

The Prophet's Birthday

THE visit which the pilgrim pays to Madinah and to the Prophet's grave is indicative of the honor and esteem in which the Prophet is held by all Muslims. The Muslim is always expected to invoke God's blessing on him whenever and wherever his name is mentioned. Such invocations are made a countless number of times a day, every day; and the salah includes it as part of the liturgy. There have been many prophets before Muhammad, and many charismatic leaders who earned the love and admiration of their people. Muhammad derived greatest love, honor and respect from the Muslims.

Certainly, some men commanded so much love and honor on the part of their adherents that the latter transformed them in their consciousness and declared them divine. The practice was common in classical antiquity as well as in India, China, Japan, and Africa. One could even venture the suggestion that there is something in human nature that tends to associate with divinity anything that is perceived as sublime. Indeed, much as Islam condemned the practice, some of the Prophet's followers fell to temptation. As the Prophet lay on his deathbed in his room, these clamored that he did not die but was lifted to heaven to join God's company. The denial of his mortality was the first but adequate step for his apotheosis. On hearing of the news of the

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Prophet's death, Abū Bakr, his closest friend and constant companion, went into his room to ascertain the event and entered the mosque hall where the claim was being voiced by no less a leader than ʿUmar. After several polite but failing attempts to silence ʿUmar, Abū Bakr stood up, shoved ʿUmar aside and said to the assembled Muslims: "If any of you has been worshipping Muhammad, let him know that Muhammad is dead. But if you have been worshipping God, then know that God is eternal and never dies." This was a terribly shocking reminder to the Muslims that only God is God, only He is immortal; that Muhammad was nothing but human, all too human and mortal like everyone else. It was the last time the Muslims entertained any idea of deifying the Prophet, of lifting him above the pale of humanity.

The humanness of Muhammad is not a drawback, but an enhancement of his great merit. As a human, he received the revelation of God; and as a human he conveyed it to mankind. As a human, he understood the revelation, interpreted and exemplified it in his life. The revelation being the will of God, Muhammad's career would not be instructive had he been divine. Men would then have to struggle with the translation of divine conduct into something humanly possible, capable of human actualization. The preservation of Muhammad's humanity is the making normative of his actualization of the religious and moral imperative. For this, the Muslim is ever so grateful. Ambiguity and error have been man's most pernicious religious enemies. God has always been known by man, from Adam down. He has always recognized something he called "religion" or "morality," an "ought" which he regarded worthy of actualizing and being. But ever did he stumble and struggle and miss the exact application of this divine ought to ease his day to day problems!

Islam holds that in His mercy, God sent a prophet to each and every people, that all prophets have taught essentially the same lesson. Assuming that God cannot be subject to change, His will, the content of all revelations, must therefore be the same. It is not becoming of a God, if He is Almighty, Omniscient, as well as Transcendent that His will for man would change from place to place or age to age. Certainly, the means of obedience by man may and did change, but not that to which man's obedience is the response, namely the divine commandment.

This notwithstanding, there is a sense in which the divine commandment itself may have changed. That is the condition where the commandment is not a categorical imperative of goodness, justice or charity but a prescription of how in any species of concrete cases, goodness, justice or charity may be realized. Prescriptive religious laws do indeed change; for they are dependent upon the concrete situations where they are to apply. But that is a change in the accidents of revelation, not in the substance. Before Muhammad, revelation consisted of both the substance of divine will which includes the values, and the accidents which consist of the prescriptive legislations determined by the relativities of history. Islam asserts that the substance of all past revelations is the same, and it bases its claim on the inconsistency of divine transcendence with change. It recognizes the requisites of history as demanding change but as affecting only the “how” of religion, never the “what.” The succession of past prophets Islam explains as necessitated either by changing situations or by aberration and misunderstanding of the substance of revelation.

Muhammad, therefore, is not claimed by Muslims to have brought anything new to the revelations of past prophets. His revelation is a confirmation of all previous revelations. Moreover, the revelation to Muhammad, the Qur’an, is imperishable because God declared Himself its protector and guardian. Hence the Muslims responded by committing it to memory by millions of persons across the centuries so that it is not possible for it ever to disappear from the earth. They have frozen the Arabic language, with all its grammar, syntax and lexicography that an understanding of the language of revelation may forever be possible and easy.

But isn’t the Qur’an subject to the change affecting all prescriptive legislations? Muslims hold the Qur’an to be essentially a statement of religious ends, of the what of divine will. They do not deny that the Qur’an does include some legislation; but they hold that element to be of lesser importance than the rest. Out of a total of 6236 verses, hardly 500 are prescriptive, the rest being an exhortation to piety and virtue in general terms. They hold that God will not need to send another revelation, partly because He has placed in man’s hand an imperishable and definitive statement of His will, viz., the Qur’an, and partly

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because He wishes man to discover and to elaborate the how's by which the will of God is henceforth to be realized. It is not by accident therefore that the Qur'anic revelation is not prescriptive in the main; it is so because the divine plan relegated law-making to man, as long as the principles and values of which the prescriptive laws are to be embodiments, are those which God had revealed.

Three important conclusions rest upon this position. First, there is no need for a prophet after Muhammad. That which necessitates the advent of another prophet – namely, corruption or loss of the revelation, or change of situations requiring a corresponding change in prescriptions – cannot come to pass. The Qur'an is imperishable; and prescriptive legislation is the duty and prerogative of men. Second, Muhammad is the last of the prophets, sent not to a people, but to the whole of mankind. As the archetypal adherent of the religion he received from God, Muhammad is the exemplar of Islam, whose Sunnah, or concrete example is normative.

Muhammad was not therefore merely the messenger who conveyed the message of his Lord *verbatim*. He concretized, particularized, specified, and made prescriptive the divine message. God had prepared him for the task, and his people never knew of a single flaw in his character. That is why God said in the Qur'an that in Muhammad's conduct stands *par excellence* the example for Muslim emulation. Two singular merits are therefore his by divine arrangement, namely, *verbatim* delivery of the message and its concretization in life. Both meanings are remembered, articulated *de novo*, and celebrated on his birthday.

On that day, as on every day but with yet more emphasis, the Muslim celebrates the advent of Muhammad. The Sunnah or example of Muhammad has been observed by him in so many events of every day. On this day, the Muslim is especially drawn to the realization of his need for this Sunnah, of the tremendous effort the Prophet's companions, their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren have exerted in keeping it pure and unadulterated, whether from well-meaning misinterpretation or unconsciously erratic conveyance. There was hardly any trouble in preserving and conveying the text of the Qur'an, as we have already seen. Its language and style are so radically

different from the sayings of Muhammad or of any man that not much training is needed to distinguish the divine language from the human. But Muhammad's language is indeed human. Sifting the historically authentic traditions of the Prophet was a task demanding stupendous care.

For this task, the Muslims invented a number of disciplines. A number of them had to do with language. Assisted by the disciplines of grammar, syntax, lexicography, etymology and philology, redaction and literary aesthetics, all of which were designed primarily to help non-Arab, non-desert Muslims and all later generation Muslims to understand the Qur'anic text, the Muslims invented the disciplines of textual criticism, form-criticism, redaction-criticism, topical criticism and historical criticism to examine the texts of the hadiths. They devised and established other new disciplines, namely, biography, historiography and personal and social analysis, to investigate the truthfulness of the narrators of the hadith. They established canons of internal criticism for the former, and canons of external criticism for the latter.

Their job was not absolutely definitive, from the very nature of the case. Hence, they did not throw away what they found falling short of absolute authenticity, but satisfied themselves with categorizing it as such, reminding their reader that God knows better than they. Their researches enabled them to classify all the traditions of the Prophet's doing and saying according to their degree of authenticity in descending order. First are those which report a deed of the Prophet which he taught to the Muslims and the latter performed repeatedly ever since. This was an "actional" Sunnah which the Muslims believe is hardly capable of error, considering its universal, repeated and public nature. Second, came those hadiths of juridical nature which had visible and public consequences in history and had thus been verified by the incontrovertible facts of that history. Third came those hadiths of a religious or moral nature which are obviously consistent with the Qur'an and were thus meant to illustrate or exemplify its ideas and injunctions. Last were those hadiths which carry some creative, innovative direction, or tell something not reported by other known narratives or traditions.

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The Muslim looks to the Prophet's Sunnah under these categories. He is careful to call the Prophet's exemplification canonized by the Qur'an itself *al-sunnah al-ṣaḥīḥah* (the verified Sunnah) thus keeping the door always open for the possibility of human error; indeed, for removing error from the precincts of the divine will which alone is religion, the imperative for man.