



AND MUHAMMAD IS HIS MESSENGER

THE VENERATION OF
THE PROPHET IN ISLAMIC PIETY

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STUDIES IN RELIGION

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MUHAMMAD

THE BEAUTIFUL MODEL

One must always keep in mind that Muhammad never claimed to possess any superhuman qualities. He was, and wanted to remain, "a servant to whom revelation has come" (Sura 41:5), and when he was challenged by the Meccans to perform miracles he used to say that the only miracle in his life was that he had received the Divine revelation in clear Arabic language, which was proclaimed through him as the inimitable Koran. He knew that he was only a mediator, and when his compatriots asked him to substantiate his message by performing miracles it was revealed to him: "Say: If men and djinn would unite to bring something like this Koran, they could not bring it, even if they would support each other" (Sura 17:90; cf. Sura 6:37). As eloquent as the Arabs might be, and as perfect as their highly refined traditional poetry might be, even they would not be able to produce a single sentence that could be compared in form and content to the Koran.

This central position of the Koran in the Islamic *Heilsgeschichte* stands, phenomenologically, parallel to the position of Christ in Christianity: Christ is the Divine Word Incarnate, the Koran is (to use Harri Wolfson's apt term) the Divine Word Inliterate. It is therefore these two manifestations of the Divine Word that should be compared, for neither in theological nor in phenomenological terms can Muhammad be likened to the Christ of Christianity—hence the Muslims' aversion to the term "Muhammadans," which seems to them to imply a false parallel to the concept of "Christians." *Muhammad*, as in "the Muhammadan Path," is used in specific connections, usually by mystics who try to emulate the Prophet's example even more than others. As a medieval mystic, Shams-i Tabrizi, said: "A *muhammad* is he who has a broken heart . . . , who has reached the heart,

and can utter the *An'î-haq-i muhammadî*, the Muhammadan 'I am the Truth.'"¹

Muhammad knew, and was repeatedly reminded by the Koranic revelation, that he was only a human being, a man, whose only prerogative was that he was granted a revelatory experience. As Sura 6:50 admonishes him: "Say: I do not say: 'With me are the treasures of God' and I do not know the Invisible, and I do not say that I am an angel—I follow only that which is revealed to me." He was also reminded that only the Lord was able to guide mankind: "You cannot guide on the right path whom you want. It is God who guides!" (Sura 28:56). What had been revealed to him is that "Your God is One God" (Sura 37:4), and thus he was called to preach the message of uncompromising monotheism, of absolute surrender to the One God who is Creator, Sustainer, and Judge.

Muhammad felt that whatever happened to him was nothing but God's inexplicable grace, which he did not deserve and which had elected him as its vessel. For God admonished him: "Verily if We wanted We would take away what We have revealed to you, and then you would not find for yourself a defendant against Us" (Sura 17:88). He knew that he could never have hoped that such a Koran would be given to him "save by the mercy of your Lord" (Sura 28:86). And when the Meccans ridiculed him, asking persistently when the hour of Judgment would arrive—an hour of whose horrors he had been speaking in such terrifying words—he had to repeat again that he too was not informed about its arrival, that he was nothing but "an evident warner" (Sura 29:49), awakening the hearts of those who are in fear of this "Hour" (Sura 20:15, 79:42, and others).

Yet there are some passages in the Koran that point to Muhammad's exceptional role. As God "taught Adam the names" (Sura 2:30), thus He taught Muhammad the Koran (Sura 96:3). For Muhammad was sent "as a Mercy for the worlds," *rahmanan lil-'alamin* (Sura 21:107), and God and His angels utter blessings over him (Sura 33:56). He is "verily of noble nature" (Sura 68:4). In several places one finds the Divine command "Obey God and obey His messenger" or similar formulations. Such Koranic sentences formed the basis of a veneration of Muhammad that soon far surpassed the respect normally accorded to a prophet, and even now the pious Muslim will never mention anything belonging to or relating to the Prophet without adding the attribute *sharif*, "noble." In the course of time, then, short Koranic remarks were elaborated and spun out into long tales and wondrous legends, which slowly illuminated the outlines of the historical Muhammad with an array of color.

The obedience due to the Prophet seems to have played an important, perhaps the central role in the development of Islamic piety.² Does not Sura

3:29 state: "Say: if you love God, follow me, then God will love you and forgive your sins. Verily God is forgiving, merciful" (cf. Sura 33:30)?

In the bipartite profession of faith, *lā ilāhā illā Allāh, Muḥammadun rasulū Allāh*, "There is no deity save God, [and] Muhammad is the messenger of God," the second half, which defines Islam as a distinctive religion, constitutes, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith rightly says, "a statement about God" in his activity in the world rather than about the Prophet's person.³ For by sending His prophet, who proclaims His word, God reveals Himself to the world: the Prophet is, according to Nathan Söderblom, "an aspect of God's activity."⁴ Muhammad is singled out by God; he is truly the Chosen one, *al-Muṣṭafā*, and for this reason his *sunna*, his way of life, became the uniquely valid rule of conduct for the Muslims. As the Prophet says: "Who follows me, belongs to me, and who does not love my *sunna*, does not belong to me."⁵ For Muhammad is indeed, as the Koran states, an *uswa ḥasana*, "a beautiful model" (Sura 33:21).

In the understanding of classical Islamic religious theory, Muhammad's *sunna* consists of his actions (*fiʿl*), his words (*qawl*), and his silent approval of certain facts (*taqrir*). His well-attested way of behavior—or at least the way that was considered well enough attested to be historically true—attained a normative value for subsequent generations from at least as early as the second century of Islam. Because of the importance of the Prophet's noble example, the science of *ḥadīth* came gradually to occupy a central place in Islamic culture.

A *ḥadīth* (narrative, tradition; specifically a Prophetic tradition) is a report that contains a remark about a saying or an action of the Prophet as it is told by one of his trustworthy Companions who related it to someone in the next generation. The *ṣaḥāba*, Muhammad's Companions, are thus the most important source for Prophetic traditions. A *ḥadīth* may treat a ritual problem; it can discuss details of faith and doctrine, tell about the punishment in the next world, or simply describe the Prophet's behavior while eating, sleeping, or giving advice. To the chain of transmitters, the *isnād*, every generation added new members, until long lines of traditionists developed, each link connected with the previous one, in a well-established relationship. In the third Islamic century (ninth century of the Christian era), during which the most important "canonical" collections of *ḥadīth* were compiled, a typical *ḥadīth* looked like this: A said: I heard B say that he had heard C telling that D told him that E stated: F said that G transmitted: I have heard from Abu Huraira that the Prophet did this or that.

One of the most important branches of scholarship was the examination of traditions, because they contained the exposition of the Prophet's behavior and thus formed the source for all aspects of human behavior. However,

the scrutinization of *ḥadīth* was primarily geared not toward the text of the tradition, but rather toward the reliability of the chain of traditionists by whom a certain text was transmitted. Careful study was devoted to ascertaining which of them was a trustworthy person, whether he could have been in touch with the person whom he mentions as his source, or was too young when that person died, or had never visited the latter's hometown. After all such formal criteria for trustworthiness had been met, the *ḥadīth* in question was considered to be *ṣaḥīḥ*, "sound, immaculate." The best and most reliable traditions, the number of which understandably increased in the course of time in spite of all scholarly scrutiny, give in a certain way a picture of the development of theological and practical problems that the Muslim community faced during the first centuries of its history. The most trustworthy *ḥadīth* were put together in the middle of the ninth century by a series of scholars, in large collections, among which the works of Bukhari and Muslim are usually called *aṣ-ṣaḥīḥān*, "the two sound ones," although four others (which four differs from list to list) are also regarded as having great authority. The *ṣaḥīḥān* are so highly esteemed in Muslim circles that Bukhari's *Ṣaḥīḥ* was often regarded as second in importance only to the Koran. From these works the Muslims obtained the necessary information about the customs of the Prophet, about his outward appearance as about his ethical ideals. Sometimes in later centuries the whole *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhari, which contains some seven thousand traditions, was read out during the month of Ramadan (thus in Mamluk Egypt), and the *kham al-Bukhari*, the completion of such a reading, was solemnly celebrated.⁶ Sometimes an individual scholar who had completed the study of Bukhari would invite his friends to celebrate this auspicious event.⁷

On the basis of the "six books" of greatest authority later scholars compiled other, handier collections of *ḥadīth*, which generally left out the chain of transmitters. These were studied throughout the Islamic world, for they formed the pivot of theological studies in the colleges, *madrasas*, together with the Koran. Among the *ḥadīth* collections that were favorites in somewhat later times we may mention Baghawi's *Masābīḥ as-sunna* (The Lamps of the *Sunna*), with 4,719 *ḥadīth*, and, following it, Tabrizi's *Mishkāt al-masābīḥ* (The Niche for Lamps), called in India *Mishkāt-i sharīf* (The Noble Lamp). Its very title implies an allusion to the Light verse of the Koran (Sura 24:35), which was often interpreted as pointing to the Prophet, through whom the Divine light radiates into the world (see chapter 7 below). Persian and later Urdu translations of these works became popular in Muslim circles and were among the first books ever printed in India.⁸ In the sixteenth century ʿAlī al-Muttaqī, a scholar from Burhanpur in central India, used his long sojourn in Mecca to organize the most important and best-attested *ḥadīth* in his *Kanz al-ʿummal* (The Treasure of

the Workers), a book that gained wide fame because of its practical arrangement.

Other pious scholars and poets extracted sets of *hadith* concerning certain problems, such as predestination or the peculiarities of the days of the week, or sayings about fasting or pilgrimage; still others collected *arba'in*, groups of forty *hadith* that usually comprised traditions of which they were particularly fond or which they found most useful.⁹ Later, such *arba'in* were often versified in Persian and Turkish, and the most famous of these collections, written by the great Persian poet and mystical scholar Jami in the late fifteenth century, has been penned by the masters of calligraphy in exquisite forms,¹⁰ for such a book carries the blessing of the Prophet's word with it. Indeed, in later times, especially in the Turkish tradition, it became a general practice to inscribe *levhas*, single pages, with Prophetic traditions, in which the two cursive styles, the small *nash* and the larger, impressive *thuluth*, were very elegantly combined to form a "calligraphic icon."

Frequently, pious medieval scholars would set out on long journeys in the hope of finding some new reliable *hadith* or in order to listen to a renowned scholar of traditions; indeed, to travel "in search of knowledge" in the form of *hadith* was essential for a good traditionist in early times.¹¹ Scholars would sit at the master's feet, for it was necessary to learn one's *hadith* from a master. Even though small collections of traditions already existed in writing at an early point in history,¹² the ideal remained to collect one's *hadith* from the mouth of a teacher who, in turn, had acquired his knowledge from another authority, thus maintaining the living chain which led back to the Prophet.¹³ Incidentally, one finds quite a number of female traditionists in the chain of transmitters, the first one being Muhammad's young wife 'A'isha. One of these learned ladies, Karima of Mecca (d. 1066), was able to teach the whole *Sahih* of Bukhari in only five days!¹⁴

Such sessions of *hadith* were days of great importance. For just as the faithful Muslim feels that when reading the Koran or listening to its recitation he is listening to God Himself, he also feels that occupation with Prophetic traditions brings him in close contact with the Prophet, so that, as it were, he sees him and hears his voice. For this reason the teaching of *hadith* was understood as a great responsibility, and the teacher would prepare very carefully for the occasion. He would undertake such teaching of *hadith* with great awe, and only in a state of perfect ritual purity. It is told of Malik ibn Anas (d. 795), the founder of the Maliki school of jurisprudence and one of the great *hadith* transmitters, that "when he intended to sit down to recite *hadith*, he performed the ablution, donned new garments, put on a new turban, took his place on the platform, in awe,

reverence, and great seriousness. As long as the lecture continued, incense was constantly burned. His reverence to *hadith* was so great that it happened in one session that a scorpion stung him sixteen times, and he did not show any sign of disturbance."¹⁵

The Prophetic tradition can also be regarded as the first step in the interpretation of the Koranic revelation, for it reflects what the earliest generations had retained from the Prophet, who was necessarily the prime exegete of the revelations he brought. Certainly Muhammad must have been himself the paradigm for his companions even before formal *hadith* developed, as Fazlur Rahman has pointed out, "for whatever new material was thought out or assimilated was given as an interpretation of the principles of the Koran and the *sunna*."¹⁶ Thus the living tradition continued and spiritually nourished the Muslim community. In fact, it became so important that one could call it "the highest normative instance," as *sunna qadhiyatan 'ala'l-Qur'an*.¹⁷ A modern interpreter of Islam in the mystical tradition puts the importance of the *sunna* in the following words:

It is inconceivable that these virtues [of the *sunna*] could have been practiced through the centuries down to our time if the founder of Islam had not personified them in the highest degree; it is also inconceivable that they should have been borrowed from elsewhere—and one cannot imagine from where since their conditioning and their style are specifically Islamic. For Muslims the moral and spiritual worth of the Prophet is not an abstraction or a supposition; it is a lived reality, and it is precisely this which proves its authenticity retrospectively.¹⁸

However, despite the deep veneration for the Prophet's *sunna*, a number of problems posed themselves during the study of *hadith*. Could conflicting *hadith* really stem in their entirety from the Prophet? Did not every political and theological group in Islam come up with relevant traditions by which they tried to defend their attitude? Were the *hadith* collected in the six canonical books, or at least those contained in Muslim's and Bukhari's work, *all* absolutely binding for the Muslim? All these questions have been discussed for centuries, and from early times there were those who favored exclusive reliance on the Koran as the safest way.

The question of the authenticity has, however, been brought in the foreground especially in modern times when the confrontation of the Muslims with Western science and technology, but also customs and habits, threatened their time-honored way of life. European scholarship since Ignaz Goldziher is extremely critical of the traditions. But such criticism is rejected by pious Muslims as an attempt to shake if not destroy the very

foundations of Islam. S. H. Nasr, one of the leading Muslim thinkers of our day, educated at Harvard, writes in his thought-provoking book *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, in the chapter "The Prophet and Prophetic Tradition":

Purporting to be scientific and applying the famous—or rather should one say the infamous—historical method which reduces all religious truths to historical facts, the critics of *hadith* have come to the conclusion that this literature is not from the Prophet but was 'forged' by later generations. What lies behind the scientific façade presented in most of these attacks is the *a priori* assumption that Islam is not a Divine revelation. . . . Were the critics of *hadith* simply to admit that the Prophet was a prophet, there would be no scientifically valid argument whatsoever against the main body of *hadith*.¹⁹

However, in the modern Muslim world itself we find most widely differing attitudes toward *hadith*. In the second half of the nineteenth century, among the Indian Muslims the very orthodox Ahl-i-hadith accepted without questioning all that is written in the classical collections, while at the same time the modernists, led by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, advocated a more selective method in the use of *hadith*: it should be binding in religious matters but not for details of social behavior or political and other worldly affairs. And yet one should not forget that Sayyid Ahmad himself in a rather early work, which remained the basis for his later thinking, meditated upon the Prophet's word "O my son, the one who has cherished my *sunna* without doubt he has cherished me and he who cherishes me will be with me in Paradise" and exclaimed:

O Muslims, reflect a little; even if a thousand souls would sacrifice themselves for this word "with me," it would still be little! To be together in Paradise with the Apostle of Allah is such glad tidings that verily both worlds have no value whatsoever in comparison with that reality! What a good fortune the person enjoys who is granted to be with the Prophet Muhammad! Alas, where do you err wandering around? Whatever gracious gift there is, it is in the *sunna* of the Prophet, by God, in nothing else, in nothing else, in nothing else!²⁰

But among the followers and collaborators of Sir Sayyid in later days, *hadith* were viewed more critically, and one of his friends, Chiragh Ali, was almost more radical in his critique of the traditions than Goldziher, who wrote shortly after him in Hungary. Chiragh Ali expresses the opinion that "the vast flood of traditions soon formed a chaotic sea. Truth and error, fact and fable, mingled together in an undistinguishable confusion."²¹

The situation is not much different today: while one wing of orthodoxy in

Pakistan strictly clings to the Prophetic traditions, Ghulam Parvez, a modernist thinker in the same country, rejects *hadith* in toto and accepts only the Koran (which he interprets in a very idiosyncratic way) as the sole source of moral and ethical values.²² Again, Fazlur Rahman caused much discussion and bitter antagonism with his interpretation of the "living *sunna*." To be sure, even in the Middle Ages the question had been posed (by the Ash'arite theologian al-Baqillani) whether complete submission to the model of the Prophet was absolutely necessary. Was it perhaps only meritorious, or even without special religious value? This discussion of course dealt not with the religious contents of the *hadith* but only with ethically indifferent questions such as manners of eating or dressing and the like. However, the majority of Muslims preferred to follow the motto of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, who said: "I do not omit anything of the things the Messenger of God has done, for I am afraid that if I should omit it, I could go astray."²³ This careful and loving imitation of the Prophet's example would be, for them, the true *din-i muhammadi*, as particularly the Sufis emphasized it.²⁴

Such an approach was on the one hand the basis for the loving veneration of Muhammad, who appears often as a kind of paternal figure (he himself is quoted as saying, "Verily I am like a father to you"),²⁵ a father or a deeply respected elder in the family to whom one would turn in full trust because one was absolutely certain that he knew the right answer to all questions, and the solution of all problems for those who belonged to him.²⁶ But it could also lead to an absolutely tradition-bound attitude, even in the minutest externals, as it is expressed by the great medieval theologian al-Ghazzali, who devotes to the Prophet the twentieth, that is, the central, chapter of his *Ihya' ulum ad-din* and clearly states:

Know that the key to happiness is to follow the *sunna* and to imitate the Messenger of God in all his coming and going, his movements and rest, in his way of eating, his attitude, his sleep and his talk. I do not mean this in regard to religious observance, for there is no reason to neglect the traditions which were concerned with this aspect. I rather mean all the problems of custom and usage, for only by following them unrestricted succession is possible. God has said: "Say: If you love God, follow me, and God will love you" (Sura 3:29), and He has said: "What the messenger has brought—accept it, and what he has prohibited—refrain from it" (Sura 59:7). That means, you have to sit while putting on trousers, and to stand when winding a turban, and to begin with the right foot when putting on shoes. . . .²⁷

And yet Ghazzali, "the scholar among the inhabitants of the world," was

accused by mystics like Maulana Rumi of lacking true love (as manifested in his younger brother Ahmad Chazali) and of not having found "the secret of the Muhammadan proximity."²⁸

The *imitatio Muhammadi* is, as Armand Abel has stated, an imitation of the Prophet's actions and activity, whereas the *imitatio Christi* is rather the imitation of Christ's suffering. But it was through this imitation of Muhammad's actions as transmitted through the *hadith* that Islamic life assumed a unique uniformity in social behavior, a fact that has always impressed visitors to all parts of the Muslim world. It is also visible, for instance, in the hagiography of Muslim saints.²⁹ For, as Frithjof Schuon says: "This 'Muhammadan' character of the virtues . . . explains the relatively impersonal style of the saints; there are no other virtues than those of Muhammad, so they can only be repeated in those who follow his example; it is through them that the Prophet lives in his community."³⁰ Even the introduction of a good *summa* is, according to one *hadith*, a laudable act, and the person who introduces it will be given the reward of someone who acts accordingly, as he who introduces a bad *summa* will be equally punished.³¹ The Muslim willing to devote himself completely to the imitation of the *nūr al-hudā*, the Light of Right Guidance, that is, the Prophet, may express his feelings in this prayer:

We ask Thee for that for which Thy servant and messenger Muhammad has asked Thee, we take refuge with Thee from that from which Thy servant and messenger has taken refuge with Thee.³²

THE SHAMĀ'IL AND DALĀ'IL LITERATURE

Veneration of the Prophet and the interest in even the smallest details of his behavior and his personal life grew in the same measure as the Muslims were distanced from him in time. They wanted to know ever more about his personality, his looks, and his words in order to be sure that they were following him correctly. The popular preachers enjoyed depicting the figure of the Prophet in wonderful colors, adding even the most insignificant details (thus, that he had only seventeen white hairs in his beard).³³ One sometimes sympathizes with more sober theologians who were not too happy when listening to these pious, well-meant exaggerations. But it was this very genre of literature, these treatises containing *qūt al-ʿashiqin*, the Nurture of the Lovers, as Makhdum Muhammad Hashim of Thatta called his collection of Prophetic traditions and legends in rhyme, that remained favorite with readers and listeners.³⁴ This *Qūt al-ʿashiqin*, written in the Sindhi language in the early eighteenth century, was one of the first Sindhi

books ever printed in Bombay (ca. 1868), and its narratives, developed out of simple *hadith*, enchanted and uplifted the masses and inspired the folk poets to elaborate them in ever more imaginative detail.

In early days, the forerunner of such collections was a genre called *dalā'il an-nubuwwa*, "proofs of Prophethood," complemented by that of the *shamā'il*, literary expositions of the Prophet's lofty qualities and outward beauty. Two of the earliest *dalā'il* and *shamā'il* works were composed by Abu Nu'aim al-Isfahani (d. 1037), mystic and historian, and by al-Baihaqi (d. 1066). Both are more or less biographies of the Prophet, studded with evidentiary miracles—those that happened before and after Muhammad's birth as well as before and after his call to prophethood, and those that pointed to his exalted status as the last Prophet. Both sources speak of his noble genealogy and his qualities and indulge in telling many of the miracles through which men and animals recognized him as God's special messenger. Such tales formed the bases for legends and poems in which popular views about Muhammad were to be reflected throughout the centuries.³⁵

Almost two hundred years before Baihaqi, the traditionist Abu 'Isa at-Tirmidhi (d. 892) compiled the first basic book about the *shamā'il al-Mustafā*, in which the Prophet's external form as well as his moral superiority was described in great detail.³⁶ Muhammad appears here as the model of moral perfection, and it is not surprising that Tirmidhi's collection was used as a source by that medieval author who composed a most extensive work about the greatness of the Prophet, Qadi Tyad. He was a stern Maliki theologian, noted enemy of the Sufis, and much-feared judge in Ceuta and Granada. His *Kitaḥ ash-shifā' fī urfī haḡiq al-Mustafā*, however, has been used by nonmystics and mystics alike. In fact, it is perhaps the most frequently used and commented-upon handbook in which the Prophet's life, his qualities, and his miracles are described in every detail. The *Shifā'* was so highly admired in medieval Islam that it soon acquired a sanctity of its own and was even used as a talisman,³⁷ protecting the house of its owner: "If it is found in a house, this house will not suffer any harm, and a boat in which it is, will not drown [*sic*]; when a sick person reads it or it is recited for him, God will restore his health."³⁸ For surely a book that is exclusively devoted to the admiring description of the noble Prophet partakes of the Prophet's *baraka*. Its very name, *shifā'*, "cure, healing," points to its healing power.

From Qadi Tyad's book an even more extensive work about the same subject was derived, the *Al-mawāhib al-laduniyya* of Qastallani (d. 1517), and the literature in this area grew incessantly. Thus the last great collector of *dalā'il*, *shamā'il*, and poems in honor of the Prophet, the indefatigable

Yusuf an-Nabhani (early twentieth century), mentions in one place the twenty-fifth (!) volume of a *shamā'ī* work that he had used for his compilation.³⁹

THE PROPHET'S PHYSICAL BEAUTY

Descriptions of the physical beauty of the Prophet are found scattered in early traditions. Among them, the story of Umm Ma'bad can serve as a proof for the Prophet's impressive presence (see chapter 4 below). For as the Prophet was the most beautiful of mankind in character, so he was the most handsome in his looks. The oldest descriptions in Tirmidhi's *Kuṭūb shamā'ī al-Mustafā* (the one quoted here is by Ali) show him like this:

Muhammad was middle-sized, did not have lank or crisp hair, was not fat, had a white circular face, wide black eyes, and long eyelashes. When he walked, he walked as though he went down a declivity. He had the "seal of prophecy" between his shoulder blades. . . . He was bulky. His face shone like the moon in the night of full moon. He was taller than middling stature but shorter than conspicuous tallness. He had thick, curly hair. The plaits of his hair were parted. His hair reached beyond the lobe of his ear. His complexion was *azhar* [bright, luminous]. Muhammad had a wide forehead and fine, long, arched eyebrows which did not meet. Between his eyebrows there was a vein which distended when he was angry. The upper part of his nose was hooked; he was thick-bearded, had smooth cheeks, a strong mouth, and his teeth were set apart. He had thin hair on his chest. His neck was like the neck of an ivory statue, with the purity of silver. Muhammad was proportionate, stout, firm-gripped, even of belly and chest, broad-chested and broad-shouldered.⁴⁰

A special mark of the Prophet was the "seal of prophethood," which documented his position as the final herald of the Divine revelation (see Sura 33:40). The seal is described by all sources unanimously as a fleshy protuberance or kind of mole the size of a pigeon's egg, of blackish color with some yellow, which was located between his shoulders. It is said that the Christian monk Bahirā' in Syria recognized young Muhammad by this very mark as the promised last prophet, the Paraclete of the Johannine gospel.

The Prophet's hands are described as cool and fragrant, "cooler than ice and softer than silk," and in all traditions the fragrance that exuded from him is duly emphasized. Some of the women close to him allegedly collected his perspiration to use as perfume.⁴¹

Out of the belief in the Prophet's lovely fragrance a delightful legend

developed: during his heavenly journey, when he was on his way into the Divine presence, some drops of his sweat fell on the ground, and from them, the first fragrant rose appeared. Thus the believer can still experience the Prophet's scent from the fragrance of the rose, as Rumi sings in his great poem in honor of the blessed mystical rose:

Root and branch of the roses is
the lovely sweat of Mustafa,
And by his power the rose's crescent
grows now into a full moon.⁴²

Pasho popular poetry, on the other hand, mentions that the rose's petals blushed from shame when the radiantly beautiful Messenger entered the garden, so that the flower's color is derived from his beauty.⁴³ In later times narratives of this kind have led to extravagant statements that, for instance, the Prophet was so pure and fragrant that flies did not sit on him, or that thanks to his pure, luminous nature he did not cast a shadow. And 'Ā'isha was told that "the earth swallows up the excrements of the prophets so that they are not seen."⁴⁴

Muhammad becomes the archetype of all human beauty because the noblest spiritual qualities are also manifested in him somatically. He is, as a contemporary Urdu poet says,

Beauty from head to toe, Love embodied.⁴⁵

Similarly, a modern Arabic source mentions that the perfection of faith consists in the conviction that "God has created Muhammad's body in such unsurpassable beauty as had neither before him nor after him been seen in any human being. If the whole beauty of the Prophet were unveiled before our eyes, they could not bear its splendor."⁴⁶ Poets in all Islamic languages have expressed this conviction, inventing ever new images to express the praise for this marvelous beauty.

Your light was in Joseph's beauty, o Light of God;
It healed Jacob's blind eye so that it became well,

sings the Urdu poet Dagh at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ He takes up with these words a favorite topic of earlier writers: not only is the wisdom of all prophets contained in Muhammad but also their beauty. And while Yusuf (Joseph) is generally accepted as the paragon of human beauty, a *hadith* makes Muhammad say: "Yusuf was beautiful but I am more handsome (*amlah*)."⁴⁸ Perhaps one should also consider the famous *hadith* "Verily God is beautiful and loves beauty,"⁴⁹ which has inspired so many artists, in connection with the beauty of the Prophet, the beloved of God.

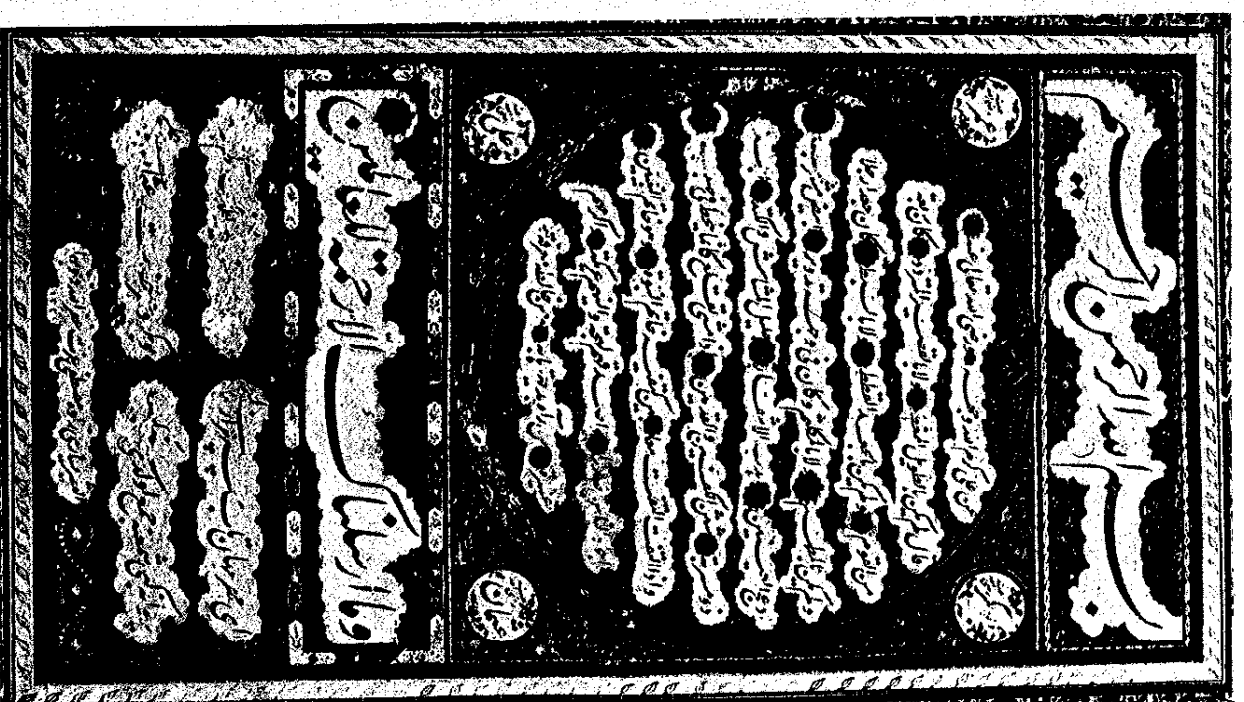
It is natural that in a religion that prohibits the representation of living

beings, particularly of saintly persons, no picture of the Prophet could be legitimately produced. (One proof of the totally wrong ideas of medieval Christians is that, confusing Islam with the paganism of antiquity, they spoke in their poetry and *chansons de geste* of "the golden images, or statues, of Mahomet.")⁵⁰ To be sure, we find representations of the Prophet in quite a number of miniature paintings in the Turkish, Persian, and even Indian traditions. In later times his face is usually veiled, although early fourteenth-century paintings show him unveiled as well, a practice that today is vehemently attacked as heresy by Muslim fundamentalists and even by large parts of the intelligentsia.⁵¹ But the Muslims found another way to make him present before their eyes: the so-called *hiyya*.

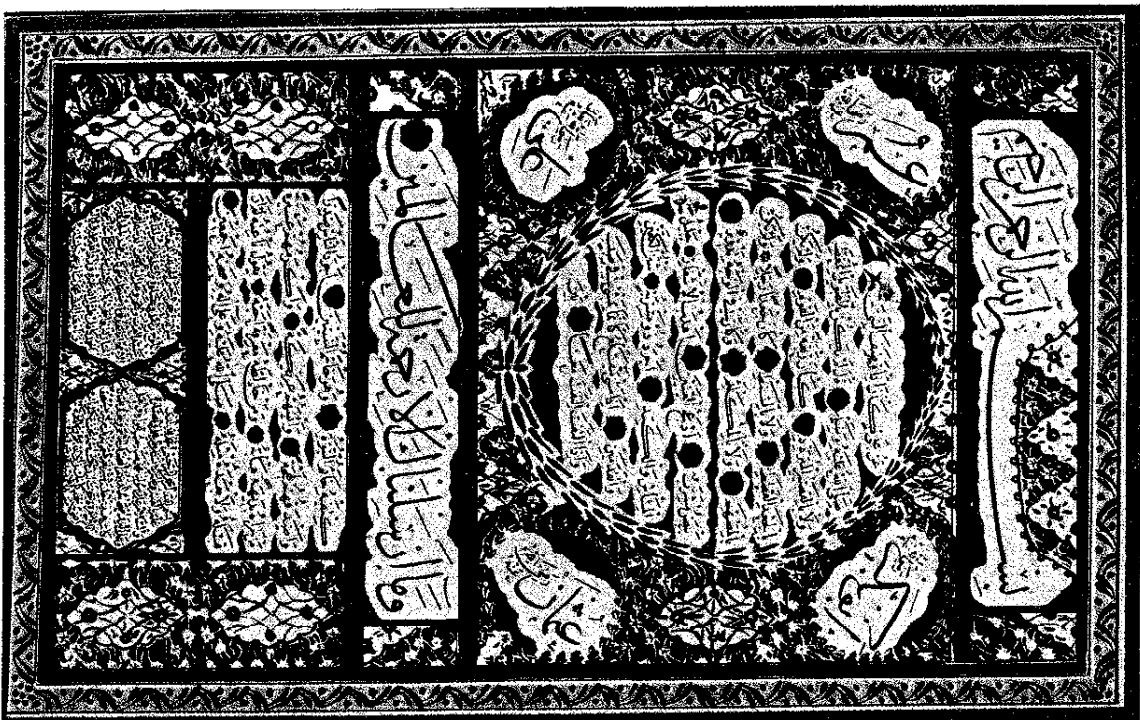
Ṭirmidhi, in the late ninth century, quotes a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet promises: "For him who sees my *hiyya* after my death it is as if he had seen me myself, and he who sees it, longing for me, for him God will make Hellfire prohibited, and he will not be resurrected naked at Doomsday." The *hiyya* (literally, "ornament") consists of short descriptions of the Prophet's external and internal qualities, drawn from early Arabic sources. It is told that the Abbasid caliph Harun ar-Rashid bought such a description from a wandering dervish, rewarding him lavishly: the following night he was honored by a vision of the Prophet, who promised him eternal blessings.⁵² According to other popular traditions, the Prophet himself advised his "four friends," the first four caliphs, before his death to remember his *shamā'il-nāma*,⁵³ that is, the description of his looks and qualities. One who stitches the *hiyya* in his shroud will be accompanied on his last way by a thousand angels who will recite the funeral prayer for him and ask forgiveness on his behalf until Doomsday.⁵⁴

Out of the simple, sonorous Arabic descriptions of Muhammad's qualities more artistic forms developed. It seems that veneration of the *hiyya* was especially widespread in Ottoman Turkey. There the calligraphers developed a peculiar style of writing it during the sixteenth century, which was perfected by Ḥafīz Osman, the master calligrapher of the late seventeenth century. These *hiyya*, often imitated, are round, and beneath the circular frame that contains the description of the Prophet, the line "Mercy for the worlds" is written in large letters.⁵⁵ Even today, the *hiyya* is usually printed according to the model set by Ḥafīz Osman and his disciples, and is kept in homes as a picture of the Virgin might be in a Catholic home, to convey blessings upon the inhabitants. To execute a *hiyya* in fine calligraphy was considered a work of great merit: one Turkish woman, widowed and childless, said she regarded the nine she had completed during her lifetime as a substitute for nine children, hoping that they would intercede for her at Doomsday.⁵⁶

Poets also transformed the short, pithy Arabic sentences describing the



The *hiyya* of the Prophet, in nasta'liq script
by the Turkish calligrapher Yesarizade Mustafa Tazat, 1830



The *hilya* of the Prophet, in traditional Turkish naksh calligraphy by Ahmet Kamil Efendi, for his graduation as calligrapher, 1882

Prophet into long-winded verse.⁵⁷ The Turkish *Hilya* by Khagani, a poet of the late sixteenth century, is especially worthy of mention. The poet tells extensively the blessings contained in the *hilya*: not only will its owner be safe from punishment in the Otherworld, but Satan will not enter his house; his recompense will be equal to the manumission of a slave and a pilgrimage to Mecca, "and the citadel of his body will not be impaired and he will not be afflicted by maladies."⁵⁸ Then the poet ingeniously describes the Prophet and his beauty. His white complexion is explained in images like this:

He with a heart like the ocean was an incomparable pearl—
No wonder that [his color] was inclined toward white!⁵⁹

His harmoniously arched eyebrows serve the whole world as *qibla*, direction of prayer, for they resemble a beautifully arched prayer-niche; but even more, they remind the spectator of the secret of *qibla gausain*, "two bows' length" (Sura 53:9), that is, the mystery of Muhammad's close presence before God during his heavenly journey.⁶⁰ His nose, again, was "as if it were the bud of a white rose."

Khagani also devotes long descriptions to the clothing of the Prophet, for not only his figure and his face were topics for the traditionists and poets but also his garments, which the believer should strive to imitate. He preferred white or green clothing, but owned, according to classical description, only one piece of each kind. Khagani then extends his verse to the various colors in which the Prophet appeared, each of them fitting for one of his aspects:

In white, he looked like a pearl, in red, like a rose.

Indeed, for him "who is beautiful like the rose" the Pathan folksinger is willing to sacrifice his life.⁶¹ On the whole, however, the color red is rarely connected with the Prophet.

It is interesting to note that a modern Egyptian narrative ballad deals with an incident concerning the Prophet's shirt. Since he had no cash to help a starving beggar, Muhammad gave him his only shirt, which was then auctioned until a Jew bought it for an enormous sum; the Jew's blindness was cured by this very shirt and he, of course, embraced Islam. The motif of Joseph's fragrant shirt, which healed his father's blindness, is here applied to the Prophet.⁶² The same idea has also been expressed in Sindhi popular verse.⁶³

The precious relic of the *khirqa-i sharf*, or *burda*, the noble coat of the Prophet,⁶⁴ is found in several mosques, among them one in Khuldabad in the northern Deccan, and in the treasury of the Topkapu Seray in Istanbul. Another *khirqa-i sharf*, preserved in Qandahar, Afghanistan, in a building

that non-Muslims may not even approach, inspired Muhammad Iqbal in 1933 to compose a deeply felt, mystically tinged poem (see p. 243).⁶⁵

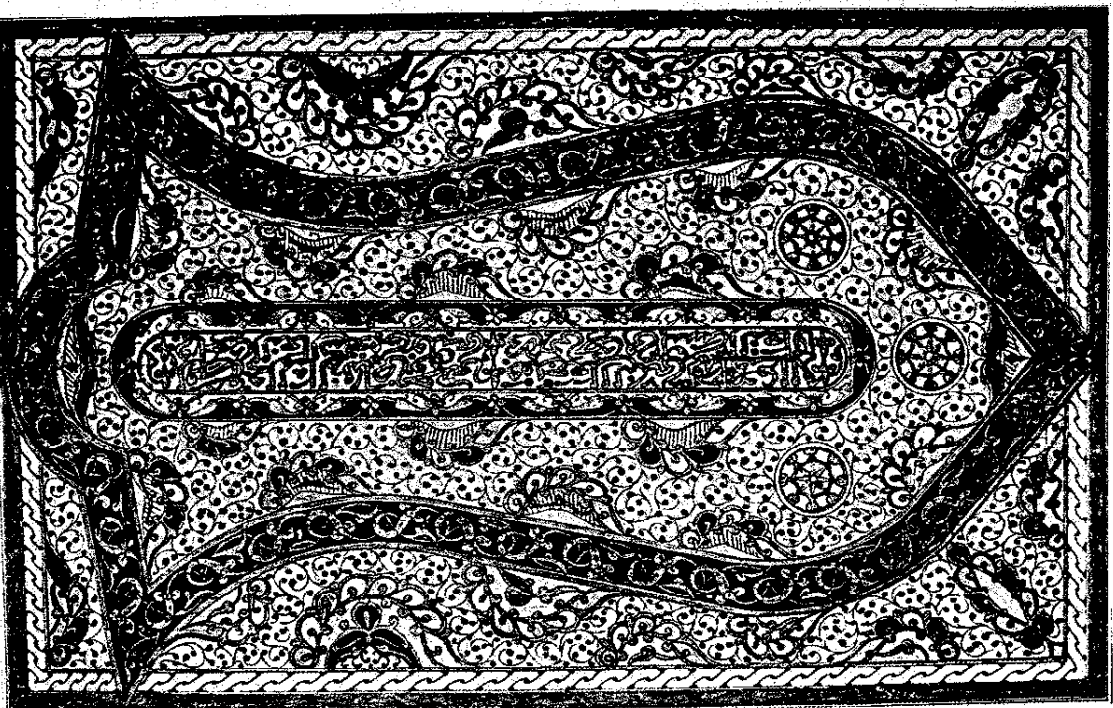
The Prophet wore a special kind of sandal, the two strings of which were drawn between the toes. These sandals, *na'i*, became likewise an amulet worthy of all admiration and veneration, for the Prophet had touched the Divine Throne with them during his heavenly journey, so that they became "the vertex of the crown of the Throne."⁶⁷ Popular poetry in the various Islamic languages has often included mention of this aspect of the sandals. The fifteenth-century Persian mystical poet Jami, for example, writes that all heavenly beings rubbed "the forehead of their intention" on Muhammad's "Throne-rubbing sandals."⁶⁸ He also claims that the heavenly tree Tuba had rubbed its head at the Prophet's sandals and thus reached highest honor,⁶⁹ and he repeatedly expresses the feeling that "the thread of the soul" is nothing but the string of Muhammad's sandals and that the cheek of the longing lover resembles the fine Ta'if leather of which these sandals were made: do the lover's cheeks not hope to be touched by the Prophet's feet and thus to obtain every conceivable bliss?⁷⁰

The relic itself was first mentioned in the thirteenth century in Damascus. But pictures of these sandals were apparently quite common in the later Middle Ages, especially in the western Islamic world, for around them a whole poetical genre developed. The poets, many of them from North Africa and Spain, described these sandals or expressed their longing for them. Thus an Andalusian poetess, Sâduna Umm Sa'd bint 'Ismâ al-Himyariyya (d. 1242), begins one of her poems with the words

I shall kiss the image if I do not find
A way to kiss the Prophet's sandal.
Perhaps the good fortune of kissing it
Will be granted to me in Paradise in the most radiant place,
And I rub my heart on it so that perhaps
The burning thirst which rages in it may be quenched.⁷¹

The North African historian al-Magari (d. 1644) devoted a voluminous book to the subject of the Prophet's sandals,⁷² its more than five hundred pages contain not only prose and poetical texts but also drawings of the sandals as they were used by people as a protective talisman, for "it protected one's house from fire, caravans from hostile attacks, ships from disaster at sea and property from loss." Around the turn of the present century, Yusuf an-Nabhani, the collector of eulogies for the Prophet, sang in one of his poems:

Verily I serve the image of the sandal of Mustafa
So that I may live in both worlds under its protection.⁷³



The sandal of the Prophet,
from the *Dhakhira of the Sharqawiya*
(Reprinted by permission of Dr. Mohammed Sielmann)

Popular songs in honor of the *ni'āl sharīf*, the "noble sandals," have persisted down to the present, according to an Iraqi friend who remembers such songs from her childhood in Baghdad.

In addition to the sandals, another relic that became widely accepted was the impression of the Prophet's foot.⁷⁴ According to legend, Muhammad's foot left a trace on the rock in Jerusalem where he alighted during his night journey before ascending into the Divine Presence. The Dome of the Rock was built to honor and protect the site, which is greatly revered. At various times and places other large stones have been found with an impression in them that came to be regarded as the trace of the Prophet's foot, and hence worthy of veneration. When visiting such a footprint one touches the stone and then passes one's hand over the upper part of one's body, beginning with the head, in order to obtain some of the stone's *baraka*. That this custom goes back to a rather early period is shown by the fact that in the year 1304, the reformist theologian Ibn Taimiyya, who tried to remove such a stone in Damascus to stop the superstitious practices connected with it, was driven away by the enraged masses and even accused of impiety.⁷⁵ One also poured water over such *qadam rasūl* stones, which was then used for its acquired *baraka*.

From the Middle Ages onward such stones were brought to India by credulous pilgrims. One of the first known instances is connected with the name of the great Suhrawardi saint Maḥdum Jahānyan from Uccā, who deposited such a *qadam rasūl* in Delhi.⁷⁶ It must have been this very *qadam sharīf*, "the noble footprint," that Sultan Feroz Tughluq placed on his son's tomb. As late as the early nineteenth century "an annual fair [was] held on the 12th Rabi' al-awwal (that is, the Prophet's birthday)" at that site; one observer ca. 1840 reported that "thousands of *madang faqirs* assemble and perform ecstasies in front of its gate."⁷⁷ Soon a number of places between Narayanganj (Bangladesh), Gaur (West Bengal), and Gujarat boasted of owning such a relic. (Shia sanctuaries, incidentally, sometimes preserve a footprint of 'Alī in stone, for instance at Maulāli near Hyderabad/Deccan.)

The veneration for the *qadam rasūl* was so deeply rooted that even the Mughul emperor Akbar waited upon such a stone that one of his grandees had brought back from his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1589. Because this happened after the ruler had promulgated the *dhm-i ilāhī*, his eclectic religious order, the critical chronicler Badoni notes the event with great amazement: how was such respect for the Prophet's footprint compatible with the ruler's otherwise so "un-Islamic" attitude?⁷⁸

Late Urdu poets loved to sing of the glory of the Prophet's footprint, for, as they felt,

The trace of his foot has the rank of Mount Sinai,⁷⁹

that is, it is the place where the Divine Light becomes visible, and therefore,

Muṣṭafā's footprint is the place where the bearers of the Divine Throne prostrate themselves.⁸⁰

Even more than the *qadam rasūl*, hairs from the Prophet's beard became a most valued relic. The beauty of his beard was always emphasized,⁸¹ and as hair and beard are considered to be endowed with special power, the oath "by the Prophet's beard" was considered extremely powerful. The Prophet is said to have given hairs to his faithful followers, and understandably, the pious strove to acquire at least some of them. Khalid ibn al-Walid, the victorious hero of the battle of Yarmuk, kept some of the Prophet's hairs in his headgear and claimed, as tradition has it, "Whosoever does so, will be victorious."⁸² Over the centuries, a number of sacred places in Islamic countries have been fortunate enough to possess such a relic,⁸³ which is usually preserved in a small precious vessel. Veneration remains strong even today: only recently the beautiful Hazrat-bal Mosque in Srinagar was built in the place of another, older mosque in order to give "the most venerable hair" (*ḥazīrat bād*) a worthy abode. Non-Muslims are very rarely allowed to see the relic; on one occasion the Alaettin Mosque in Konya (Anatolia) did permit my mother and me to view the sacred hair, preserved in a very fine glass bottle. Usually it is well guarded, to be exhibited on certain festive days; in Rohri, Pakistan, for instance, the jewel-studded vessel is displayed once each year, in March. Sometimes only men, not women, are admitted into the presence of such a valuable relic, as we discovered in the Athar Mahal in Bijapur (Deccan) in 1979 and 1980. And the theft—or alleged theft—of such a hair can still cause extensive rioting, as was the case some years ago in Kashmir.

Besides the veneration of relics connected with the Prophet's bodily presence, the Muslims carefully studied the way in which he cared for his body, because in this respect too, he was taken as the paradigm of behavior. According to 'Ā'isha, he never woke up without using the *miṣwāk*, a piece of twig that serves as a toothbrush. Therefore the *miṣwāk* plays an important role in Muslim life—so much so that an Indian mystical writer of the eighteenth century, Nasir Muhammad 'Āndalīb, praised the use of the toothbrush as a special sign of Divine grace by which the Muslims are distinguished from all other peoples.⁸⁴ Whether the Prophet used antimony to blacken his eyes or not, whether or not he daubed his hair and beard with henna⁸⁵—all manner of details constituted problems whose appropriate solution was critically important to generations of pious Muslims who had never seen him in the flesh but wanted to remain faithful to his *sunna* even in the externals.

And there are other issues as well: most importantly, that the Prophet began every work with the right hand (or the right foot), and used exclusively the right hand for eating. Thus the first three fingers of this hand are to be employed when obtaining food; the left hand should be used only for the purification after urinating and defecation. Even today a traditional Muslim would never touch food with the left hand; when dining with fork and knife (the use of which was violently debated in pious circles in the late nineteenth century), many prefer to take the fork in the right, the knife in the left hand.

Even the food that the Prophet liked and disliked is carefully recorded. Although the sources usually stress his modesty, his prolonged periods of fasting, and, at times, his starving, they still agree that he liked certain foodstuffs better than others, for instance the foreleg of lamb, milk, and dates. Sweets, particularly honey, were among his favorites. Such details were taken over in the descriptive poetry written about him. Composed at the turn of the present century, Nabhan's *Hamziyya*, a biographical poem of many hundred verses, sings not only of the spiritual greatness of the Prophet and of his miracles, but also tells how

He liked all permitted food
And he particularly loved *halwā*.
He liked cream and dates very much, and other things
That he liked were melon and squash . . . ⁸⁶

Anas ibn Malik, who served the Prophet for many years and thus became acquainted with his habits, is reported to have said: "Once I saw the Messenger of God fetch pieces of squash (*kūsa*) from the kettle, and from that day I have always loved squash."⁸⁷ A famous example of the tradition-bound attitude of pious Muslims is connected with Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who in 1850, when he was in his early thirties, discussed with Azurda, the Mufti of Delhi, the permissibility of eating mangoes and ended the conversation with the emphatic statement: "By God, who holds my life in His hands! If a person refrains from eating mangoes for the sole motive that the Prophet did not eat them—the angels will come to his deathbed to kiss his feet."⁸⁸ To eat this favorite fruit of Indian Muslims was thus for him certainly "doubtful"; it was "better to leave it." Sayyid Ahmad, who was to become the reformer of Indian Islam, here followed exactly the attitude manifested by the great mystic Bayezid Bistami a thousand years before him: according to legend, this saint did not eat melons for sixty years, because he did not know how the Prophet cut that fruit.⁸⁹

While the favorite foods of the Prophet have been lovingly adopted by the Muslims, they are not bound to follow his aversion to garlic and onion—although they should avoid consuming those vegetables before

going to the mosque.⁹⁰ The Prophet disliked their smell and thought that the archangel Gabriel might be offended by it when descending to bring him another revelation.

The Prophet's attitude toward medicine should also be mentioned briefly. He said: "God did not send any illness unless he sends a medicine for it."⁹¹ The water with which he had washed himself was often reused by the pious as a medicine because of its *baraka*—a custom well known in the history of religions. Likewise, and for the same reason, his saliva could serve for healing purposes, and it is often told that he cured 'Ali's sore eyes by putting some of his saliva on them.⁹² It seems that he attributed special importance to cupping and also recommended the use of purgatives, for he apparently considered the stomach to be an important source of many ailments; from his sketchy remarks in this field a special science developed, called *at-tibb an-nabawī*, "Prophetic medicine," which is still practiced even today in some places. His own success in healing—of which some popular stories give examples—was part of the *baraka* that accompanies the saintly person and that enables him sometimes to perform healing miracles by merely touching a person or breathing upon him.⁹³ Many Muslims have also experienced that Muhammad's apparition in a dream cured them, and it is believed that prayers "by the honor of the Messenger of God" will definitely help an ailing person to get well soon.

Muhammad is often called *ṭabīb*, "physician," for the prophets are, as Ghazzali says, "the physicians of the soul," who can recognize the ailments of the human heart and can heal them by their teaching and preaching. Thus the Prophet appears frequently—especially in poetry—as the *ṭabīb* and *ḥabīb*, physician and beloved friend, and it is under this twofold aspect that his community trusts in him and loves him. As Maulana Rumi sings in a lovely little Arabic poem:

Hādhā ḥabībī, hādhā ṭabībī, hādhā aṭībī, hādhā dawātī . . .
This is my friend, this is my physician, this is my tutor, this is my remedy . . . ⁹⁴

THE PROPHET'S SPIRITUAL BEAUTY

Muhammad is considered, as we have already mentioned, the paragon of physical beauty. His face was, as later poets often claimed, "the Koran copy, *muṣṭaf*, of beauty," and the dark "down" on his cheeks the "text of the sent-down revelation."⁹⁵ But this external beauty was but a mirror of his interior beauty, for God had created him perfect in nature and moral qualities, *ḥalīqan wa ḥulīqan*. When 'Ā'isha, his favorite young wife, was once

asked about his character she simply stated: "His character was the Koran—he liked what the Koran liked, and grew angry when the Koran was angry."⁹⁶

The Western reader, raised in a centuries-old tradition of aversion to Muhammad, will probably be surprised to learn that in all reports the quality that is particularly emphasized in the Prophet is his humility and kindness. Qadi Iyad, one of the best representatives of the reverent admiration of the Prophet so typical of Muslim piety, writes:

God has elevated the dignity of His Prophet and granted him virtues, beautiful qualities and special prerogatives. He has praised his high dignity so overwhelmingly that neither tongue nor pen are sufficient [to describe him]. In His book He has clearly and openly demonstrated his high rank and praised him for his qualities of character and his noble habits. He asks His servants to attach themselves to him and to follow him obediently. It is God—great is His Majesty!—who grants honor and grace, who purifies and refines. He that lauds and praises and grants a perfect recompense . . . He places before our eyes his noble nature, perfected and sublime in every respect. He grants him perfect virtue, praiseworthy qualities, noble habits and numerous preferences. He supports his message with radiant miracles, clear proofs, and apparent signs.⁹⁷

All reports speak of Muhammad's friendly, kindly but serious attitude and point out that he did not often laugh. (One famous Prophetic tradition, frequently quoted by the early ascetics, says: "If you knew what I know you would cry much and laugh little.")⁹⁸ However, he is also said to have had a most winning smile that never failed to enchant his followers, and Chazzali even mentions his tendency to laugh.⁹⁹ His softspoken humor is palpable from some early Islamic stories, such as the following: "One day a little old woman came to him to ask whether old wretched women would also go to Paradise. 'No,' answered the Prophet, 'there are no old women in Paradise.' And then, looking at her grieved face, he continued with a smile: 'They will all be transformed in Paradise for there, there is only one youthful age for all!'"¹⁰⁰ And his practical wisdom in dealing with his companions is nicely revealed in his remark to Abu Huraira, who had the habit of visiting him too often: *zur ghubbān tazdid hubbān*, "Visit rarely, then you'll be loved more!"¹⁰¹

The sources praise Muhammad's concern for the weak, and his kindness is always highlighted: "He did not bet a servant, nor a maid servant, and none of his wives," says the tradition. Tirmidhi describes him as follows: "He was well acquainted with sorrow, much absorbed in thought, had little rest, was silent for long periods and did not talk without cause. He

began and finished his talk with the formula 'In the name of God.' His talk was pithy, neither too long nor too short, not coarse, but also not too playful or light. He honored each of God's signs of grace, even though it might be small, and never found blame in anything."¹⁰²

Practical advice to his people is not lacking either. When a Bedouin asked him whether, since he trusted in God and His protection, he could let his camel roam loose, the Prophet answered briefly: *Ta'īlāh wa lawakkal*, "First tether it, and then trust in God."¹⁰³ The importance of activity in this world, as contrasted to an unhealthy fatalism that leads in the long run to a lack of responsibility, is expressed best in the oft-repeated *ḥadīth*: "This world is the seedbed for the next world";¹⁰⁴ every action upon which man embarks here will bring its fruits—good or bad—in the next world, at the day of Resurrection. Furthermore, every faithful Muslim should be reminded to appropriate the Prophet's short prayer "Oh Lord, increase my knowledge!" The devout should likewise imitate his way of dealing with his contemporaries and behavior in society. Was he not even blamed in the Koran (Sura 80:1) for frowning when a blind visitor interrupted him in an important conversation?¹⁰⁵ This Divine blame led him to a well-balanced kindness toward everyone: "When someone came with a request he was not sent off before it had been granted or before he had at least received a friendly word. The Prophet's friendliness and largesse encompassed everyone; he was like a father for his companions."¹⁰⁶

To illustrate such brief remarks, long and touching legends easily grew up over the centuries. Among them is one told by Rumi in his *Mathnawī*: An infidel visited the Prophet and, as is the infidels' custom, "ate with seven stomachs." After stuffing himself overmuch he lay down in the guest room, where he soiled the linen, and leaving the room dirty, slipped out secretly before dawn. However, he had to return to seek an amulet that he had forgotten in his room, and found the Prophet washing the soiled linen with his own hands. Of course he immediately became a Muslim, put to shame by such humility and generosity.¹⁰⁷ Such stories cannot have been invented without any basis; they may go back to early historical nuclei, having been elaborated in later times to make the ideals of Muslim ascetic-mystical circles conform with the example of the Prophet.

Along these lines, Muhammad's poverty and the destitute situation of his family members form an essential theme of popular tradition. His bread, it is said, was made from unsifted barley, and some reports describe how he and his family, especially his beloved daughter Fatima, suffered from hunger many a night. In fact, the Prophet always fastened a stone on his stomach to suppress the feeling of hunger,¹⁰⁸ and the misery of Fatima has been told in heartrending stories (mainly in the Shiite tradition). It is even related that after the Prophet had returned from his most sublime experi-

ence, the heavenly journey, the next morning he had to borrow some barley from an unsympathetic Jewish merchant in order to assuage his hunger. Umar ibn al-Khattab, destined to become Muhammad's second successor, once wept when looking at the Prophet's miserable household, upon being asked the reason for his tears, he replied that he could not bear the idea that Khosroes and Caesar, the rulers of Iran and Byzantium, lived in luxury while the Prophet of God was near starvation in his poverty. "They have this world, and we the next one," answered the Prophet, consoling him. Had not God offered him the keys of all treasures on earth? Yet he had refused them because he wanted to stay with his Lord, "Who feeds me and gives me to drink."¹¹⁰ Did not God want to make him a king-prophet like David and Solomon, though he preferred to be a servant-prophet? "I eat as a slave eats, and sit as a slave sits, for I am a slave [of God]." His prayer, which became a favorite with mystics and ascetics, was: "Oh Lord, keep me hungry one day and satiated one day. When I am hungry I pray to you, and when I am full I sing your praise."¹¹¹ And the sufferings inflicted upon him by the unfeeling Meccans resulted in his remark that "those most afflicted are the prophets, then the saints, and then the others according to their position."¹¹²

It is told that someone came to the Prophet and said: "I love you, O Messenger of God!" To which he replied: "Be ready for poverty!"¹¹³ Hence love of the poor became a sign of love for the Prophet: to honor the poor and to associate with them means not only to follow his example but, in a certain sense, to honor him in them. The Prophet's admonition concerning the treatment of slaves—"Let them wear what you wear, and let them eat what you eat"—was quite popular in later centuries, as several anecdotes prove.¹¹⁴

In later times Muhammad's saying *faqri fakhrī*, "My poverty is my pride," became the motto of the mystical seekers.¹¹⁵ Poverty was now understood not merely as destitution but rather as a spiritual stage that consists in man's knowledge of his own lowliness and poverty before God, the One Who Has No Need (*al-ghani*); for it is said in the Koran: "He is the Rich, and you are the poor!" (Sura 35:16). Thus the Prophet became the model for the *mīl habentes, omnia possedentes* of Islam. Part of this mystical concept of poverty is gratitude. The words of Job, "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away—praised be the name of the Lord!" express the Muslims' ideal of acceptance. It was this kind of gratitude that the Prophet practiced, and his saying "I cannot account the praise due to Thee" has been central to mystical reflection upon gratitude and praise of God.¹¹⁶ Muhammad's lovingkindness extended over all beings. He was noted for his love of children, and used to greet them in the street and play with them. Later folk ballads tell in touching verses how his two grandsons Hasan and

Husain—often simply called al-Hasanain, the Two Hasans—climbed on "Gran' Dad Prophet's" back while he was performing his prayer,¹¹⁷ and he was not at all disturbed by the lively boys, who were "the earrings of the heavenly Throne."¹¹⁸ For the Prophet had been informed by Gabriel about their future sad fate: the angel had brought a green robe for Hasan and a red one for Husain to indicate that the former would die from poison, whereas his younger brother would be slain in battle.¹¹⁹ The Prophet therefore had a special attachment to these grandchildren, and it is told that when one of his companions saw him kiss Hasan, and remarked with disdain, "I have ten boys but have never kissed any of them," the Prophet thereupon replied: "He who does not show mercy will not receive mercy."¹²⁰

Muhammad was also known for his love of animals. He once promised Paradise to a sinful, evil woman who had saved a dog from death by fetching water for it. But he had a special liking for cats. Did he not cut the sleeve from his coat when he had to get up for prayer and yet did not want to disturb the cat that was sleeping on the sleeve? One of his cats even gave birth to kittens on his coat, and special blessings were extended to Abu Huraira's cat, who killed a snake that tried to cheat the Prophet and sting him despite the kindness he had shown it. Because he petted this cat's back, cats never fall on their backs; and because his five fingers left a mark on her forehead, every cat has some black stripes over her eyes.¹²¹ (One is reminded of the black lines on the petals of a fragrant yellow flower that blooms in spring near the Khyber Pass, called by the Pathans *paighāmbur gul*, "the Prophet's flower.")¹²² Remembering the Prophet's fondness for cats, one *hadīth* claims that "love of cats is part of faith."¹²³ Such traditions have led to the formation of many charming legends in the Muslim world, and the individual creatures that were promised Paradise (among them Abu Huraira's cat) have even become part of German literature since Goethe introduced them in his *West-Östlicher Divan* as *Begünstigte Tiere*, Preferred Animals.

One aspect of the Prophet's life has always puzzled, bothered, even shocked, non-Muslim students of Islam: his attitude to women. At the end of his life he was married to nine wives. Someone raised in the Christian tradition, with its ascetic ideal of the celibate Jesus and its stress on monogamy, will of course have difficulty acknowledging that a true prophet could have been married, nay, even polygamous. Indeed, one of the most frequently reiterated attacks against Muhammad from the early Middle Ages to this day has been the charge of lasciviousness and sexual vice. The Muslim, on the other hand, feels that the capacity of the Prophet to combine the worldly and the spiritual spheres is a special proof of his high rank. (The Koranic restriction of polygamy to four wives, who must be treated with absolutely equal justice according to specific scriptural orders, was in fact a

great improvement on pre-Islamic customs.) Islamic apologetics constantly emphasize that Muhammad married some of his wives in later years with the intention of giving a new home to the widows of fighters for the faith. Besides, the numerous wives and concubines of Solomon and David, the two kings of Israel who appear in the Koran as prophets and thus precursors of Muhammad, make the number of Muhammad's marriages after Khadija's death look quite modest. One often forgets that Muhammad was married, for the better part of his life, only to one wife, Khadija, who was considerably senior to him. Only in his last thirteen years did he contract several other marriages, and even so, as noted earlier, Khadija remained so much his ideal after her death that the young 'Aisha never ceased being jealous of her.

Muhammad set an example for his community in his treatment of his wives, who were by no means always united in harmonious love. "To marry is my *sunna*": this word was related from him in early times, and therefore Islam does not cultivate the ideal of celibacy. "There is no monkery in Islam," as another *hadith* has it. Certainly, some ascetics preferred celibacy, but even among them one finds saintly people who thanks to a vision of the Prophet in their dreams were finally animated to get married—suffice it to mention Ibn Khafī of Shiraz (d. 982) and Maulana Rumi's father, the noted theologian Bahā'uddin Walad (d. 1231).¹²⁴

Some of the most important traditions concerning Muhammad's private life are reported on the authority of 'Aisha, who was still a child playing with dolls when she became betrothed to her father's friend. It is 'Aisha who stresses the modesty and bashfulness, *hayā*, of the Prophet, a quality that the believer is expected to possess in large measure. 'Aisha is the authority of numerous *hadith*.¹²⁵ It was she who heard Muhammad say, "My eyes are asleep but my heart is awake,"¹²⁶ and thus learned that the Prophet was spiritually awake even during the times that he shared her bed and seemed to slumber, because he never lost the spiritual connection with his Lord. And sometimes he would tenderly call her: *Kalimūn yā Humayrā*, "Talk to me, you little reddish girl!"¹²⁷

Muhammad was human enough to recognize the weak spots in human beings, including women. In Goethe's *West-Östlicher Divan* we find a poetical transformation of the *hadith* according to which God "has created woman from a crooked rib; if her husband wants to use her let him use her as crooked because if he tries to straighten her she will break, and her breaking is divorce."¹²⁸ That does not sound like the equal rights of women's liberation, in the modern sense, but it was a great step forward from a social system in which newborn daughters had sometimes been buried alive because the parents were afraid that they would be unable to feed and rear them.

Naturally, Muslim exegetes have considered the problem of the Prophet's many marriages. Although they admit that in general women are able to distract men and divert them from God and from their preoccupation with spiritual goals, they are convinced the case is different with the Prophet: "His wives have never diverted him from God, rather, it was an increase in his piety that he kept them chaste and made them participate in his merits and his guidance. Although marriage is, for others, an affair of this world he rather sought the other world with his marriages."¹²⁹ This statement, by a medieval theologian, is echoed by a writer in the twentieth century: "The multiple marriages of the Prophet, 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."¹³⁰

In this connection one should not forget the high veneration shown by the Prophet to mothers. It is told that "when the Prophet was informed once that the monk Jurajj did not care for his mother, who wanted to see him, Muhammad said: 'If Jurajj were a learned, knowing monk he would have known that it is part of the service of God to answer one's mother's call.'"¹³¹ Tradition also ascribed to him the beautiful saying "Paradise lies beneath the feet of the mothers."¹³²

One has to beware of deriving later developments in Islamic societies, such as purdah or the veiling of women, from Muhammad's own example. He ordered only certain restrictions for his own wives, "the mothers of the faithful"; in general the Koran speaks merely of a required decent covering for women, and tradition calls for the covering of the head, not the face. The example of 'Aisha shows that women in early Islamic days participated actively in social life and communal affairs. In advanced age, long after the Prophet's death, she herself even went out into the battlefield.

As much as the Islamic ascetics derogated women as dangerous, deceptive, and unintelligent creatures,¹³³ they could not completely blacken the feminine image, for the Koran repeatedly speaks of the pious and faithful men and women, *al-mu'minūn wa'l-mu'mināt*, and of the Muslim women, *al-muslimāt*, who have the same religious duties as men and will receive equal recompense for their performance. The Prophet's love for his wives and his daughters, especially Fatima, itself excluded any completely negative judgment. Indeed one of the most frequently repeated sayings of Muhammad states: "God has made dear to me from your world women and fragrance, and the joy of my eyes is in prayer." The great medieval mystical theologian Ibn 'Arabi made this saying the center of an extended meditation designed to evoke sublime thoughts about the mysteries of the Prophet of Islam.¹³⁴ Astonishing as it sounds to a non-Muslim, this *hadith* allows us a

Another aspect of the Prophet's biography that may appear repellent to Western tastes and is correspondingly difficult to assess correctly is his blending of religion and politics, of *din wa dawla*. The normal pattern according to which the non-Muslim judges Muhammad, namely that he was "prophet and statesman," usually implies that while he began as a sincere religious seeker, after his migration to Medina he became an unscrupulous politician and the cunning leader of a fast-growing armed community. The Muslim, understandably, sees this development from a completely different angle: the message of Christ, with its emphasis on otherworldliness and withdrawal, seems incomplete and, despite its admirable traits, defective; surely a successful prophet should also use worldly means to propagate the message that God entrusted to him. What seems to the non-Muslim a contradiction, that is, Muhammad's role as prophet *and* statesman, is according to the Muslim's conviction the very proof of Muhammad's unique role as God's messenger, evidencing his greatness and the truth of his message. How could it happen that God, who sent him, should not grant him ultimate success and inspire him to guide his community well?

Even in early times the proof of the truth of Muhammad's message was derived from the success of Islam. This argument has been used even more pointedly in modern times. If a Western observer, brought up in the liberal tradition of post-Enlightenment thought, claims that religion and politics (in the widest sense of the word) should be separated and that religion is a personal, interiorized, and exclusively private affair, a matter of the heart alone, the traditional Muslim will explain to him that, rather, religion and state belong together like the two sides of a coin. If Muhammad—as it

The Prophet embodies to an eminent degree this perfection of contemplative virtue. If one thinks of the Buddha as sitting in a state of contemplation under the Bo-tree, the Prophet can be imagined as a rider sitting on a steed with the sword of justice and discrimination in his hand and galloping at full speed, yet ready to come to an immediate halt before the mountain of Truth. . . . His rest and repose was in the heart of the holy war 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.¹³⁶

It is in this deeper sense of *jihad* that the Prophet declared, in a famous *ḥadīth*, that “the greatest *jihad* is that against the *nafs*, the base instincts,”¹³⁷ those instincts and evil qualities that should be subdued and transformed into something positive. Muhammad thus embodies the quality that has been termed (by Nathan Söderblom) the “Prophetic No,” the

distinctive feature of prophetic religiosity, as contrasted with the all-inclusive "mystical No."¹³⁸

Differences in the interpretation of the Prophet's sociopolitical activities can easily arise among the Muslims. The material at our disposal is many-sided and often contradictory, and the very history of early Islam poses numerous problems to the faithful as to how to implement the Prophet's ideals. Herein lies one reason for the difficulties that modern nations face when they attempt to create a truly "Islamic" state based on the teachings of the Koran and the Prophetic *sunna*.

One should not forget that some aspects of the Prophet's political career have provided the Muslims with a special terminology. His Hegira, for example, became the model of the *hijra* of pious men and women who left their countries in search of a home under Islamic rule. One such *hijra* occurred after the extension of British rule in India, and those who left India for Pakistan in the wake of partition are called, like the Prophet's Companions who settled with him in Medina, the *muhājirūn*, a word that gives their emigration a distinctly religious flavor.

In war and peace, at home and in the world, in the religious sphere as in every phase of working and acting, the Prophet is the ideal model of moral perfection. Whatever he did remains exemplary for his followers. Thus his prayers have become formulas that the Muslims, hoping for Divine response, repeat constantly. Koranic sentences of which he was particularly fond are also very dear to the Muslims, who try to use them in the same manner as did the Prophet. For instance, when going to bed, one should remember what Aisha told: "When [the Prophet] went to bed he would put his two hands together and recite *al-khilāṣ* (Sura 112) and the *mū'awwiz-dhātān* (Suras 113-14), then blow into his hands and pass them over as much of his body as he could reach, beginning with his head and face and the nearer parts. And this he would do three times. To copy him in this is approved."¹³⁹ This *ḥadīth* is only one instance of many model prayer usages of the Prophet. Every standard work of Islamic religious education contains chapters with numerous useful formulas and prayers, first used by the Prophet, that are still very much alive in the community of the faithful.

In these prayers, the Messenger's humility and trust in God is especially evident. He always appears aware of his own need for forgiveness: "I ask forgiveness from God seventy [sometimes, one hundred] times a day."¹⁴⁰ Even though such an expression seems to contradict the long-standing doctrine of his prophetic *isīmā*, that is, freedom from sins and defects, it is usually interpreted as his effort, whatever his own excellence, to provide an example for his sinful community so that they might pray in awareness of their human weakness. Here his role as teacher of his followers comes to the

fore. He is, after all, quoted as saying: "I have come to perfect the noble habits."

The ethical norms that are handed down from him breathe the same spirit as those taught by all great religious leaders. Asked "What is virtue?" he answered: "Ask your heart for a *farwā* [legal decision]. Virtue is when the soul feels peace and the heart feels peace, and sin is what creates restlessness in the soul and rumbles in the bosom."¹⁴¹ And when asked "What is the best Islam?" he replied: "The best Islam is that you feed the hungry and spread peace among people you know and those you do not know."

The imitation of the noble actions and thoughts that Muhammad, the "beautiful model," had taught his community by his personal example was meant to form each and every Muslim, as it were, into a likeness of the Messenger. This is so that each, like him, should give witness of God's unity through his or her whole being and existence. Therefore, as it is said in the *Dalā'il al-khairiyya*, the pious Muslim should pray: "I ask Thee, O our Lord, to employ us in his [Muhammad's] usages, to cause us to die in his community, to number us in his band, under his banner, and to make us his companions, to supply us from his reservoir, to give us to drink from his cup, and to give us the boon of his love."¹⁴²

It is this ideal of the *imitatio Muhammadi* that has provided Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia with such a uniformity of action: wherever one may be, one knows how to behave when entering a house, which formulas of greeting to employ, what to avoid in good company, how to eat, and how to travel. For centuries Muslim children have been brought up in these ways, and only recently has this traditional world broken down under the onslaught of the modern technological culture. Awareness of the danger that now confronts Islamic tradition has certainly contributed to the sudden growth of Muslim fundamentalism that came as such a surprise to the unprepared Western world.

But one must keep one thing in mind: it would be unthinkable that such a tradition could have developed if Muhammad had not been blessed by an unusual charisma. As Johann Fück aptly says, "Still today we see in true Muslim piety a reflection of that *Gotteserlebnis* [experience of the divine] which forced—1,300 years ago—Muhammad son of 'Abdallah to come forward and to preach of God and the Last Judgment."¹⁴³ And we certainly agree with Tor Andrae, who in 1917 wrote in his study of the role of the Prophet in Muslim doctrine and piety: "We have all reason to believe that Muhammad indeed knew the art of winning hearts to a rare degree."¹⁴⁴