

Part III

Other Muslim Celebrations

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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.

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IMPORTANT as the Prophet's birthday may be, it was not deemed by the Muslims to be the proper beginning for the Islamic calendar. It must be kept in mind that Muhammad was not the first prophet. Before him, a countless number of prophets have come and delivered the same message. True, they regard him to be the last, according to the divine description of him in the Qur'an as the "seal" or last of the prophets (Qur'an 33:40). The revelation he brought, like the preceding revelations, contains the same and whole content of the divine will. The *verbum dei* it conveyed is preserved intact and whole and its continued presence obviates the need for a new revelation. God's will is immutable in its substance, it is not subject to the vicissitudes of change. This substance is the body of principles and values expressed in the Qur'an. Not only do Muslims amply fulfill the obligation to preserve the Qur'an in its totality, committed to memory, written in the most sublime calligraphy in the best specimens ever produced by the arts of book-making which it alone engendered, and daily recited from cover to cover by thousands and millions of people publicly around the globe, but God Himself promised to preserve it intact forever.

The advent of the Prophet is hence indicative of a contact with divinity which brought to mankind knowledge of His will. It also

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indicates the preparation of this will for implementation through exemplification by the Prophet. As such, the whole significance of the advent is a matter for the divine economy, not the human. It does not necessarily include the commencement of the Islamic movement in history. The Islamic calendar had therefore to have another beginning.

It was 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph (12-22 AH/634-644 CE) who established the Islamic calendar as beginning on the day of the Prophet's hijrah (July 16, 622 CE), i.e., his emigration to Madinah. The reasoning was precise and clear. Islam was not only a divine dispensation, nor one to be observed merely by man as an individual person, but one to constitute total guidance for the community, the state and world order. It is meant to be an ideology for a comprehensive movement issuing from Makkah and enveloping the earth and mankind. When did it launch itself on this cosmic career? Not on Muhammad's birthday! Nor on the first day of revelation when the Prophet himself was not yet quite sure of what was happening! Nor on the emigration of some of the Prophet's companions to Ethiopia, for their flight was one of refugees! But it launched itself on the emigration of the Prophet, or really the day after, when he proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic state and launched Islam as a world movement and a cosmic mission.

Was such a launching necessary for the religion itself? Was it not an accident of history, or a deliberate pursuit of men and hence a human *desideratum*?

No, answers the Muslim. Involvement in history was essential to Islam and its ultimate end. Islam taught that piety, spirituality, and religious felicity are vain and empty if they are meant for the subject alone. The point is clearly discernible in the realm of morals. It is possible to think of an ethic of intention where the good, or value, is defined in terms of the psychic states of the subject, i.e., of the determinants of his will in its personal moment. Such would be a subjective ethic whose ultimate judge on earth is the subject's own conscience, since only conscience penetrates to those inner layers of personal consciousness where the ultimate motives rest. Such, for instance, would be the opposite of an ethic of consequences, of a utilitarianism which defines the good, and hence the ethical merit of the deed, in terms of the

external, obvious, measurable advantages in space and time which it engenders.

So with religion as such, in its totality, Islam is not a personalist, subjective religion like Christianity had been understood to be in the majority of cases over most of its twenty centuries of history. It is, rather, a mobilization of man to enter history, to interfere in its processes, to reorient its forces and therewith, men and nature, toward rekneading the cosmos and remolding it after the pattern God has revealed. The Muslim sees his vocation precisely in this: to enter history and therein to reshape the world.

Since nothing in creation is sacred, the sacred being alone God who is outside of creation, everything in creation is equally necessary, valuable and pertinent to the task once that is defined in terms of *Khilāfah* or vicegerency, of God. Those religions which bifurcated the world into sacred and profane, end up by dividing man's life accordingly. Under their view, religion is relevant on one day but not on the other; at worship in church or temple but not outside; during old age but not in youth; for personal acts but not for general economic and social behavior; for neighbor to neighbor conduct but not decisions and deeds of state.

All this is implicit in the Muslim's celebration of the hijrah. It is a reminder to him of another year past and another to begin. It is a moment of stocktaking, not in the domain of personal life, but in that of public life where the subject is Islam as world movement, as world state. How close is the world movement the Prophet had launched in Madinah to realizing its God-given objective? How far is it from including and mobilizing humanity? From transforming that humanity into monuments of genius, heroism and saintliness? From transforming nature into paradise?

Isrā' and Mi^crāj

AS the youngest of the world religions, and as one born in the cradle of ancient civilizations, of Judaism and Christianity, Islam could not omit to relate itself to these religions. Its theory of prophecy already bound Islam to recognize the prophethood of the Hebrew prophets as well as of Jesus, whose memories were alive. The Qur'an mentions many of them, and pays particular attention to Abraham, Jacob, Shuayb, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah, and Jesus. They and their followers it identifies as *ḥanīfs*, i.e., persons who were neither Jewish, nor Christian, nor adherents of Makkan religion, and yet were held in utmost respect for their moral uprightness, their religious vision and spirituality. Islam had therefore to specify its relation to them.

To begin with, it identified itself with the *ḥanīfs* whose head it identified with Abraham. The *ḥanīfs* were the Arab carriers of the whole legacy of Semitic religious consciousness, from Lipit-Ishtar to Sargon and Hammurabi, to Abraham and Moses and finally to Jesus. Undoubtedly their ranks were swelled by those refugees who ran away from persecution in Palestine, Jordan and Syria where the religious establishment was often in conflict over what was deemed to be orthodox Judaism and orthodox Christianity. The state religion of David, the post-exilic version canonized by Ezra and Nehemiah, the literal, legalistic version of the Pharisees, Maccabees and the Rabbinic

schools, all these did not become established without producing recurrent waves of dissidents some of whom found refuge among Arabs with some affinity to their own views. Likewise in Christianity, where the disagreements of the churches about Christology nearly always led to the banishment and/or persecution of some adherents. Mention should be made of Jewish refugees escaping the forced Hellenization of Alexander's heirs, and of the Christian refugees escaping Roman and Jewish persecution. This is also borne by the fact that "*ḥanīf*" is the Arabic form of the Aramaic *hanepai* which means heretic, rejected or separatist, which is exactly what such refugees would be from the religious establishment's point of view. But the *ḥanīfs* could not have all been such refugees. For it is impossible for any refugee of a different religion from the Arabs to choose to go to them for refuge, unless some Arabs were already of the same faith or sympathized therewith. The ranks of such native *ḥanīfs* may have been swelled by those emigrants who, in course of time, were naturalized and Arabized.

Islam's self-identification with the *ḥanīfs* was total. Ethnically, they regarded Abraham as their ancestor, and asserted him to be the first *ḥanīf*. The *ḥanīfs* had no known scripture, a fact which facilitated identification of Islam with them. With what was known of their religion among the Makkans, Islam agreed without reservations. This included monotheism, transcendence of the Godhead, universalism and a strict morality of chivalrous, pietistic and humanitarian values.

Judaism and Christianity were a different case. Each of them was a continuing establishment with its own scripture, its own *magisterium* and institutions. Something of their doctrines was perfectly true and genuine and hence agreeable to identify with. Other parts expressed views foreign to the whole Semitic tradition and were hence found to be in diametrical opposition to Islam. The Qur'anic criticism of these religions belonged to the Makkah period of revelation when Muslims had no relations with any people of different faith except the Makkans. Islam's criticism of the two religions is hence independent of the socio-political involvement of the Muslims with Jews and Christians. Islam was not shy to proclaim its continuity with both, its essential identity with both. It recognized them as legitimate religions whose ultimate source is God. But it criticized them mercilessly where their scriptures

had been tampered with so as to contain men's fabrications alongside genuine revelation, and where it found their adherents' observance of the injunctions of the two religions deficient or wanting. In so doing, Islam achieved two goals: It related itself to these religions as members of one family whose source is one and the same God; and it distinguished itself from their human distortions by inviting their own adherents to exercise their common sense and do some Old Testament and New Testament criticism.

The *Isrā'-Mi'rāj* celebrates this discovery by Islam of itself as one with Judaism and Christianity, represented by the story of Jerusalem which the Prophet has visited miraculously in a single night's journey, and by his discourse with the prophets of God when he was lifted from Jerusalem to heaven on that same night. Obviously, a night journey to any distant city would have been equally miraculous. Heaven could, on the other hand, be reached from any locality on earth. Why then was Jerusalem chosen? Evidently because that city was the religious capital of Judaism and Christianity, and the abode of the prophets, with which Islam sought to identify itself. Already, the Muslims were turning North to Jerusalem in prayer.

The tradition has brought down the details of the event as told by the Prophet. He was awakened at night by the angel who on many earlier occasions had brought down the revelation to him. The angel brought to him a special steed which he mounted. The steed then flew across space, not without enabling the Prophet to recognize the travelers on the road and their caravans. Once in Jerusalem, the Prophet tethered his steed to the "wailing wall" adjoining *al-Aqsa* and from the rock now under "the Dome of the Rock" ascended to heaven where he led all the prophets assembled to meet him, in prayer and praise to God. God instructed His Prophet to institute salah in Islam. He was then taken on a tour of heaven and hell, Muslim reports of which have become the source for many romantic and speculative accounts of Heaven in Islam and the West. We should note here that Dante's *Divina Comedia* was a Christian adaptation of this Muslim theme.

In celebrating *al-Isrā'* and *al-Mi'rāj* Muslims celebrate the great unity of all the prophets, and consequently, of all the religions, notably those associated with Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. A

very special place among the prophets is accorded to Abraham, Moses and Jesus, founders of the three main streams of the Semitic family of religions.

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