

Love for the Prophet Muhammad

A Key to Countering Islamism and Islamophobia

BY JOSEPH LUMBARD

NON-MUSLIMS OFTEN struggle to understand Muslims because they fail to grasp the role that the Prophet Muhammad plays in our lives. Failing to realize the breadth of the Prophet's teachings and the depth of love for the Prophet throughout the Islamic world, many non-Muslims are quick to believe ISIS, the Wahhabis, and other militant groups when they claim that it is they who adhere to the precepts set by the Prophet Muhammad and are thus the true followers of the "prophetic model."

Yet the understanding of the prophetic model among militant Islamist groups falls far short of what is conveyed by the classical Islamic tradition. Far from being the literalists that some portray them to be, militant Islamists choose to ignore or explain away those teachings that expose their wanton violence for what it is. When non-Muslims fail to recognize this, they succumb to severe miscalculations regarding both ISIS and the nature of Islam. It is thus of the utmost importance to consider what the prophetic model means to the majority of Muslims.

Several years ago, the song that topped the charts in Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Arab world was Sami Yusuf's "Muallim" (Teacher), a song in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. A few years later, Mesut Kurtis topped the charts with "The Burdah" (The Mantle), whose refrain is "Our Lord, bless and have peace, at all times and forever, upon the beloved who is the best of all creation." The title and refrain of the latter come from the most widely read poem in the history of Islam, "The Mantle" (al-Burdah), written in thirteenth-century Egypt, and recited to this day by Muslims from Indonesia to Europe, from Senegal to South Africa to the United States and almost everywhere in between.

The Prophet As a Source of Love and Hope

The enduring love of the Prophet Muhammad exhibited in this and thousands of other poems is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of Islam. As the German scholar Annemarie Schimmel observes, even Western accounts that display tremendous respect for the Prophet Muhammad "betray nothing of the mystical love that his followers feel for him." This love endures throughout popular culture among the young and old alike, as evoked in this oft-recited passage of "The Mantle":

Incomparable, his beauty has no peer —
The essence of beauty itself is inseparable from him.

JOSEPH LUMBARD, Assistant Professor of Classical Islam at Brandeis University and former advisor for interfaith affairs to the Royal Jordanian Court, is a general editor for *The Study Quran*. His other publications include *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition* and *Submission, Faith and Beauty*.



Covenant from the Prophets
by Salma Arastu.

Ascribe to his essence what you wish of honor,
Attribute to his exalted status what you will of greatness!

Truly, the Messenger of God's bounty
Cannot be overstated by two lips and a tongue.

If a miracle could equal his magnitude,
The mere mention of his name would revive decaying bones.

For the majority of Muslims it is this inner spiritual reality that defines the Prophet Muhammad. We understand all of his actions in light of his direct connection to God. But for many non-Muslims, as well as for Muslims entrenched in militant political manifestations of Islamism, it is as if the Prophet's spiritual nature is veiled by his human nature; his role as a spiritual model and guide is obscured by his role as a statesman and military leader. This misunderstanding is perpetuated in the West by much of the misinformation and disinformation regarding the Prophet that has become ingrained in Western culture for over 1,000 years. As the *Cambridge History of Islam* observes,

Occidental readers are still not completely free from the prejudices inherited from their medieval ancestors. In the bitterness of the Crusades and other wars against the Saracens, they came to regard the Muslims, and in particular Muhammad, as the incarnation of all that was evil, and the continuing effect of the propaganda of that period has not yet been completely removed from occidental thinking about Islam.

Given this background and a view of the Prophet that is at best "all too human," from a classical Islamic perspective, the vast majority of Westerners are unable to understand that a caricature of the Prophet is, for many Muslims, the greatest of insults. This is especially so for those Muslims who feel dispossessed by the forces of globalization, and

hold fast to God and his Prophet as their lifeboat in a sea of troubles. For as “The Mantle” says, “The Prophet is the beloved whose intercession is hoped for.”

Even many non-practicing Muslims find in the Prophet Muhammad the greatest source of love, hope, and inspiration. As the Qur’an says, “The Prophet is closer to the believers than they are to themselves” (33:6). The Qur’an advises, “You have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example” (33:21), and verse 68:4, addressing the Prophet, states, “truly thou art of an exalted character.” When asked about the Prophet’s character, his wife Aisha says, “The character of God’s Prophet was the Qur’an.”

Based upon these and other sayings, the Prophet Muhammad is seen as the living embodiment of the message he delivered. The well-preserved record of his actions, sayings, and even tacit approvals thus provides Muslims a model for how they, like him, can conduct themselves with submission and mindfulness at every turn. To follow the Prophet’s example is to live a life wherein all the diverse elements of one’s being rotate around the truth, unified in perpetual submission to God. This prophetic model coordinates the chaos of worldly existence by returning it to its divine center, transforming the diffuse cacophony of daily life into the harmony of a life lived by the eternal rhythm of heaven.

Countering Extremist Interpretations of the Qur’an

Today, some see the actions of strident puritanical Islamists as indicative of a warrior religion that will stop at nothing to suppress all others. Such militarist interpretations, however, take particular incidents and sayings out of their broader context and employ them to justify political and apocalyptic aspirations. It cannot be denied that military campaigns occurred in the life of the Prophet and that the Prophet and his followers took both the defensive and the offensive in these campaigns. But nothing could be further from the practice of the Prophet Muhammad than political and military processes in which the ends are used to justify the means.

For the first thirteen years of his prophetic mission (610–622), the Prophet and his followers suffered persecution, yet he sought the way of nonviolence. In 622 he was driven from his home in Mecca. He and his followers were forced to employ military tactics to ensure their survival. Even then, the Prophet sought to avoid conflict when possible, preferring just treaties to armed conflict, as stipulated in verse 8:61 of the Qur’an: “If they incline unto peace, then incline unto it.” In this vein, the Prophet instructed his followers, “Do not desire to meet the enemy.” Fewer than 1,000 people died in the battles by which he came to rule Arabia, and when he rode into Mecca at the head of a victorious army in the year 629, he ordered that no blood be shed, for his mission was to ennoble, not to abase.

When asked of the Prophet’s conduct, Anas ibn Malik, who had been his servant for much of his prophetic mission, declared, “He never struck a man, woman, or child.” He was known to many as the most trustworthy, generous, and gentle of God’s creation. In a statement that still echoes throughout the Islamic world, the Prophet said, “The merciful are those upon whom God has mercy. Have mercy upon those on earth, He Who is in Heaven will be merciful unto you” and “There is no harming or requiting harm.” When the Prophet received insults from his enemies, he was enjoined to turn away from those who mocked him and to instead turn toward God: “Certainly We know that thy breast is constricted because of what they say. So hymn the praise of thy Lord, be among those who prostrate, and worship thy Lord, until certainty comes unto thee” (Qur’an 15:97–99).

Qur’anic passages such as this teach that in the face of mockery and ridicule, one should not respond with pettiness, anger, or violence, but instead seek solace in God. When confronted with the pettiness of others, Muslims are enjoined, “Remember God and leave them to their idle chatter” (Qur’an 6:91). It is a general principle of Islamic ethics that one not respond in kind to insults, be they intentional or unintentional; rather one should have patience and trust in God.

When a group of the Prophet’s opponents addressed him by saying, “Death be upon

you” (*al-sām* ‘*alaykum*), a play on the Muslim greeting “Peace be upon you” (*al-salām* ‘*alaykum*), the Prophet cautioned his wife against verbal retaliation, saying, “Go easy, O Aishah! You must be kind.” Such counsel is in accord with a well-known maxim articulated in many sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that one should never act out of anger. The wisdom behind such counsel can be seen in the effects of responses to the satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in the Danish periodical *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. While the vast majority of Muslims voiced their opposition to the caricatures in a peaceful manner, the violent responses of Islamists in Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, among other countries, ensured that such caricatures would spread far and wide and inspired the creation of dozens if not hundreds of other caricatures of the Prophet. Similarly, the murder of eleven employees at the offices of the French weekly satirical *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 has not brought the honor that was sought. Rather it has undermined the understanding of Islam and compromised the safety of Muslims in Europe and beyond. In both instances, violent retaliation has done far more to besmirch the name of Muhammad than to honor it.

The Politics of Satire

The atrocities committed by Islamists in response to the caricatures in *Charlie Hebdo* and to the Danish cartoon affair were a direct violation of Islamic teachings. It nonetheless behooves us to examine why some Muslims’ reactions to caricatures of Prophet Muhammad have become so strident, not in an effort to excuse such responses, but to see them from all perspectives. What is the context wherein emotions could be so readily inflamed by a few cartoons? This was not simply about depicting the Prophet, as some have portrayed it to be. The permissibility of producing images of the Prophet has always been debated in Islam. Nonetheless, there are thousands of classical Islamic miniatures in which he is depicted, though always in the context of veneration, not caricature. The issue that gave rise to so much consternation among Muslims of all walks is the needless desecration of sacred symbols through misrepresentation and vilification of the Prophet Muhammad.

Satire is not an innocent game. It can in fact be quite cruel, especially when some claim the right to trample with impunity upon that which is closest to the hearts of others. All societies and individuals have lines they believe should not be crossed: words, deeds, and subjects that are considered taboo. For Muslims, even many secular non-practicing Muslims, insulting the Prophet Muhammad (or any prophet for that matter) is such a subject. In the West, it is generally agreed that although free speech might permit us to insult or even denigrate another, basic human decency does not allow us to do so. It is not illegal for anyone to insult my parents, but it is also not socially acceptable. Propriety and courtesy are part of an unwritten social contract woven from delicate abstentions that reflect respect for all human beings. Most recognize that freedom of speech is not an absolute inalienable right — that as with any freedom, it comes with responsibilities. It is by meeting those responsibilities that we maintain the privilege to have that freedom. This is why we have laws against hate speech in over two dozen Western countries.

Modern Incarnations of the Medieval Polemic Against Islam

In this context, many Muslims feel that the *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures and the Danish cartoon affair are emblematic of the West’s inability to apply equitable standards of hate speech to itself. The caricatures of the Prophet appear as a continuation of the medieval polemic against Islam, a polemic whose weapon of choice was often the vilification of the Prophet and the Qur’an. As Minou Reeves has shown in *Muhammad In Europe: A Thousand Years of Western Myth Making*, from the medieval period through the Enlightenment and beyond, there has been no shortage of pens

ready to dishonor, denigrate, and (from the Muslim perspective) blaspheme the Prophet Muhammad.

Faced with such patronizing claims as “if we mock you, that shows that you are part of our culture,” and “everyone must be willing to put up with sarcasm, mockery, and ridicule,” along with disingenuous lectures about the nature of free speech, obfuscations regarding the intent behind the caricatures, and claims that any Muslims who are offended are backward, totalitarian, and medieval, many Muslims cannot see the continuing caricatures of the Prophet as anything other than another chapter in the long and sordid history of Western anti-Islamic polemics.

The outward attacks against the Prophet Muhammad, such as the epithets of Dante, the fulminations of Luther and other men of the Church, the vituperations of Marlowe, mockery at the hands of Rabelais, and the vitriol of Voltaire, are easier to accept. Such polemic is straightforward and honest. But the pen of the satirist is far more insidious, especially when used to ridicule and even provoke fractured and dispossessed minorities, which Muslims constitute in France, Denmark, and much of Europe. In this respect, many would agree that some of the caricatures represent a puerile and irresponsible use of free speech. Just as the atrocities committed by a few Islamists did more to besmirch the name of the Prophet and of Islam, so too did the publication of the caricatures do more to harm the moral foundations of free speech than to uphold them.

Until we seek to understand one another through real dialogue, and learn to respect each other’s sanctities and sensibilities, we will remain complicit in continuing the cycle of senseless and reciprocal hate. In the current environment, such efforts are of the utmost importance. Those of us who seek to adhere to the fullness of the prophetic model provide the bulwark against those who cherry-pick prophetic statements to support narrow objectives. Recognition of what following the “unlettered Prophet” (Qur’an 7:157), the “luminous lamp” (33:46), and the “bearer of glad tidings” (17:105; 25:56; 33:45) has meant to Muslims throughout history can thus serve as the means whereby the Prophet Muhammad does indeed remain a beautiful example whose legacy is “a mercy unto the worlds” (21:107). ■