divine Peace. In fact his participation in social and political life was precisely to integrate this domain into a spiritual center. The Prophet entertained no political or worldly ambition whatsoever. He was by nature a contemplative. Before being chosen as prophet he did not like to frequent social gatherings and activities. He led a caravan from Mecca to Syria passing through the majestic silence of the desert whose very "infinity" induces man towards contemplation. He often spent long periods in the cave of Hira in solitude and meditations. He did not believe himself to be by nature a man of the world or one who was naturally inclined to seek political power among the Quraysh or social eminence in Meccan society, although he came from the noblest family. It was in fact very painful and difficult for him to accept the

burden of prophecy which implied the founding of not only a new religion but also a new social and political order. All the traditional sources, which alone matter in this case, testify to the great hardship the Prophet underwent by being chosen to participate in the active life in its most acute form. Modern studies on the life of the Prophet which depict him as a man who enjoyed fighting wars are totally untrue and in fact a reversal of the real personality of the Prophet. Immediately after the reception of the first revelation the Prophet confessed to his wife, Khadijah, how difficult it was for him to accept the burden of prophecy and how fearful he was of all that such a mission implied.

Likewise, with the marriages of the Prophet, they are not at all signs of his lenience *vis-à-vis* the flesh. During the period of youth, when the passions are strongest, the Prophet lived with only one wife who was much older than he and also underwent long periods of sexual abstinence. And as a prophet many of his marriages were political ones which, in the prevalent social structure of Arabia, guaranteed the consolidation of the newly founded Muslim community. Multiple marriages, for him, as is true of Islam in general, was not so much enjoyment as responsibility and a means of integration as the newly founded society. Besides, in Islam the whole problem of secularity appears in a different light from that in Christianity. Sexuality is sacred in Islam and it should not be judged by Christian standards. The multiple marriages of the Prophet, far from pointing to his weakness towards "the flesh," symbolize his patriarchal nature and his function, not as a saint who withdraws from the world, but as one who sanctifies the very life of the world by living in it and accepting it with the aim of integrating it into a higher order of reality.

The Prophet has also often been criticized by modern Western authors for being cruel and for having treated men harshly. Such a charge is again absurd because critics of this kind have forgotten that either a religion leaves the world aside, as Christ did, or integrates the world. In which case it must deal with such questions as war, retribution, justice, etc. when Charlemagne or some other Christian king thrust a sword into the breast of a heathen soldier, he was, from the individual point of view, being cruel to that soldier. But on the universal plane this was a necessity for the preservation of a Christian civilization which had to defend its borders or perish. The same holds true for a Buddhist king or ruler, or for that matter any religious

authority which seeks to integrate human society.

The Prophet exercised the utmost kindness possible and was harsh only with traitors. Now, a traitor against a newly founded religious community, which God has willed and whose existence is a mercy from Heaven for mankind, is a traitor against the Truth itself. The harshness of the Prophet in such cases is an expression of Divine justice. One cannot accuse God of being cruel because men die, or because there is illness and ugliness in the world. Every construction implies a previous destruction, a clearing of grounds for the appearance of a new form. This holds true not only in case of a physical structure, but also in case of a new form. This holds true not only in case of a physical structure, but also in case of a new revelation which must clear the ground if it is to be a new social and political order as well as a purely religious one. What appears to some as the cruelty of the Prophet towards men is precisely this aspect of his function as the instrument of God for the establishment of a new world order whose homeland in Arabia was to be purified from any paganism and polytheism which, if present, would pollute the very fountain of life. As to what concerned his own personality, the Prophet was always the epitome of kindness and generosity.

Nowhere is the nobility and generosity of the Prophet better exemplified than in his triumphant entry into Mecca, which in a sense highlights his earthly career. There, at a moment when the very people who had caused untold hardships and trials for the prophet were completely subdued by him, instead of thinking of vengeance, which was certainly his due, he forgave them. One must study closely the almost unimaginable obstacles placed before the Prophet by these same people, of the immense suffering he had undergone because of them, to realize what degree of generosity this act of the Prophet implies. It is not actually necessary to give an apologetic account of the life of the prophet, but these matters need to be answered because the false and often malicious accusations of cruelty made against the founder of Islam in so many modern studies make the understanding of him by those who rely upon such studies well nigh impossible.

Also the Prophet was not certainly without love and compassion in say the least.

Many incidents in his life and sayings recorded in *Hadith* literature point to his depth of love for God which, in conformity with the general perspective of Islam, was never divorced from knowledge of Him and perfect surrender to His Will. For example, in a well known *hadith*, he said, "O Lord, grant to me the love of Thee. Grant that I love those who love Thee. Grant that I may do the deed that wins Thy love. Make Thy love dear to me more than self, family and wealth." Such sayings clearly demonstrate the fact that although the Prophet was in a sense a king or ruler of a community and a judge and had to deal according to justice in both capacities, he was at the same time one whose being was anchored in the love for God. Otherwise, he could not have been a prophet.

From the Muslim point of view, the Prophet is the symbol of perfection of both the human person and leader of human society. He is the prototype of the human individual and the *summa* of the human collectivity. As such he bears certain characteristics in the eye of traditional Muslims which can only be discovered by studying the traditional accounts of him. The many Western works on the Prophet, with very few exceptions, are useless from this point of view, no matter how much historical data they provide for the reader. The same holds true in fact for the new type of biographies of the Prophet written by modernized Muslims who would like at all cost to make the Prophet an ordinary man and neglect systematically any aspect of his being that does not conform to a humanistic and rationalistic framework they have adopted *a priori*, mostly as a result of either influence from or reaction to the modern Western point of view. The profound characteristics of the Prophet which have guided the Islamic community over three centuries and have left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the Muslim cannot be discerned save through the traditional sources and the *Hadith*, and, of course, the Quran itself which bears the perfume of the soul of the person through whom it was revealed.

The universally characteristic of the Prophet are not the same as his daily actions and day to day life, which can be read about in standard biographies of the Prophet, and with which we cannot deal here. They are, rather, characteristics which issue forth from his personality as a particular spiritual prototype. Seen in this light, there are essentially three qualities that characterize the Prophet. First of all, the Prophet possessed the quality of piety in its most universal sense, that quality which attaches

man to God. The Prophet was in that sense pious. He had the most profound piety which inwardly attached him to God, that made him place the interest of God before everything else including himself. Secondly, he had a quality of combativeness, of always being actively engaged in combat against all that negated the Truth and disrupted harmony. Externally it meant fighting wars, either military, political or social ones, the war which the Prophet named the "smaller holy struggle" (*al-jihad al-asghar*). Inwardly this combativeness meant a continuous war against the carnal soul (*nafs*), against all that in man tends towards the negation of God and His Will, the great inner struggle which he called "greater holy struggle" (*al-jihad al-akbar*).

It is difficult for modern men to understand the positive symbolism of war thanks to modern technology which has made war total and its instruments what very embodiment of what is ugly and evil. Men therefore think that the role of religion is only in preserving some kind of precarious peace. This, of course, is true, but not in the superficial sense that is usually meant. If religion is to be an integral part of life, it must try to establish peace in the most profound sense, namely to establish equilibrium between all existing forces that surround man and to overcome all the forces that tend to destroy this equilibrium. No religion has sought to establish peace in this sense more than Islam. It is precisely in such a context that war can have a positive meaning as the activity to establish harmony both inwardly and outwardly and it is in this sense that Islam has stressed the positive aspect of combativeness.

The Prophet embodies to an eminent degree this perfection of combative virtue. If one thinks of the Buddha as sitting in a state of contemplation under the Bo-tree, the Prophet can be imagined as a rider sitting on a steed with the sword of justice and discrimination drawn in his hand and galloping at full speed, yet ready to come to an immediate halt before the mountain of Truth. The Prophet was faced from the beginning of his prophetic mission with the task of wielding the sword of Truth, of establishing equilibrium and in this arduous task he had no rest. His rest and repose was in heart of the holy struggle (*jihad*) itself and he represents this aspect of spirituality in which peace comes not in passivity but in true activity. Peace belongs to one who is inwardly at peace with the Will of Heaven and outwardly at war with the forces of disruption and disequilibrium.

Finally, the Prophet possessed the quality of magnanimity in its fullness. His soul displayed a grandeur which every devout Muslim feels. He is for the Muslim nobility and magnanimity personified. This aspect of the Prophet is fully displayed in his treatment of his companions which, in fact, has been the model for later ages and which all generations of Muslims have sought to emulate.

To put it another way, which focuses more sharply the personality of the Prophet, the qualities can be enumerated as strength, nobility and serenity or inner calm. Strength is outwardly manifested in the smaller holy struggle and inwardly in the greater holy struggle according to the saying of the Prophet who, returning from one of the early wars, said, "We have returned from the smaller *jihad* to the greater *jihad*." It is this greater *jihad* which is of particular spiritual significances as the struggle against all those tendencies which pull the soul of man away from the Center and Origin and bar him from the grace of Heaven.

The nobility or generosity of the Prophet shows itself most of all in charity towards all men and more generally towards all beings. Of course this virtue is not central as in Christianity which can be called the religion of charity. But it is important on the human level and as it concerns the person of the Prophet. It points to the fact that there was no narrowness or pettiness in the soul of the Prophet, no limitation in giving of himself to others. A spiritual man is one who always gives to those around him and does not receive, according to the saying, "it is more blessed to give than to receive." It was characteristic of the Prophet to have always given till the last moment of his life. He never asked anything for himself and never sought to receive.

The aspect of serenity, which also characterizes all true expressions of Islam, is essentially the love of truth. It is to put the Truth before everything else. It is to be impartial, to be logical on the level of discourse, not to let one's subjective emotions color and prejudice one's objective intellectual judgment. It is not to be a rationalist, but to see the truth of things and to love the Truth above all else. To love the Truth is to love God who is the Truth, one of His Names being the Truth (*al-Haqq*).

If one were to compare these qualities of the Prophet, namely, strength, nobility and serenity, with those of the founders of the other great religions, one

would see that they are not necessarily the same because firstly, the Prophet was not himself the Divine Incarnation and secondly, because each religion emphasizes a certain aspect of the Truth. One cannot follow and emulate Christ in the same manner as the Prophet because in Christianity Christ is the God-man, the Divine Incarnation. One can be absorbed into his nature but he cannot be copied as the perfection of the human state. One can neither walk on water nor raise the dead to life. Still, when one thinks of Christianity and Christ another set of characteristics come to mind, such as divinity, incarnation, and on another level love, charity and sacrifice. Or when one thinks of the Buddha and Buddhism it is most of all the ideas of pity for the whole of creation, enlightenment and illumination and extinction in Nirvana that stand out.

In Islam, when one thinks of the Prophet who is to be emulated, it is the image of a strong personality that comes to mind. Who is severe with himself and with the false and the unjust, and charitable towards the world that surrounds him. On the basis of these two virtues of strength and sobriety on the one hand and charity and generosity on the other, he is serene, extinguished in the Truth. He is that warrior on horseback who halts before the mountain of Truth, passive towards the Divine Will, active towards the world, hard and sober towards himself and kind and generous towards the creatures about him .

These qualities characteristic of the Prophet are contained virtually in the very sound of the second *Shahadah*, *Muhammadun rasul Allah*, that is , Muhammad is the Prophet of God, in its Arabic Pronunciation, not in its translation into another language. Here again, the symbolism is inextricably connected to the sounds and from of the sacred language and cannot be translated. The very sound of the name Muhammad implies force, a sudden breaking froth of a power which is from God and is not just human. The word *rasul* with its elongated second syllable symbolize this "expansion of the chest" (*inshirah al-sadr*) and a generosity that flows from the being of the Prophet and which ultimately comes from God. As for Allah it is, of course, the Truth itself which terminates the formula. The second *Shahadah* thus implies by its sound the power, generosity and serenity of reposing in the Truth characteristic of the Prophet. This repose in the Truth is not, however, based on a flight from the world, but on a penetration into it in order to integrate and organize

it. The spiritual castle in Islam is based on the firm foundations of harmony within human society and in individual human life.

In the traditional prayers on the Prophet which all Muslims recite on numerous occasions, God's blessing and salutation are asked for the Prophet who is God's blessing and salutation are asked for the Prophet who is God's servant (*`abd*), His messenger (*rasul*), and the unlettered Prophet (*al-nabi al-ummi*). For example, one well-known version of the formula of benediction upon the Prophet is as follows:

"Oh, God, bless our Lord Muhammad, Thy servant and Thy Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, and his family and his companions, and salute them."

Here again the epithets with which his name is qualified symbolized his three basic characteristics which stand out most in the eyes of devout Muslims. He is first of all an *`abd*; but who is an *`abd* except one whose will is surrendered to the will of his master, who is himself poor (*faqir*) but rich on account of what his master bestows upon him. As the *`abd* of God the Prophet exemplified in its fullness this spiritual poverty and sobriety which is so characteristic of Islam. He loved fasting, vigilance, prayer, all of which have become essential elements in Islamic religious life. As an *`abd* the Prophet put retying in the hands of God and realized a poverty which is, in reality, the most, perfect and enduring wealth.

The *rasul* in this formula again symbolizes his aspect of charity and generosity and metaphysically the *rasul* himself is sent because of God's charity for the world and men whom He loves so that He sends His prophets to guide them. That is why the Prophet is "God's mercy to the worlds." For the Muslim the Prophet himself displays mercy and generosity, a generosity which flows from the nobility of character, Islam has always emphasized this quality and sought to inculcate nobility in the souls of men. A good Muslim must have some nobility and generosity which always reflect this aspect of the personality of the prophet.

As for the *nabi al-ummi*, it symbolizes extinction before the Truth, The unlettered nature of the Prophet means most of all the extinction of all that is human before the

Divine. The soul of the Prophet was a *tabula rasa* before the Divine pen and on the human level his quality of "unlettered ness" marks that supreme virtue of realizing the Truth through the contemplation of It, which marks an "extinction" in the metaphysical sense before the Truth. Only through this extinction (*fana'*) can one hope to enter into life with God and subsistence in Him (*baqa'*).

To summarize the qualities of the Prophet, it can be said that he is human equilibrium which has become extinct in the Divine Truth. He marks the establishment of harmony and equilibrium between all the tendencies present in man, his sensual, social, economic, political tendencies, which cannot be overcome unless the human state itself is transcended. He displays the integration of these tendencies and forces with the aim of establishing a basis which naturally leads towards contemplation and extinction in the Truth. His spiritual way means to accept the human condition which is normalized sanctified as the foundation for the most lofty spiritual castle.

The spirituality of Islam, of which the Prophet is the prototype, is not the rejection of the world but the transcending of it through its integration into a Center and the establishment of a harmony upon which the quest for the Absolute is based. In these qualities that he displayed so eminently, the Prophet is at once the prototype of human and spiritual perfection and a guide towards its realization, for as the Quran states: "Verily in the messenger of Allah ye have a good example" (33:21).

The *Sunnah* and *Hadith*

Since the Prophet is the prototype of all human perfection to the extent that one of his titles is the "most noble of all creation" (*ashraf al-makhlūqat*), it may be asked in what way can men emulate him. How can the Prophet become a guide for human life, and his life, deeds and thoughts serve as a guide for the Muslim in this terrestrial journey? The answer to this fundamental question, which concerns all of the individual and collective life of Muslims of later generations, lies in the sayings which he left behind and which are known as *Hadith* and his daily life and practice known as *Sunnah* or *wonts*. The family and companions of the Prophet who had been with him during his life time bore the impressions of his *Sunnah* within their souls with a depth that results from contact with a prophet. When man meets an extraordinary person he carries the impression of this meeting always. Then how permanent must have been the impression made on men by the Prophet, whose encounter is so much outside of ordinary experience today that human beings can hardly imagine it! The first generation of Muslims practiced this *Sunnah* with all the ardor and faith that resulted from their proximity to the source of the revelation and the presence of the *barakah* or grace of the Prophet among them. They in turn were emulated by the next generation and so on to modern times when the faithful still seek to base their lives upon that of the Prophet. This end is achieved through emulation of his actions, by means of the fresh interpretations that each generation makes of his life (*siyar*), through the litanies and chants repeated in his praise (*mada'ih*) and through the celebrations marking his birth *mawlid* or other joyous occasions.

As for the *Hadith*, these, too, were memorized by those who heard them and were in turn transmitted to those who followed during succeeding generations. Here again it was not a question of memorizing just anything but of remembering the sayings of one whom God had chosen as His messenger. And those who memorized the prophetic sayings were not like modern men whose memory has been dulled by formalized classroom learning and over-reliance on written sources, but nomads or men of nomadic background for whom speech and literature were connected with

what was known by heart. These were men who possessed remarkable powers of memory, which still survive among certain so-called "illiterate" people and which have often startled "literate" observers from sedentary civilizations.

The sayings of the Prophet were eventually collected as the spread of Islam and the gradual moving away from the homogeneity of the early community endangered their integral existence. The devoutest of men set about to collect prophetic sayings or *ahadith*, examining the chain of transmitters for each saying. As a result, in the Sunni world six major collections of *Hadith* became assembled such as those of Bukhari and Muslim and soon gained complete authority in the orthodox community. In Shi`ism a similar process took place except that in addition to the sayings of the Prophet those of the imams, whose teachings expound the meaning of the prophetic message, form a part of the *Hadith* collection. There, too, four collections of these sayings were assembled of which the most important is the *Usul al-kafi* of Kulayni.

The *Hadith* literature, in both Sunni and Shi`ite sources, is a monumental treasury of wisdom which is at once a commentary upon the Quran and a complement to its teachings. The prophetic sayings concern every domain from pure metaphysics to table manners. In them one finds what the Prophet said at times of distress, in receiving an ambassador, in treating a prisoner, in dealing with his family, and in nearly every other situation which touches upon the domestic, economic, social and political life of man. In addition, in this literature many questions pertaining to metaphysics, cosmology, eschatology and the spiritual life are discussed. Altogether, with the Quran, the *Hadith* and the prophetic *Sunnah* of which it is a part are the most precious source of guidance which Islamic society possesses, and along with the Quran they are the fountain head of all Islamic life and thought.

It is against this basic aspect of the whole structure of Islam that a severe attack has been made in recent decades by an influential school of Western orientalists. No more of a vicious and insidious attack could be made against Islam than this one, which undercuts very foundations and whose effect is more dangerous than if a physical attack were made against Islam.

Purporting to be scientific and applying the famous--or rather should one say the infamous--historical method which reduces all religious truths to historical facts, the critics of *Hadith* have come to the conclusion that this literature is not from the Prophet but was "forged" by later generations. What lies behind the scientific facade presented in most of these attacks is the a priori assumption that Islam is not a Divine revelation. If it is not a Divine revelation, then it must be explained away in terms of factors present in seventh century Arabian Society. Now, it is assumed that a Bedouin society could not have had any metaphysical knowledge, could not have possibly known about the Divine World or Logos, about the higher states of being, about the structure of the Universe. Therefore, everything in *Hadith* literature that speaks of these matters must have been a later accretion. Were the critics of *Hadith* simply to admit that the Prophet was a prophet, there would be no scientifically valid argument whatsoever against the main body of *Hadith*. But this is precisely what they do not admit and, therefore, they have to consider as a later forgery anything in *Hadith* literature which resembles the doctrines of other religions or speaks of esoteric questions.

There is of course no doubt that there are many *hadiths* which are spurious. Traditional Islamic scholars themselves developed an elaborate science to examine the text of the *Hadith* (*`ilm al-jarh*) as well as the circumstances under which it was spoken. They examined the chains of transmission (*`ilm al-diurayah*) and as well as the circumstances under which it was spoken. They examined the chains of transmission and sifted the sayings and compared them with detailed knowledge of the factors involved in a manner which no modern scholar can hope to match. In this manner certain sayings were accepted and other rejected as being either of dubious origin or completely unauthentic. Those who often traveled from Central Asia to Madina Iraq or Syria in search of *Hadith*. Throughout Islamic history the most devout and ascetic of the religious scholars have been the scholars of *Hadith*, (the *muhaddithun*) and because of the degree of piety and trust of the community that is necessary before a person is recognized as an authority in this field, they have always constituted the smallest number among all the different classes of religious scholars.

In fact, what the modern critics of *Hadith* do not realize in applying their so-called historical method is that they are projecting the kind of agnostic mentality

prevalent in many academic ears today onto the mentality of a traditional Muslim scholar of *Hadith*. They think that for him also the questions of religion could be treated in such a "detached" manner as to enable them even to "forge" sayings of the Prophet or to accept them into the traditional corpus without the greatest care. They do not realize that for men of the early centuries and especially the religious scholars the fire of hell was not an abstract thought but a concrete reality. They feared God in a way which most modern men can hardly imagine and it is psychologically abused that, with a mentality to which the alternative of Heaven or Hell is the most real thing of all, they should commit the unpardonable sin of forging prophetic sayings. Nothing is less scientific than to project the modern mentality, which is an anomaly in history, onto a period when man lived and thought in a traditional world in which the verities of religion determined life itself, and in which men sought first and foremost to perform the most important duty placed upon their shoulders, namely, to save their souls.

As to the statement made by critics of *Hadith* that the forged sayings came into being in the second century and were honestly believed to be prophetic sayings by the collectors of the third century, the same answer can be given. The *Sunnah* of the Prophet and his sayings had left such a pound imprint upon the first generation and those that came immediately already possessed by the community. It would have meant a break in the continuity of the whole religious life and pattern of Islam which, in fact, is not discernible. Moreover, the Imams, whose sayings are included in the *Hadith* corpus in Shi`ism and who themselves are the most reliable chain of transmission of prophetic sayings, survived into the third Islamic century, that is, after the very period of the collection of the well-known books of *Hadith*, so that they bridge the period to which the modern critics point as the time of "forgery" of *Hadith*. Their very presence in fact is one more proof of the falsity of the arguments presented against the authenticity of *Hadith* literature, arguments which attack not only the dubious and spurious sayings, but the main body of *Hadith*, accordions to which Islamic society has lived and modeled itself since its inception.

The danger inherent in this criticism of the *Hadith* lies in decreasing its value in the eyes of those Muslims who, having come under the sway of its arguments, accept the fatally dangerous conclusion that the body of *Hadith* is not the sayings of the

Prophet and therefore does not carry his authority. In this way one of the foundations of Divine law and a vital source of guidance for the spiritual life is destroyed. It is as if the whole foundation were pulled from underneath the structure of Islam. What would be left in such a case would be the Quran, which, being the Word of God, is too sublime to interpret and decipher without the aid of the Prophet. Left by themselves, men would in most cases read their own limitations into the Holy Book and the whole homogeneity of Muslim society and the harmony existing between the Quran and the religious life of Islam would be disrupted. There are few problems that call for as immediate action on the part of the Muslim community as a response by qualified, traditional Muslim authorities in scientific--but not necessarily "scientist"--terms to the charge brought against *Hadith* literature by modern Western critics, who have now also found a few disciples among Muslims. They have found a few followers of Muslim background who have left the traditional point of view and have become enamored by the apparently scientific method of the critic which only hides an *a priori* presumption no Muslim can accept, namely the negation of the heavenly origin of the Quranic revelation and the actual prophetic power and function of the Prophet.

Be that as it may, as far as traditional Islam is concerned which alone concerns us here, the *Hadith* is, after the Quran, the most important source of both the Law, the *Shari`ah*, and the Spiritual way, the *Tariqah*. And it is the vital integrating factor in Muslim society, for the daily lives of millions of Muslims the world over have been modeled upon the prophetic *Sunnah* and *Hadith*. For over fourteen hundred years Muslims have tried to awaken in the morning as the Prophet awakened, to eat as he ate, to wash as he washed himself, even to cut their nails as he did. There has been no greater force for the unification of the Muslim peoples than the presence of this common model for the minutest acts of daily life. A Chinese Muslim, although racially a Chinese, has a countenance, behavior, manner of walking and acting that resembles in certain ways those of a Muslim on the coast of the Atlantic. That is because both have for centuries copied the same model. Something of the tail unifying factor, a common *Sunnah* or way of acting and living as a model, that makes a bazaar in Morocco have a "feeling" or ambiance of a bazaar in Persia, although the people in the two places speak a different language and dress differently. There is something in the air which an intelligent foreign observer will immediately detect as belonging to the same religious and spiritual climate. And this

sameness is brought about firstly through the presence of the Quran and secondly, and in a more immediate and tangible way, through the "presence" of the Prophet in his community by virtue of his *Hadith* and *Sunnah*.

Through the *Hadith* and *sunnah* Muslims come to know both the Prophet and the message of the Quran. Without *Hadith* much of the Quran would be a closed book. We are told in the Quran to pray but were it not for the prophetic *Sunnah*, we would not know how to pray. Something as fundamental as the daily prayers which are the central rite of Islam would be impossible to perform without the guidance of the prophetic practice. This applies to a thousand and one other situations so that it is almost unnecessary to emphasize the vital connection between the Quran and the practice and sayings of the Prophet whom God chose as its revealer and interpreter to mankind. Before his death it was asked of the Prophet how he should be remembered later. He answered, "Read the Quran".

Before terminating this discussion about the *Hadith*, it should be pointed out that within the vast corpus of prophetic sayings there are a number which are called "sacred sayings" (*ahadith qudsiyyah*) which are not a part of the Quran but in which God speaks in the first person through the Prophet. These sayings, although small in number, are of extreme importance in that they are, along with certain verses of the Quran, the basis of the spiritual life in Islam. Sufism is based to a large extent on these sayings and many a Sufi knows them by heart and lives in constant remembrance of their message. These sayings all concern the spiritual life rather than social or as in the famous *hadith qudsi* so often repeated by Sufi masters over the ages: "My slave ceaseth not to draw nigh unto Me through devotions of free will until I love him, and when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hearth and the sight with which he seeth and the hand with which he fighteth and the foot with which he walketh."

The presence of these sayings indicate how deeply the roots of Islamic spirituality are sunk in the sources of the revelation itself. Far from being just a legal and social system devoid of a spiritual dimension, or one upon which a spiritual dimension was artificially grafted later on, Islam was, from the beginning, both a Law and a Way.

The two dimensions of Islam, the exoteric and esoteric, are best demonstrated in the case of the Prophet himself who was both the perfection of human action on the social and political plane and the prototype of the spiritual life in his inner intimacy with God and in his total realization in which he saw nothing except in God and through God.

The particularity of the Prophet, which distinguishes him from those that came before him, is that he is the last of the prophets (*khatam al- anbiya*), the seal of prophecy who, coming at the end of the prophetic cycle, integrates in himself the function of prophecy as such. This aspect of the Prophet immediately brings up the question of what prophecy itself means. There have been numerous volumes written by traditional Muslim authorities on this subject in which the elaborate metaphysical dimension of this central reality of religion is outlined. Although it is not possible to discuss this question in detail here, one can summarize by saying that prophethood is, according to the Islamic view, a state bestowed upon men whom God has chosen because of certain perfections in them by virtue of which they become the instrument through whom God reveals His message to the world. Their inspiration is directly from Heaven. A prophet owes nothing to anyone. He is not a scholar who discerns through books certain truths, not one who learns from other human beings and in turn transmits this learning. His knowledge marks a direct intervention of the Divine in the human order, an intervention which is not, from the Islamic point of view, an incarnation but a theophany (*tajalli*).

This definition of prophethood holds true for every prophet, not just in the case of the founder of Islam. From the Islamic point of view Christ did not gain his knowledge of the Old Testament and the message of the Hebrew prophets by reading books or learning from rabbis but directly from Heaven. Nor did Moses learn the laws and the message that he brought from older prophets, be it even Abraham. He received a new message directly from God. And if he reiterated some of the truths of the messages brought by the Semitic prophets before him or if Christ affirmed the Jewish tradition whose inner meaning he revealed--according to the well-known saying "Christ revealed what Moses veiled"--or if the Quran mentions some of the stories of the Old and New Testaments, none of these instances implies an historical borrowing. They indicate only a new revelation in the *cadre* of the same spiritual climate which can be called the Abrahamic Tradition. The same applies to avatars of

Hinduism who each came with a new message from Heaven but spoken in the language of the same spiritual ambiance.

Although all prophecy implies a meeting of the Divine and human planes, there are degrees of prophecy dependent upon the type of message revealed and the function of the messenger in propagating that message. In fact whereas in English the single word prophet is usually used, in Arabic, Persian and other languages of the Islamic people there are a series of words connected with levels of prophethood. There is first of all the *nabi*, a man who brings news of God's message, a man whom God has chosen to address. But God does not just speak to any man. He who is worthy of hearing a Divine message must be qualified. He must be pure by nature. That is why according to traditional Islamic sources the body of the Prophet was made from the choicest earth. He must possess the perfection of human virtues such as goodness and nobility, although in reality he has nothing of his own, everything having been given by God to him. He must have the perfection of both the practical and theoretical faculties, a perfect imagination, an intellect that is perfectly attuned to the Divine Intellect, a psychological and corporeal structure which enables him to lead men in action and to guide them through all trials and circumstances if and when necessary. But the message which the *nabi* receives is not necessarily universal. He may receive a message which is to remain within him and not be divulged openly or is meant to be imparted to only a few in the cadre of an already existing religion.

Of the prophets in this sense (*anbiya*), there are, according to tradition, one-hundred and twenty-four thousand whom God has sent to every nation and people, for the Quran asserts that there is no people unto whom a prophet has not been sent: "And for every nation there is a messenger" (10: 48). Although it also states that to each people God speaks in its own language, hence the diversity of religions: "And We never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk" (14: 4). The universality of prophecy so clearly enunciated in the Quran means the universality of tradition, of religion. It means that all orthodox religions come from Heaven and are not man-made. It also implies by its comprehensive formulation the presence of Divine revelation not only in the Abrahamic Tradition but among all nations, although in previous times this question was rarely explored explicitly. The Quran asserts the

principle of universality leaving the possibility of its application outside the Semitic world as the case has arisen, for example, when Islam encountered Zoroastrianism in Persia or Hinduism in India. In the same manner it could be applied in modern times to the encounter with any previously unknown genuine tradition, such as that of the American Indians.

Among the *anbiya'* there are those who belong to another category of prophets, or a new level of prophecy, namely those who not only receive a message from Heaven but are also chosen to propagate that message for the segment of humanity providentially destined for it. The prophet with such a function is called *rasul*. He is also a *nabi* but in addition he has this function of making God's message known to men and inviting them to accept it, as is seen in the case of many prophets of the Old Testament. Above the *rasul* stand the prophets who are to bring major new religions to the world, the "possessors of firmness and determination" (*ulu l-`azm*). Of this latter category Islam, again limiting itself to the Abrahamic Tradition, believes that there have been seven, each of whom was the founder of a new religion and who brought a new Divine law into the world. There are then altogether three grades of objective prophecy, that of the *nabi*, the *rasul* and the *ulu l-`azm* although in certain Islamic sources this gradation is further refined to include in further detail the degrees of *anbiya'* who are distinguished by the manner in which they perceive the angle of revelation.

The Prophet was at once a *nabi*, a *rasul* and an *ulu l-`azm* and brought the cycle of prophecy to a close. After him there will be no new *Shari`ah* or Divine Law brought into the world until the end of time. There are to be no revelations (*wahy*) after him, for he marks the termination of the prophetic cycle (*da'irat al-nubuwwah*). It may on the surface appear as a great tragedy that man seems to be thus left without any possibility of renewal of the truths of the revelation though new contact with the source of the Truth. But in reality the termination of the prophetic cycle does not mean that all possibility of contact with the Divine order has ceased. Whereas revelation (*wahy*) is no longer possible, inspiration (*ilham*) remains always as a latent possibility. Whereas the cycle of prophecy (*da'irat al-nubuwwah*) has come to an end, the cycle of *walayah/ wilaya (da'irat al-walayah)*, which for want of a better term may be translated as the "cycle of initiation" and also sanctity, continues.

Actually, *walayah* in this context, which should not in the technical languages of Islamic gnosis be considered identical to *walayah* in the ordinary sense having to do with the state of *wali* or saint, means the presence of this inner dimension with in Islam which the Prophet inaugurated along with a new *Shari`ah* and which will continue to the end of time. Thanks to its presence, man is able to renew himself spiritually and gain contact with the Divine although a new revelation is no longer possible. It is due to this esoteric dimension of Islam and the grace or *barakah* contained in the organization which are its preserves and propagators that the spiritual force of the original revelation has been renewed over the ages and the possibility of a spiritual life leading to the state of sainthood, that purifies human society and rejuvenates religious forces, had been preserved.

The Prophet, in terminating the prophetic cycle and in brining the last *Shari`ah* into the world, also inaugurated the cycle of "Muhammadan sanctity" (*walayah/ wilayah muhammadiyah*), which is ever present and which is the means whereby the spiritual energy of the Tradition is continuously renewed. Therefore, far from there being a need for any new religion, which at this moment of time can only mean a pseudo-religion, the revelation brought by the Prophet contains in itself all that is needed to fulfill in every way the religious and spiritual needs of Muslims, from the common believer to the potential saint.

The Prophet, besides being the leader of men and the founder of a new civilization, is also the perfection of the human norm and the model for the spiritual life of Islam. He said "I am a human being like you" (*ana basharun mithlukum*) to which Muslim sages over the ages have added, yes, but like a precious gem among stones (*ka'l-yaqut bayn al hajar*). The profound symbolism contained in this saying is connected with the inner nature of the Prophet. All men in their purely human nature are like stones, opaque and heavy and a veil to the light that shines upon them. The prophet also in a sense possesses this human nature outwardly but in its proper perfection. Yet inwardly he has become alchemically transmuted into a precious stone which, although still a stone, is transparent before the light and has lost its opacity. The Prophet is outwardly only a human being (*bashar*), but inwardly he is the full realization of manhood in its most universal sense. He is the Universal man (*al –*

insan al-kamil), the prototype of all of creation, the norm of all perfection, the first of all beings, the mirror in which God contemplates universal existence. He is inwardly identified with the Logos and the Divine Intellect.

In every religion the founder is identified with the Logos, as we read in the beginning of the Gospel according to John, "*In principio erat verbum*," that is, that which was in the beginning was the Word or Logos identified with Christ. Islam considers all prophets as an aspect of the Universal Logos, which in its perspective is identified with the "Muhammadan Reality" (*al-haquiqa al-muhammadiyah*), which was the first of God's creations and through whom God sees all thing. As the Muhammadan Reality the Prophet came before all the other prophets at the beginning of the prophetic cycle, and it is to this inner aspect of him as the Logos to which reference is made in the *hadith*, "I [Muhammad] was prophet [the Logos] when Adam was still between water and clay."

The Sufi Najm al-Din al-Razi in his *Mirsad al-`ibad* writes that just as in the case of a tree one first plants a seed which then grows into a plant that gives branches, then leaves, then blossoms, then fruit which in turn contains the seed, so did the cycle of prophecy begin with the Muhammadan Reality, with the inner reality of Muhammad, while it ended with the human manifestation of him. He thus is inwardly the beginning and outwardly the end of the prophetic cycle which he synthesizes and unifies in his being. Outwardly he is a human being and inwardly the Universal Man, the norm of all spiritual perfection. The prophet himself referred to this inner aspect of his nature as in the *hadith*, "I am Ahmad without the *mim* [that is, *ahad* meaning Unity]; I am an Arab without the (*`ayn*) [that is *rabb* meaning Lord]. Who hath seen me, the seem hath seen the Truth."

What do such sayings mean but the inward "union" of the Prophet with God. This truth has been re-iterated over and over again throughout the ages by masters of Sufism as in the beautiful Persian poem from the *Gulshan-I raz*:

A single *mim* separates *ahad* from Ahmed

The world is immersed in that one *mim*.

This "*mim*" which separates the esoteric name of the Prophet, Ahmed, from God, is the symbol of return to the Origin, of death and reawakening to the eternal realities. Its numerical equivalence according to the science of *jafr* is forty which itself symbolizes the age of prophecy in Islam. The Prophet is outwardly the messenger of God to men; inwardly he is in permanent "union" with the Lord.

The doctrine of Universal Man, which is inextricably connected with what one may call prophetology in Islam, is far from having originated as a result of later influences upon Islam. It is based rather on what the Prophet was inwardly and as he was seen by those among his companions who, besides being his followers religiously, were the inheritors of his esoteric message. Those who wish to deprive Islam of a spiritual and intellectual dimension seek to make of this basic doctrine a later borrowing, as if the Prophet could have become in an effective and operative way the Universal Man by just having such a state attributed to him if he were not so already in his real nature. It would be as if one expected a body to shine simply by calling it the sun. The Prophet possessed in himself that reality which later gained the technical name of Universal man. But the "named" was there long before this name was given to it, and before the theory of it was elaborated for later generations who, because of separation from the source of the revelation, were in need of further explanation.

In conclusion, it may be said that the Prophet is the perfection of both the norm of the human collectivity and the human individual, the norm for the perfect social life and the prototype and guide for the individual's spiritual life. He is both the Universal Man he is the totality of which we are a part and in which we participate; as the Primordial Man he is that original perfection with respect to which we are a decadence and a falling away. He is thus both the "spatial" and "temporal" norms of perfection, "spatial" in the sense of the totality of which we are a part and "temporal" in the sense of the perfection which was at the beginning and which we must seek to regain by moving upstream against the downward flow of the march of time.

The prophet possessed eminently and in perfection both human (*nasut*) and spiritual (*lahut*) natures. Yet, there was never an incarnation of the *lahut* into the *nasut*, a perspective which Islam does not accept. The prophet did possess these two natures

and from this very reason his example makes possible the presence of a spiritual way in Islam. He was the perfect ruler, judge and ledger of men. He was the creator of the most perfect Muslim society in comparison with which every later society is a falling away. But he was in addition the prototype of the spiritual life. That is why it is absolutely necessary to follow in his footsteps if one aspires towards spiritual realization in Islam.

The love of the Prophet is incumbent upon all Muslims and especially upon those who aspire towards the saintly life. This love must not be understood only in a sentimental, individualistic sense, rather, the prophet is loved because he symbolizes that harmony and beauty that pervade all things, and displays in their fullness those virtues, the attainment of which allow men to realize his chemotropic nature.

“Lo! Allah and His angels shower blessings on the Prophet. O ye who believe! Ask blessings on him and salute him with a worthy salutation” (33:56)

Chapter 3: The prophet and Prophetic Tradition- the Last Prophet and Universal Man

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