

PERFORMATIVE TEACHINGS OF THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD

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In the Muslim imaginary, both in the popular version and the learned genre, the Prophet Muhammad is remembered as the paragon of virtue. Panegyrics and praise poetry, theological treatises, and cosmological theories assign to him the eternal status of prophethood. As a famous prophetic report (*hadith*) puts it: ‘I was already a prophet when Adam was between water and clay.’ In other words, for Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad had a cosmic existence that preceded Adam’s actuality in the world.

Yet, few can dispute that Muḥammad, the son of ‘Abdullāh, the messenger of God whose hands shaped a world-making people among the Arabs in the seventh century, led by example and character. Only a person of character whose determination was steered by a divinely inspired proclamation could manage to successfully will the transformation of his society from polytheism to monotheism, from injustice to justice, and from an inward-looking people to an *umma* who set their eyes on the world beyond their region. Only a leader who could inspire people by example could initiate an impulse, followed by continuous momentum whose effects were felt far beyond its rugged borders. Within a century the Umayyad dynasty vied with pre-existing civilisations and empires for worldly pre-eminence as well as salvation in the hereafter. The Prophet Muhammad’s transformative impulse was at the time felt in cultures near and far, and with the passing of fourteen centuries, no continent is left untouched by the presence of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad’s open secret was his embodiment of virtue. In the words of the Qur’an the Prophet Muhammad is a moral archetype, ‘an excellent exemplar’ (*uswa ḥasana*) (33:21) and the bearer of a ‘a strong character’ (*khuluq ‘azīm*) (91:4). Ā’isha, his wife, when asked about his character, famously and promptly said, ‘his character was the embodiment of the Qur’an.’

CRITICAL MUSLIM 48, AUTUMN 2023

Specialised writings on the Prophet's virtues constitute a genre of literature that is hard to summarise and difficult to quantify. But they amount in the tens of thousands and in every conceivable language Muslims use.

Vocabularies of Virtue in Islam

What does it mean that the Prophet is the embodiment of the Qur'an? The Qur'an consists of accounts of past communities of faith as well as those who rejected faith. It portrays the horrors of the Day of Judgement when humankind will flee each other, each seeking their own path from perdition. It previews the heavenly gifts for those who recognised God in the world and followed divine commandments. It talks about prophets and angels, articulations of God's will and actions with peoples over time in broad brushstrokes and at times with fine detail. God's retribution and reward are two motifs, but it contains many more stories of God's beneficence and unlimited mercy to humanity. All of this is a prelude for the reader of the Qur'an and a follower of the Prophet Muhammad to become a member of the 'party of God' (*ḥizbullāh*). Admission to the 'party of God' requires the moral subject internalise good conduct and virtue.

It is no exaggeration to say that the call to virtue is repeatedly made in the Qur'an, in the reports of the Prophet Muhammad, and in the myriads of writings of Muslims, especially the traditions of practice of sufism and a range of popular religious practices. The Prophet Muhammad's virtue is captured in poetry, art, architecture, music, song, even the rhythmic dance of the dervishes, leave alone the extraordinary and abundant intellectual, scholarly, edificatory, and historical writings, detailing his virtues and their impact on the human soul in innumerable languages of the world.

Vocabularies abound to articulate the notion of virtue in all Muslim core languages of practice and reflection. Most popular is the ṣ-l-ḥ root word used in the Qur'an for the male who does good, *ṣāliḥ* or the female, *ṣāliḥa* who performs good and virtuous deeds. This root word and its variants occur around 182 times in the Qur'an. Often the translation 'pious' or for *ṣāliḥ* and 'pious deeds' for *ṣāliḥat* do not capture the full impact of the expression. The ṣ-l-ḥ Arabic root is rich in its performative mode, as a verb or noun, for it accomplishes things through acts and deeds. The variants of this word are plenty which include making peace, *ṣulḥ*, the one who makes things good and

reformed, *muṣliḥ*, and hence reforming and mending the world is called *iṣlāḥ*, just as an individual also mends their ways from heedlessness to conscientiousness. ‘Those who perform *ṣāliḥāt*, virtuous or wholesome deeds from among men and women, and have faith, shall enter paradise and will not be wronged one fleck.’ (4: 124). Many verses reinforce this same teaching that wholesome and virtues deeds are indeed those that are favoured by God.

Another key vocabulary is the word *iḥsān*, derived from the Arabic root *ḥ-s-n* for beauty. When *ḥ-s-n* is used in *iḥsān*, it means to perform beautifully and excellently. Often this concept is used in conjunction with ‘faith’ (*īmān*), with ‘surrender’ (*islām*), with God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and with the performance of wholesome or virtuous deeds (*al-‘amal al-ṣāliḥ*) in many verses of the Qur’an. But the crux of *iḥsān* is captured in a portion of the report of Jibril (Gabriel) who appears to the Prophet as a visitor who asks a series of questions. Among the questions asked: ‘What is *iḥsān*?’ To which the Prophet replies: ‘That you worship God as if you see God. And if you are not able to see God, know that God sees you.’

The pinnacle of beauty and bliss in Islam is to be in the presence of the Divine. Devoutly worshipping God is only a prelude to the perfection of beauty. The crowning perfection of sublime beauty will only be possible in the hereafter when humans will be gifted to behold the visage of the Divine. Thus, to be virtuous means to internalise the beatific attributes of God in one’s soul and body. Worshipping God *as-if* one sees the Divine is a means to gain that deep and intimate consciousness of God in one’s life.

The Stage

If Muslims salute and emulate the character of the Prophet, then their adversaries in faith and the political enemies of the Prophet of Islam, from ancient to modern times, all regularly assault his character. If any human being has been judged, misunderstood and whose character has been subject to mischief, and I daresay a subject of great envy because his followers adore him so, then it is the Prophet of Islam.

Critics and devotees, champions and detractors make one common and fatal error: they either judge the man unfairly or, expect him to be a man who should resonate with their times, especially in modern time. Just as his seventh-century impatient Meccan foes expected him to provide them

with a one-shot manufactured book of revelation, so too do people today expect him to meet their sometimes-unreasonable expectations. Often expectations soar when believers lack in work, labour, and aspiration. His twenty-first century devotees expect him and his teachings to answer every question from the solution to poverty to quantum mechanics and physics. Few pay attention to the history and humanity of the Prophet Muhammad. His true virtue lies in him being a mortal with high standards. We ought to point out that his character and virtues preceded his experience with the ineffable and miraculous revelations he announced to the world. Revelations which no doubt infused the world, and inspired the ever-expanding community of Muslims for over fourteen hundred years.

The Arabian Prophet was a magnificent being who never hid his vulnerabilities. Scared and overwhelmed by his first revelations around 610—given his encounter with a supernatural being in the cave of Ḥirā—who asked him to recite like the poets and soothsayers of his culture. After that experience he hastened to his trusted friend, partner, and wife Khadija. To her he confessed his distress and confusion following that experience. It turns out that the figure was an angel who asked him to ‘recite’ like persons of wisdom, virtue and character were expected to do. In other words, they were expected to say something profound. What involuntarily came out of his mouth was: ‘Recite! Recite in the name of thy Lord who created...’

Perplexed by this experience, he detailed his encounter to Khadija. With her help he consulted other folks who consoled him and explained that his experience was a sign. Indeed, it was an encounter with a divine emissary, the archangel Gabriel, as tradition taught. Khadija validated his experiences, comforting him, shrouding him, and cradling his perplexed body and soul. She did so in the most delicate and subtle manner as recounted in some of the most touching accounts in the traditions. She reassured him that the image that haunted him for some time was indeed an angel - a source of enrichment and divine comfort. He had no reason to fear. It is an extraordinary account of an Arab man in a patriarchal society who so effortlessly relies on his wife’s wisdom, in what becomes the decisive and life-altering moments in the life of Muhammad, the son of Abdullah, who will from that moment be known to his followers and the world as Muhammad Rasūlullah, Muhammad the Messenger of Allah. Khadija not only consoled him, but became the first to testify to his truthfulness and to

accept his proclamation and mission. For all intents and purposes, she was the first mortal to anoint him as God's Chosen One, al-Muṣṭafā. By the Prophet's own words, her passing during his last years in Makka was an irreparable loss. Later wives of the Prophet were deeply envious of the reverence and dedication to her memory he continued to show in his life.

The Prophet is later reminded in passages of the Qur'an of these events in cryptic form:

'O you enwrapped one in robes
Keep vigil the night, except a little
(a half of it, or diminish a little, or add a little)
And chant the Qur'an very distinctly
Behold, we shall cast upon you a weighty word.' (73: 1-5)

Further revelations say:

'O you shrouded in your mantle
Arise and warn!
Your Lord magnify
Your clothes purify
And defilement flee!' (74: 1-5)

The Context

If one cannot understand the Prophet Muḥammad as a seventh century man in the urban-rural setting of Makka and Medina, then much is lost. Two aspects of his persona are interwoven. One must be able to hold together in one articulation the soaring, elevating and brilliant prophetic imagination of his revelations, on the one hand, and the everyday events, basic and elementary ethical and moral practices that reveal the Messenger's true character, on the other. Failing to keep those threads of context, supernatural divine speech, everyday advice and mundane practices as a seamless unity, then the extraordinary character and virtue of the Prophet will escape you. Practices and behavior patterns are literally welded into the terrain, culture, and experiences of Arabia. If you miss that, you miss everything. If you are looking for a modern man in the teachings of a seventh-century Prophet, you are frustrating yourself and

completely upending the Muslim experience. For Muslims experienced the Prophet differently in every age without distorting the record.

Think about his reality and how he himself had to adapt to change. For nearly a decade after announcing prophecy in Makka he was married to a single wife, Khadija. At her death, his closest and dearest friend Abu Bakr entreated him to bestow upon his family the honour of family ties, and proposed that the Prophet marry Ā'isha, at the time a very young daughter of his friend. Custom and friendship demanded that he comply. The marriage was not consummated till Ā'isha reached her teens. This marriage has created great consternation and controversy among moderns, but especially Islam and Muslims' modern religious foes cast all kinds of aspersions. The modern faithful are also unable to grasp the different eras in history in which experiences were very different. Intriguingly not a single of the Prophet's Makkan political foes thought such a marriage to be a violation of the morals of the time. Recall they left no stone unturned to harass and besmirch him. As his stature as a political figure grew in Medina, the Prophet needed to consolidate political affiliations with the various tribes and clans under his banner now as Messenger of God. Marriages with women, almost all of them widows or divorcees, allowed him to consolidate such kinship ties. These social relations helped to tie his prophetic and political roles into a differentiated, but singular authority. Such practices of political marriages were *de rigueur*. If he did not act according to the social norms at the time, it would have been viewed as odd and possibly chalked up as a political deficit.

He had only one slave, but early in his prophetic ministry he freed him. Violating sacred rules such as deliberately breaking your fast or breaking an oath involved penalties, and often one of the options was to free a slave. Yet he did not outlaw slavery in a society enmeshed in a slave economy, as most of the world was at the time. But he pointed to what was a better practice and option. Women were by all accounts given better rights and duties under Islam compared to the pre-Islamic dispensation, but marriage equality was not a priority. Marriage bonds together with stipulated rights and duties could be transacted, but male authority had a greater role in the moral economy of the marriage consistent with the norms of patriarchy. Changes in these and other social and moral practices were malleable and alterable by the changing moral economies and political theologies Muslim

societies and communities adopted over time. What were acceptable practices in Arabia were viewed differently in later times and were easily replaced with newer practices. Hence, the Prophet expected and required his community to cultivate thought and understanding (*fiqh* and *tafaquh*) for the purposes of their evolving needs.

Even the lives of prophets were not without tenderness and the human touch. At times he had to adopt a different standard for himself and his closest family. When his daughter Fatima, who felt overburdened by domestic chores, asked her father to assign her a slave, he declined her request. Most people of average means owned slaves at the time. If he felt at times that he could not hold his society to the higher standard he personally aspired to, given that such change might cause social upheaval, the Prophet had no hesitation in holding himself and his immediate family to a higher standard. Most likely, he denied Fatima the help of a slave for this reason.

Again, he and other persons of means and social standing often married more than one wife. But when his son-in-law and cousin Ali expressed a wish to marry another wife alongside Fatima, the Prophet's emotions as a father who cared for his daughter's emotional wellbeing tenderly surfaced. 'Fatima is part of me,' he agonisingly announced. 'What hurts her, hurts me,' he added. 'Ali got the hint and abandoned his plans to marry a second wife.

Narratives

Beautiful narratives of realist and believable proportions are recounted in the prophetic traditions, the hadith literature, a rich resource often neglected. Hadith reports are perhaps the best resource for the anthropology of early Islam and the shape of the psychology of the early Muslim community, providing glimpses of the mindset of the Prophet's closest friends and family. Failing to give attention to these narratives, I believe, is to lose a sense of proportion of how the Prophet interacted with his community. But more importantly, we miss a sense of the two-way interaction between the Prophet and his people. I agree with the scholar Ali A. Mian on the need to enlarge what he called the 'ethnographic imagination' to better study and understand the person of the Prophet.

Hadith collector and scholar MuḤammad bin Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (d.870) provides an account of a very routine interaction between the Prophet and

‘Ali, the cousin of the Prophet married to Fatima. It appears that the Prophet was trying to wake ‘Ali and Fatima to perform the optional early morning prayers. These prayers are called *tahajjud*, to keep a vigil at night, before morning breaks. This is how Bukhārī narrates it, with some editing for clarity.

‘Ali b. Abi Talib, may God be pleased with him, said: ‘The Messenger of Allah, came to me and Fatima, may God be pleased with her, at night and woke us both for prayers.’ He [‘Ali] said: The Prophet then went back [to his home] and then prayed for a long portion of the night.’ He [‘Ali] said: ‘He did not hear us being awake.’ ... ‘So he [the Prophet] returned to us and woke us again.’ The Prophet then said: ‘Rise you two and pray.’ ‘I sat up,’ ‘Ali said, ‘and rubbed my eyes, and I said [to the Prophet]: ‘We, by Allah, will not pray except what God had decreed for us. Nevertheless, our souls are in the hands of Allah. If Allah willed to make us rise, we would have risen!’ ‘Ali said: ‘The Prophet, on whom be peace, then turned back, and on turning back was hitting his thigh and repeating the phrase: *‘And humans are contentious in most things’*.’ (18:54). Another report states the Prophet repeated, the phrase ‘Ali used: ‘We will not pray except what God had decreed for us.’ ‘We will not pray except what God had decreed for us.

This is such an unusually beautiful and touching account. It shows the Prophet’s care and inspiring nature. He urges his immediate family to perform additional devotions. Part of his reasoning is perhaps that his family should adhere to a higher standard. But ‘Ali’s free-spirited nature is also on display here and so is their human and natural interaction. Whatever ‘Ali’s personal reasons might have been for not doing the optional prayers on that night, he had a witty reply for the Prophet while rubbing his eyes. ‘We, by Allah, will not pray except what God had decreed for us,’ he said. Even the Prophet might have been amused by this quick-witted reply, for he slapped his thigh and repeated ‘Ali’s words. You almost visualise how the Prophet both surprised and amused at ‘Ali’s reply is engaged in thought about what just transpired and spontaneously the words of the Qur’an *‘And humans are contentious in most things’* came to his mind. I think this is a moment of irony, not judgment, following the repartee with his son-in-law. In fact, I almost get the feeling the Prophet is impressed with ‘Ali’s reply and hence slapped his thigh and repeated the answer he received, and possibly did so with a smile on his lips.

The Source

Biographers and especially experts in prophetic reports (*muḥaddithūn*) have a very human and humane grasp of the temperament and psychology of the Prophet, and most do so without exaggerating his virtues. To his credit, the legendary collector of hadith, al-Bukhari – who provides a treasure of reports most highly revered by Sunni Muslims after the Qur’an – in his authoritative collection, dedicates a *Book on the Merits and Virtues of the Prophet*. It brims with subtleties and insights on how the Messenger of Islam presented himself to the world and how he was observed by others. Browsing through Bukhari’s *Book of Virtues*, one notices how the collector painstakingly plots for ethical and historical continuity between pre-Islam and Islam. Very early in the *Book of Virtues* Bukhari shares the following report.

The Prophet said: ‘People are akin to mines: the best of them in pre-Islam are also the best in Islam. But more so when they dedicate themselves to gain moral insight. You will find the best people among them to strongly dislike seeking leadership.’

Several elements shine through this wisdom-filled simile.

First, think of the rich imagery involved in the wording of the Prophet in describing humans to be the repositories of something precious like mines and quarries. Extraordinary eloquence was indeed among the many virtues of the Prophet, as many accounts attest. Not only is the high standard of eloquence evident in his speech, but his revelation, the Qur’an, is the epitome and inimitable (*iʿjāz*) standard in style and presentation. Eloquence among the Arabs was viewed as a gift from the unseen world. The ability to express ideas clearly with an economy of words was a highly valued trait by the Arabs. A short and pithy expression is both memorable and easy to recall from memory. For this reason, tradition remembers the Prophet Muhammad as being gifted with an ‘all-comprehensive diction’ (*jawāmiʿ al-kalim*).

Second, ponder the words used in the simile: humans are like ‘quarries’ or ‘mines.’ These sources of essential minerals or valuable stones and metals are permanent features on the earth’s surface. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d.1449), possibly the most noted commentator and authority on the *Sound Book of Bukhari*, displays a capacious comprehension of the imagery of ‘quarries’ or ‘mines.’ In his reading, this analogy means humans are

analogous to being ‘different sources’ of richness and value, just as mines offer a variety of precious minerals and metals. Like we value sources of material wealth, similarly human beings too are valued for their diverse talents, gifts, and abilities. The Prophet Muhammad does not only assume humans are different in his teaching, but indeed he valued the fact that difference was strength. What is essential about humans is their character and the inherent goodness evident in all people, all things being equal: these qualities are viewed as a fortune in and of itself, qualities that a new faith values and appreciates. But the take home wisdom is that even devotees of a polytheistic faith are carriers of character. Islam and the Prophet rather valued the good things that already existed in people and human society and worked with those resources to make a new community.

Third, it is known from the history of Islam that those people who excelled in their pre-Islamic way of life were the human capital the Prophet sought out at every opportunity. He often yearned and hoped that such talented people would become part of his faith community. At an early and rather dark and challenging period of Islam in Makka, the Prophet prayed asking God to strengthen his community with one of two highly noted people in the city. One was Abū al-Ḥakam, who later attained infamy as Abū Jahal, ‘Father of Ignorance,’ since he made no secret of his loathing of Islam and the Prophet. The other was ‘Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb who at first was equally villainous towards the first Muslims, but later converted and occupied a distinguished place in Muslim history. The Prophet understood the good in people to be transferable. Virtue and the good, the Prophet taught, is not a monopoly of Muslims. Like wisdom, wherever you find the good, you are encouraged to espouse it.

Fourth is the condition under which the gift of good character is forever nourished: if humans cultivate thinking, understanding and insight, captured in the simple and frequently used Arabic word *fiqh*. The report, says: *idhā faqihū or faqubū*, ‘when people gain understanding.’ *Fiqh* is possibly the most glibly used word in Islamic discourse but often the most poorly understood concept. It immediately evokes the notion of applied Islamic law, which is clearly one use. At a fundamental and more significant level, *fiqh* even as a set of derivative rules entails reasoning and effort (*al-raʾy wa ʾl-ijtibād*). Understanding involves ‘inquiry and reflection,’ says the lexicographer and theologian, Mīr Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjānī (d. 1414).

The implication is that persons with good character and virtue cannot merely rest on their laurels or parade their good character topped with superficial piety. The Prophet aspired for a community gifted with rich and diverse integral human endowments, but these should be continuously nourished with thinking, inquiry, and reflection. Early Muslims grasped the importance of thinking, reflection, and interpretation. In the tenth century, the poet Abū Ṭayyīb al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) mocked those Muslims who followed religion in unthinking ways. Aware that some traditions encourage men to pluck or trim their lip hairs as a sign of cultural distinction, others viewed it almost as an article of faith. Mutanabbi, in lines dripping in unrelenting sarcasm, criticised that attitude:

Is the sole purpose of religion that you pluck your moustaches?
 What a sorry community (*umma*) whose display of ignorance embolden other
 peoples to mock them.

Sceptics might say nothing has changed, but that is an aside. The moral of the story is this: without intellectual vigilance, even the best talented human community can flounder. Persons with superb character and integrity can easily become dupes and fools, if thinking is not cultivated. The precondition in the prophetic report is crucial: not only is Islam in search of people with virtue and character, but the same people should also be capable of thinking. Otherwise, they become naïve and holy fools, a liability to humanity. Islam, German philosopher and cultural critic, Friedrich Nietzsche (1884-1900), concluded in *The Anti-Christ*, savoured the senses and celebrated nobility since ‘it owed its origins to manly instincts, because it said Yes to life even in the rare and exquisite treasures of Moorish life!’ From the teaching of the Prophet discussed here, it is evident that the Arabian Prophet taught his community to be intelligent and noble at the same time. Just as he expected that they should be world-affirming but equally in awe of accountability in the afterlife, all in one single seamless teaching.

Fifth, virtues and the character of people do not change from the pre-Islamic period to the Islamic era, the Prophet taught. The adoption of Islam rather changes their life purpose and the meaning and end of their lives. For at its core, virtue is synonymous to dignity and nobility of character truly affirmed by Islam. The prophetic analogy of humans being precious

sources is apt. Once precious metals or stones like diamonds are extracted from the depths of the earth, their qualities do not change. Rather the lustre of precious stones and metals only increase with further refinement and polishing. So too is the case with virtue. The Prophet of Islam recognised the excellent qualities in people even though they worshipped a deity that was antithetical to his invitation to a monotheistic God. It is an extraordinary trait of the Prophet Muhammad to see past the false ideology the Makkans pursued, but he never gave up on them as human beings, as persons of excellence and nobility of character. Nobility in character in turn attracts and stresses the virtues of generosity, chastity, restraint, and other valued qualities. Together these serve as a bulwark against negative qualities such as miserliness, corruption, and injustice. Muslims call excellent and valuable qualities ‘beautiful character or morality – *maḥāsīn al-akblāq*’.

Sixth, there is humility in the coils of virtue, with the result that people of character shy away from promiscuous and ambitious plots to seize leadership at any cost. The reason the virtuous are reluctant, explains ‘Asqalānī, is due to their acute sense of the burden of responsibility and the challenges they would encounter as leaders especially when enforcing justice and mobilising people to counter oppression and injustice. Persons of intelligence and faith, added ‘Asqalānī, grasp and shudder at the burden of responsibility. Often ambitious persons, minus talent and humility vie to attain authority and leadership without serving the greater purpose of the well-being of the umma as their primary task. Most times leadership is a parade of megalotistical proportions, where self-gratification takes priority over the improvement of the conditions of the people who are being ruled.

If one word summarises both the essence of the teachings of the Qur’an and the life, practice, and teachings of the Prophet of Islam, then it is the need to pursue good deeds, in short, virtues. Virtues are embedded in the soul which become manifest in the heart, mind, and body. Virtues can come naturally just as they can be acquired, inculcated, and internalised. It comes with practice. Virtue and wisdom are very intimate. A famous prophetic tradition teaches: ‘Oh people! Do not give wisdom to those who are undeserving, for then you oppress wisdom. Do not deny wisdom to the deserving, for then you will oppress them’. It is a delicate balance to navigate the path of virtue. But its achievement is infinitely rewarding.