The Last Holy Prophet and Universal Man

Extract" The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)" traditions - from Ideals & Realities of Islam written by Professor S. Hossein Nasr, and published by George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 2nd edition London 1975.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) it is not sufficient to study, from the outside historical texts pertaining to 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), it means Muhammad (S.A.W.) - whose name as such is never iterated except that as a courtesy it be followed by the formula 'Sall' Allahu 'alaihi wa sallam', that is, 'may God's blessing and salutation be upon him'.

It is even legitimate to say that, in general, when one says the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) it means the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 it refers to Christ who personifies this aspect. And although every Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) of Islam is the prototype and perfect embodiment of prophecy and so in a profound sense is the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). 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.A.W.) - Upon whom be peace. As the Sufi poet Mahmud Shabistari writes in h is incomparable Gulshan-i raz (the Secret Rose Garden):

The first appearance of Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)hood was in Adam,

And its perfection was in the 'Seal of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)s'. (Whinfield translation) It is difficult for a non-Muslim to understand the spiritual significance of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 career of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 easier to see the spiritual radiance of Christ or even medieval saints, Christian or Muslim, than that of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.); although the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is the supreme saint in Islam without whom there would have been no sanctity whatsoever.

The reason for this difficulty is that the spiritual nature of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is veiled in his human one and his purely spiritual function is hidden in his duties as the guide of men and the leader of a community. It was the function of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is to be under- stood he should not be compared to Christ or the Buddha whose message was meant primarily for saintly men and who founded a community based on monastic life which later became the norm of a whole society. Rather, because of his dual function as 'king' and 'Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)', as the guide of men in this world and the hereafter, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) should be compared to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)-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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) should be compared in Hinduism, to Rama and Krishna, who although in a completely different traditional climate, were avataras and at the same time

kings and house- holders 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 such devout kings as Charlemagne and St. Louis.

The figure of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is the least understood to non Muslims and especially to Occidentals.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 with- in 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 centre.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) entertained no political or worldly ambition whatsoever. He was by nature a contemplative. Before being chosen as Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 meditation. 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) underwent by being chosen to participate in the active life in its

most acute form. Modern studies on the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) which depict him as a man who enjoyed fighting wars are totally untrue and in fact a reversal of the real personality of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). Immediately after the reception of the first revelation the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), they are not at all signs of his lenience vis-à-vis the flesh. During the period of youth when the passions are most strong the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) lived with only one wife who was much older than he and also underwent long periods of abstinence. And as a Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 marriage, for him, as is true of Islam in general, was not so much enjoyment as responsibility and a means of integration of the newly founded society. Besides, in Islam the whole problem of sexuality appears in a different light from that in Christianity and should not be judged by the same standards. The multiple marriages of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 pure of any paganism and polytheism which if present would pollute the very source of this new fountain of life. As to what concerned his own person, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) was always the epitome of kindness and generosity.

Nowhere is the nobility and generosity of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) by these same people,

of the immense suffering he had undergone because of them, to realize what degree of generosity this act of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) implies. It is not actually necessary to give an apologetic account of the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), but these matters need to be answered because the false and often malicious accusations of this kind 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) was not certainly without love and compassion. 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 the knowledge of Him. For example in a well known Hadith, he said, 'O Lord, grant to me the love of thee. Grant that I love those that 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.).

From the Muslim point of view, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is the symbol of

perfection of both the human person and human society. He is the prototype of the human individual and 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) written by modernized Muslims who would like at all cost to make the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) which have guided the Islamic community over the 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 universal characteristics of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) are not the same as his daily actions and day to day life, which can be read about in standard biography of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.).

First of all the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) possessed the quality of piety in its most universal sense, that quality which attaches man to God The Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) was in that sense pious. He had a 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) named the 'little holy war' (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 holy war' (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 the 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 the 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) was faced from the beginning of his Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)ic 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 the heart of the holy war (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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), the qualities can be enumerated as strength, nobility and serenity or inner calm. Strength is outwardly manifested in the little holy war and inwardly in the great holy war according to the saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) who, returning from one of the early wars, said, 'We have returned from the small jihad to the great jihad.' It is this great jihad which is of particular spiritual significance as a war against all those tendencies which pull the soul of man away from the Centre and Origin and bar him from the grace of heaven.

The nobility or generosity of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). It points

to the fact that there was no narrowness or pettiness in the soul of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 emotions colour and prejudice one's 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) are contained virtually in the sound of the second Shahadah, Muhammad (S.A.W.)un rasul Allah, that is Muhammad (S.A.W.) is the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) of God, in its Arabic pronunciation, not in its

translation into another language. Here again the symbolism is inextricably connected to the sounds and forms of the sacred language and cannot be translated. The very sound of the name Muhammad (S.A.W.) implies force, a sudden breaking forth of a power which is from God and is not just human. The word rasul with its elongated second syllable symbolizes this 'expansion of the chest' {inshirah al-sadr), and a generosity that flows from the being of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). But this repose in the Truth is not based on a flight from the world but on a penetration into it in order to inte- grate 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) which all Muslims recite on certain occasions, God's blessing and salutation are asked for the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) who is God's servant ('abd), His messenger (rasul), and the unlettered Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) (al-nabi al-ummi). For example, one well-known version of the formula of benediction upon the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is as follows: 'Oh, God, bless our Lord Muhammad (S.A.W.), Thy servant and Thy Messenger, the unlettered Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.), and his family and his companions, and salute them.'

Here again the three epithets with which his name is qualified symbolize 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) put everything 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.)s to guide them. That is why the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is 'God's mercy to the worlds.' For the Muslim the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) 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 Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W