

PROPHETHOOD

by
Dr. Jamal A. Badawi

Edited by
Anthony Green



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For the Publication and Distribution of
Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore
(MCAS)

ISBN: 978-981-11-2314-6

First edition published in 2001.

Reprinted in 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011 and 2013.

This pocket-sized version was first published in 2016.

Reprinted in 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2024.

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Prophethood is one of the Free Publications of MCAS.

Based on and includes materials from

Dr Jamal A. Badawi's lectures and research, circa 1980-2000.

Edited by Anthony Green for Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore
(2016)

Cover design by Muhammad Zafir Bin Shamsulbahri

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PREFACE

This content for this small book is taken from a series of talks delivered by Dr Jamal A. Badawi at Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore (MCAS) some years ago. Originally published as direct transcripts of the 'Question and Answer' format of the talks, the books have been edited by permission of Dr Jamal Badawi to provide what we hope is a more readable flow of text.

This is the second book in a series of three. The first book in the series is on Monotheism, and the third is on Muslim Belief.

One small point to note: in the title 'Monotheism' it was made clear that 'Allah' is the proper name of the One God. There can be no plural form of 'Allah.' In that sense the English word 'God' is not the same. Nevertheless, we recognise that readers may pick up these books in any order and that people coming to Islam will likely be more familiar with the word 'God.' For that reason alone the word 'God' is used extensively in this book.

THE PROPHETS

The relationship between prophets and the concept of monotheism

In the first book in this series our focus was on the creed in Islam and we said that the creed for Muslims is that:

There is no deity but Allah or God, and Muhammad is but His Messenger.

That first book dealt with the first half of the creed that is the concept of monotheism, the Oneness of God, and our perception of Him. In it we talked about the affirmative side or the divine attributes and how that affects our lives.

It's time now to take the second half of the creed, "Muhammad is His Messenger," as our focus; that is to say after believing in

God (in Allah), it follows also that you have to believe in the prophets who communicated that message from God, so in a sense it is the second half of the Muslim creed.

You notice here that we say that the second half starting with “Muhammad is His Messenger” summarizes the whole concept of Prophethood although it mentions only the name of one prophet – Prophet Muhammad.

Any puzzlement over this is quite simple to explain as Muhammad himself recognized all previous prophets who came before him. In fact, not only Muhammad but the Qur’an itself (the word of Allah) asserts and clarifies that all prophets sent from Adam to Muhammad were sent by Allah. So, by believing in Muhammad as the last messenger, it follows that Muslims also must believe in all prophets throughout history.

The second way that we can say that this book is also relevant to the previous book is that one thing that we emphasized in the discussion on the Oneness of God is this whole notion of His exclusive Lordship.

The fact is that He has infinite knowledge and wisdom and if this is true then there must be some purpose behind creation. That means there must also be some purpose behind our presence here as humans on this planet. If this is the case, then as humans we need to know what our roles should be.

What kind of guidance do we need to conduct our lives in accordance with His will? The only source of authentic information about such a universal question would be the revelation of God’s own messages and that can only take place through Prophethood, by the prophets or apostles of God.

Some people may say: “Okay, granted that we need guidance and granted that we need that as a path to follow. But why should we reach for prophets? Why do we need Prophethood to

give us that guidance? Why don't we just rely on our own brains, on science, and the scientific method to achieve guidance?"

There are four basic reasons why science cannot provide answers to this question. We're not belittling science because both science and revelation have their importance. When we talk about science, we know that science describes certain facts or phenomena that we call scientific laws. These laws are used to help us predict things that may occur in the future.

However, the kind of description that science provides for us depends after all on individual perception. The way that each person looks at things will vary a great deal between individuals depending on their own background and previous position.

We know that most of the time everybody insists that a particular matter must be a fact as far as he is concerned, in the same way that people say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So, what we are saying here is that individual perception, although it may be useful in a certain way, is neither foolproof nor is it final.

The second problem is when we have total dependence on science. Even if our perception is supposed to be accurate, science may explain only a partial aspect of life. Science cannot explain the totality of life. This is an area which we as human beings are very eager to know. We are not merely interested to know about light, sound and electronics. We also want to have some good explanation about life.

A third difference between science and revelation is that science, by definition, focuses largely on physical phenomena. Physical matter is considered real. But it is not reality. Material is not reality as it itself does not constitute ultimate reality. So, when we focus on science we find that science is incapable, for example, of prescribing rules for human life.

The questions science cannot answer

Nor can it explain the ultimate aim in nature. Questions like where did we come from? What are we supposed to do on earth? Where are we going to? What is our destiny and what is the destiny of the universe at large? What are the inner motives which make our activities meaningful? These are all questions whose answers do not fully lie within the scope of observational science.

The fourth and final difference between science and revelation is that science by itself cannot achieve human happiness. Nor can it inculcate in us a sense of purpose. Science may help us to build a material

***Science by itself
cannot achieve
human happiness***

civilization where material laws and scientific achievements are incorporated. However this civilization is often not responsive to our nature. It's based on the wrong information, on the lack of knowledge of the true nature of humans and, as such, cannot be totally responsive to individual needs.

The problems of mind and soul

As a result we find that this civilization has to confront the problems of mind and soul. This leads to alienation, anxiety, loneliness, confusion and ultimately even the collapse of the entire civilization as we have seen over and over again throughout human history. After all, we must remember that humans are not just physical forms or reflex mechanisms. A human is much more than that – a human possesses free will, and above all, moral consciousness.

So, to conclude this particular question, science – while quite useful – should not be deified or worshipped in itself. It should not be taken as God in place of the Real and Omnipotent God.

By itself, science is incapable of giving us this moral discipline – the quality of peace of mind, the sense of purpose and balance in our lives. Science is incapable of giving us final answers to

hidden realities, questions about Godhood, revelation, the Qur'an and Prophethood which are already provided by the messengers.

What about other sources of guidance?

However, science is not the only source that people claim we can turn to for guidance. There are those who say, "But we can get guidance through mystical experience by looking at Eastern philosophies." Where does mystical experience fit in?

As we distinguish between science and revelation we also have to distinguish between mystical experience and revelation because they are not the same.

Mystical experience is not the same as revelation

We can point to six basic differences between mystical experiences and prophetic revelation. Divine revelations are transmitted to chosen prophets of God.

First of all, mystical experience, by its nature, defies expression. It is non-transmittable. It cannot be transferred from one person to another. It is a sort of insight into reality, but on a personal basis.

Now as far as the genuine prophet is receiving revelation from God, this revelation given to him is not individualized for himself.

It is something that he has to communicate fully and completely to the people, as was the case with all prophets, or to the entire humanity as was the case with Prophet Muhammad, being the last of all prophets.

To quote the Qur'an on this, in chapter 5: verse 67 addressing Prophet Muhammad, we read:

"Oh! Apostle, Announce all that has been bestowed from on high upon you by your Sustainer: for unless

you do it fully, you will not have delivered His message [at all]. And God will protect you from [unbelieving] men: behold, God does not guide people who refuse to acknowledge the truth.”

The duties of a prophet

It is part and parcel of the duty of the prophet to communicate and that’s different from mystical experience.

The second way of distinguishing between both is that the mystical experience is highly individualized. It is restricted to one particular person at a time. That experience depends on the subjectivity of an individual who claims to have gone through this mystical experience.

Obviously each individual can claim that his or her experience is unique; that it’s the ultimate judge. Almost anybody following any faith or cult will say, “Oh! I believe it is the best. Why? Because I feel peace, I feel very happy and I just have a strong feeling that this is the truth.”

So again these claims are made by people holding many contradictory sets of beliefs.

Of course it’s quite different from genuine revelation coming from God directly to a genuine prophet – it must be truth. In a way, it’s just not something of a private personal feeling of one particular person.

The Qur’an fully upholds and emphasizes this question of generality of the Message of the prophet of revelation. It says, in Chapter 4: verse 64,

“We send not to an apostle but to be obeyed in accordance with the will of Allah.”

So, the prophet is not free to speak on his own. He’s actually communicating directly what God commanded him to

A prophet communicates directly what God commanded him to communicate

communicate to other people.

A third distinction is that there is a good possibility

of extremism and errors if we depend totally on individual mystical experience. This may explain the existence of so many cults with strange beliefs. Where to draw the line between truth and falsehood is also very difficult. When we talk about divine revelations, we are talking about something that's immutable and reliable; that, in itself, must be free from error. Nor could there be any error on the part of the prophets. They are directly appointed by God to honestly and accurately transmit God's message and this is the matter that must be elaborated on as we go along.

Revelation – and the problem of preservation

Another problem that arises with revelation is not the accuracy and authenticity of the message but the problem of preservation. Any errors that may arise are simply caused by the *priesthood* or people guarding it that have their own philosophical or theological speculations and interpretations as well as theories which changed the original version.

In comparison, the only scripture in world history that remains intact without having a single meaning corrupted, but also to the extent of not having even a letter changed, is the Qur'an. So errors could not be from the revelations given to Muhammad, Moses, David or Jesus.

The fourth distinction is that a mystical experience has to be attained by personal effort. The person goes through a certain discipline, spiritual training or exercise until he attains that particular state.

Prophethood is a gift from God

Prophethood, on the other hand, is not something that

everybody can attain. It cannot be achieved exclusively by personal effort. It is a gift from God to a chosen and special type of people that are qualified to carry His messages to other human beings.

Thus it's very important to realize that a prophetic mission is not derived from the prophet himself. It is not dependent upon his own inherited tendencies or skills that determine his ability to receive revelation from God.

Prophethood . . . cannot be achieved exclusively by personal effort. It is a gift from God.

The mystical experience is passive

A fifth distinction is that by and large the mystical experience is passive. It's one-way. A person who goes through this transcendental stage would not wish to come back. He would regard that trance or that overwhelming spiritual feeling as the ultimate goal in itself. He doesn't want to come back to worldly conscious life.

Whereas with divine revelations, we talk about the prophet in a role that is never passive. Indeed, he's anxious to get back after he received a revelation from God.

He's very anxious to get back to life to communicate to other people, to teach them how to live a better life and even to fight against the forces of evil.

The mystical experience is passive; divine revelations are never passive

Finally, the sixth difference is that God is not necessarily admired or loved or focused upon by the mystic. The prophets recognize God as Lord, Sovereign, as One in whose hand is the right to command and guide.

And in fact any mystical figure in history would very easily be dwarfed as you compare them with Abraham, Moses, Jesus or Muhammad.

Defining the word 'revelation'

At this point we have clarified the differences between science and revelation as well as between mystical experience and revelation. But what we haven't done yet is to define the word revelation in the Islamic context.

We haven't answered the question: "What does revelation actually mean?"

We have to be very honest in stating that this is indeed a difficult subject.

But basically, to put it in a simple form, revelation is essentially a form of communication between God as The Creator and His chosen prophets, messengers or apostles.

Perhaps this could be understood by making some analogy, even though this is a very rough one, between our communication processes as humans and the communication of the word of God to prophets.

There are at least four basic elements in any process of communication. In a skeletal model of communication there is the *sender*, there is the *receiver*, the *message* and the *channel* through which the message is communicated.

Now, in revelation, the *sender* is God Himself. The *receiver* in this case is the prophet. The third component then is the *message* or revelation itself such as the Qur'an.

This revelation covers a wide variety of subjects but essentially it covers knowledge of the unseen, the area of knowledge which is not within the realm of science or human perception.

It also provides various laws that regulate our life, whether they be social, economic or political. So that's the summary of the message itself.

How do these revelations come?

Then we come to the *channel* and that is perhaps the area which is important and relevant to the question of revelation.

The *channel* is the medium through which that revelation is communicated to us. Now, this is an area where no speculation could be useful as you can refer directly to the word of God Himself in the Qur'an.

Here we find that there are three basic channels of communication of His message.

All of them are summarized in one single passage. That is in Chapter 42: verse 51. The translation of this verse will give some idea:

“It is not fitting for men that God should speak to him, except by inspiration, or [by a voice, as it were], from behind a *veil*, or by sending a messenger to reveal, by His leave, whatever He wills [to reveal], for He is exalted, most wise.”

We notice from this particular passage that first of all there is no possibility for us as humans, so long as we are still living here on earth, that God could talk or communicate with any of us directly.

Inspiration is to reveal the truth or knowledge into the heart of that chosen prophet. This inspiration could be by exact revealed words as in the case of the Qur'an and the three scriptures before it, or by

We notice that . . . there is no possibility . . . that God could talk or communicate with any of us directly

meanings without exact words being used. So, a prophet could use his own words to express it.

The notion of speaking behind a veil or behind some kind of mystical barrier is also described in the Qur'an, for example in the instance of God talking to Prophet Moses at Mount Sinai.

Similarly, it also happened to Prophet Muhammad in the night journey and ascension, well known to Muslims, where he was spoken to by God directly.

Messengers from God

The third channel that the passage mentions is that God could send someone, as a Messenger, to reveal what God wills. The word "messenger" here does not refer to humans but is from among the angels. And for Muslims – and we may presume also for Jews and Christians – the name Gabriel (or Jibrail in Arabic) is well known as such an angel of revelation. In fact in the Qur'an itself mention is made to clarify the issue:

“God chooses message-bearers from among the angels as well as from among mankind. For God is He who hears and sees all things.”

(Chapter 22: verse 75)

The Qur'an also indicates that this whole notion of a prophet receiving a message or a Holy Book is nothing new. In one verse of the Qur'an, in Chapter 4: verse 163, it says:

“We have inspired you, [O Muhammad] just as We inspired Noah and all the messengers after him, we inspired Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants, including Jesus, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon; and as we vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom [the Psalms].”

Prophet Muhammad received revelation in three ways

However, some of these forms of revelation or channels of communication are not necessarily combined in the prophets. In the case of Prophet Muhammad all three forms have been combined.

He has talked directly to God from behind a veil as God spoke to him on the night of ascension.

Secondly he received revelation through the messenger, the Angel Gabriel, in the form of the Qur'an – the exact words of God. Muhammad did not use a single word of his own in it.

He also received inspiration of knowledge and wisdom and truth which he expressed in his own words that are distinctly *separate* from the Qur'an. They are meant as a complementary guidance. It is classified in what is known as the prophetic traditions or *hadiths*. As the last Messenger, God chose to realize through Muhammad all three methods of revelation.

SIGNS OF THE PROPHETS

Archangel Gabriel as a medium of communication

Since revelation is not a subject of speculation, we have to turn what is documented in the Qur'an and also in the prophetic traditions.

But there are two basic forms that are reported about the Angel Gabriel coming with the message to Prophet Muhammad. One was that Gabriel came to the prophet in the form of a man teaching him and dictating certain passages of the Qur'an to him.

This is most notably reported in the Qur'an itself in Chapter 96: verses 1-5, the first time Prophet Muhammad received revelation.

***The Angel Gabriel came
to the prophet in the
form of a man***

He was alone meditating in the Cave of Hira outside Mecca, when a *man* came to him [it was only later that he knew him to be Gabriel] who surprised and held him and said, "Recite!"

The reply of Prophet Muhammad was, "I cannot read!" Then the angel held him again, and he made the same command twice, whereupon Muhammad gave in and repeated the very first revelation of the Qur'an that was dictated by Angel Gabriel. You still find this today in the Qur'an, in the original wording, the meaning of which in English is:

"Recite in the name of your Lord and Cherisher Who created, created man out of something that hangs. Recite, and your Lord is Most Generous. Who taught by the pen; taught man what he knows not."

The mystery of the word *alaq*

In this translation we use the phrase *something that hangs* as this is again quite amazing about the expression used in the Qur'an. The literal meaning of the Arabic expression is that God created man out of *something that hangs*. The word *alaq* comes from *yalaq* or hangs.

This was a mystery for centuries and many translators of the Qur'an into English made what may be an error in specifying a variety of meanings like *clot of flesh* in *chewed form* but here we prefer to stick to the original Arabic. *Something that hangs* can be explained very easily now with modern knowledge of medicine that the fertilized ovum hangs literally from the wall inside the uterus which is something amazing to have been revealed more than fourteen centuries ago.

That is pure proof that it is not Muhammad's own imagination or conjecture.

Now we examine another incident where the Angel came again in the form of a man. There is a famous incident reported in prophetic tradition where in the presence of his companions, the Angel Gabriel came in the form of a human being and commenced a dialogue with Muhammad on the three spheres of the *deen* namely *Islam*, *Iman* [faith] and *Ihsan* [excellence], and on the signs of the Day of Judgement.

The Angel Gabriel also brought revelations without being seen by others

However, the more common form in which Gabriel brought revelation from God to Prophet Muhammad was by coming without being seen by others

except the prophet who would hear him very distinctly, dictating to him certain passages of the Qur'an and then the Prophet would recite the passages with the people around him, memorizing them or committing them to writing. It is important to emphasize that this was not a guarded secret.

Many of the companions in authentic narrations reported that they had experienced these situations and in fact this was in its originality because people heard it at the same time as the prophet received it from Gabriel.

The state of the Prophet as he received the Revelations

Now the question can arise as to how the companions knew for sure that Archangel Gabriel really was the one sending those revelations and not something else.

First of all as we have already said, there was no physical sight of Gabriel. But the prophet gave the descriptions when they happened. Whenever the prophet started uttering the Qur'an under this state of revelation, they noted that Prophet Muhammad went through a very special spiritual state.

At times he used to perspire very heavily even when it was cold, due to the concentration involved. The companions described that sometimes he would be shivering while under this state of revelation. So this was one indication.

And the manner and style of the Revelations

But there was a second indicator also. It is in the manner and style of the Revelation. As indicated before, while under that particular state of concentration he used to utter the verses of the Qur'an that they could write down and memorize it directly from his mouth,

so they realized that now he was saying something quite different from normal speech.

And as has been commented on in many places the style of the Qur'an is the style of God speaking; it is not like a story narrated for example by a third party. Using one such verse to say:

“All you who believe, follow the Messenger.”

“Yes, Gabriel comes to me”

This verse was addressed to people from another party. So they noted that this was something that Gabriel was dictating. This was the second indication. The third indication was the statement made by the Prophet Muhammad himself when he said:

“Yes, Gabriel comes to me... I hear something almost like the sound of a bell and I hear the dictation of the passages of the Qur'an.”

So, all these three indications put together confirm Angel Gabriel's presence.

Was the Prophet Muhammad in some sort of trance?

There is a common misconception. At one time this used to be a popular theme, and unfortunately, even today, we find some supposed scholars still speculating about this. This is the idea that the Prophet Muhammad was in a state of epileptic seizure or he was in a state of trance.

We know from what psychiatrists and psychologists tell us about epilepsy that it is a sort of disease or malfunction. It is an interruption of the normal functioning of the brain. And the person usually under an epileptic seizure has a kind of convulsion.

That person is not totally conscious and under that state he or she utters meaningless and incoherent words that don't make any sense, and often, after the epileptic seizure is over, they do not remember what they said.

Now this kind of description cannot be associated with revelation. Not only did Prophet Muhammad remember vividly each and every word that he uttered under that state of revelation, but the most significant point is that the Qur'an he uttered is available.

Every word of the Qur'an is available . . . with the exact words which the prophet uttered.

It's available in the very original language with the exact words which the prophet uttered when he received that revelation.

Anyone studying the Qur'an must know for sure that it is not a meaningless mumbling of incoherent words. It is available as the biggest rebuttal to the epileptic hypothesis.

The Qur'an – the biggest rebuttal to any notion of a fit or trance

Read the Qur'an and see whether anything epileptic is involved throughout it. In the whole history of humanity could an epileptic utter such things to produce such a scripture that has such an influence on the whole history of the world and provides guidance on all aspects of spiritual, moral, political, economic and social life for millions of people, past, present and future? Yet there is more we need to add to this whole claim of 'epilepsy' or trance.

If the people who raised that issue were atheists, that would somehow prove their motives because they see revelation and divinity, or the existence of God as nonsense. So, if a person with this kind of attitude talks about epilepsy in Muhammad, that might be understandable.

But what is really puzzling is that many of the so-called scholars, who are themselves Jewish or Christian – two major world faiths that are themselves based on revelation – accuse Muhammad of such.

That leads to a question of double standards.

No sincere Jew or Christian will say, “The Torah received by Moses is a product of epilepsy.” But when it comes to Muhammad receiving the last revelation, they say that maybe it is not really true revelation from God. It could be some kind of epilepsy.

Any person making such claims needs to answer some frank questions:

Do you believe in God or don't you? Do you believe in the unseen or don't you? If you believe in God and you believe that God is capable of conveying His Message through His Prophets to humanity, then you believe in such characteristics of revelation.

So either all prophets were epileptic or invented something or all of them were genuine prophets having received that revelation direct from God. It's either one or the other.

Who can receive revelation? Is it only given to a select few?

Now we should move to examine the question of revelation being an inspiration of God to only a select class of humanity that we refer to as prophets. Now first of all, is the divine inspiration confined to a select few and should revelation be given to anybody?

To answer this we should first define the translation of the original word for revelation, as used in the Qur'an, which is *Wahy*, and the best response to that question is to refer to the Qur'an itself to show that there are two levels to the defining of *Wahy*.

It can be defined as the general essence of God inspiring or guiding creatures whether they are human or not. In this first general meaning we find one example where the term *Wahy* is used to inspire creatures to survive as used in the following verse which refers to the bee – Chapter 16: verse 68,

“And your Lord inspired or taught the bee to build its cells in hills on trees and in man’s habitation.”

That’s *Wahy* as inspiration, but not as *scripture*, given to the bees – simply inspiring them to help them to survive. It is also used in the Qur’an in the sense of inspiring and guiding people who are not prophets, but just good people.

For example, about the disciples of Prophet Jesus, we read in the Qur’an in Chapter 51: verse 14,

“And behold! I (God) inspired the disciples (of Jesus) to have faith in Me and My messenger. They said, ‘We have faith, do you witness that we bowed to God as Muslims in subservience?’”

There is another verse about God inspiring the mother of Moses when she was afraid that the Pharaoh might take her son, the infant Moses, and kill him. And again we find in Chapter 28: verse 7 of the Qur’an:

“So we sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses, ‘Suckle your child but when you have fears about him, cast him into the river. But fear not nor grieve for We shall restore him to you and We shall make him one of Our Messengers.’”

In fact, without spending too much time on this there are also other meanings for the word *Wahy* as it is used in the Qur’an. For example, in Chapter 41: verse 12. It is used in a sense of assigning or imparting:

“And He decreed that they become seven heavens in two aeons, and imparted to each heaven its function...”

It is also used in the sense of conveying a message, as here in Chapter 8: verse 12:

“Lo! Your Sustainer inspired the angels [to convey to the believers]: ‘I am with you!’”

Here it is used in the sense of giving a certain sign. This is in Chapter 19: verse 11:

“Thereupon he [Zachariah] came out of the sanctuary to his people and signified to them [by gestures]: ‘Extol His limitless glory by day and by night.’”

However the special meaning of inspiration or guidance through scriptures by the use of specific wording or meaning is for selected prophets to convey to us.

Since prophets occupy such a central role in the Islamic faith, maybe one should ask an even more fundamental question and that is, from the viewpoint of Islam itself what is the prophet? Because the word prophet has been used for centuries in different contexts giving different meanings.

For Muslims a prophet is a human being selected by God to carry His Message and to be a role model for teaching and a good example to humanity.

***There is no question
about the human nature
of the messenger***

Islam treats prophets exactly as such and avoids assigning to them extreme treatments that might have been allotted by other faiths to them.

In using the term 'extreme' we can see this happen when we compare the three Semitic monotheistic faiths of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

We have two kinds of extreme. One extreme is to deify the prophets to the level of Godhood. And that is what happened in the case of Prophet Jesus. The other extreme is exactly the opposite: that is to attribute a major moral or cardinal sin to these great figures.

For Muslims both of these are regarded as extremes. But perhaps one thing we must emphasize is that these prophets are human and not like angels. There is no question about the human nature of the messenger. There is also nothing between the human and the Divine. There is no demi-God or anything that is half-God, half-man.

As for the Creator, there is only one and that's God. The Qur'an made it categorically clear on this issue in Chapter 21, verse 7 & 8:

"For [even] before your time, [Muhammad,] We never sent [as Our Apostles] any but [mortal] men, whom We inspired – hence, [tell the deniers of the truth,] 'If you do not know this, ask the followers of earlier revelation' – and neither did We endow them with bodies that could dispense with food, nor were they immortal."

Having introduced the subject of extremes and having stressed again that Islam speaks of the One and Only God, we should deal with the great prophet about whom there was a great deal of controversy concerning his nature – that is the Prophet Jesus.

The Qur'an says in Chapter 3: verse 59, that the similitude of Jesus before God is as that of Adam:

“He created him from dust then He said to him, ‘Be’ and he was.”

This similitude describes the ease with which God was able to create Adam without parents – from neither a father nor a mother, and thus it was simpler for God to create Jesus from only a mother, but without a father.

The following quotation gives a slight twist: that the very fact that the prophets or messengers were human could be one of the underlying reasons why people rejected them. In Chapter 64: verse 6, we read that,

“... because time and again there came to them their apostles with all evidence of the truth, but they [always] replied, ‘Shall mere mortal men be our guides?’ And so they denied the truth and turned away.”

The Qur’an also responds to those who think that it is quite strange that God should reveal His Message through normal human beings as messengers. In Chapter 10: verse 2 we read,

“Do people deem it strange that We should have inspired a man from their own midst [as a messenger]?... They who deny the truth say, ‘Behold, he is clearly but a spellbinder!’”

To indicate, finally, the inconsistency of those who reject the Messengership of Prophet Muhammad while believing in prophets before him, the Qur’an addresses them very clearly in Chapter 6: verse 91,

“For, no true understanding of God have they when they say, ‘Never has God revealed anything unto man.’ Say: ‘Who has bestowed from on high the divine writ which Moses brought unto men as a light and a guidance, [and] which you treat as [mere] leaves of paper, making a show of them the while you conceal much – although

you have been taught what neither you nor your forefathers had ever known?”

Say: “God [has revealed that writ]! – and then leave them to play at their vain talk.”

So those inconsistent thinkers say, “Yes. God gave the revelation to Moses, but when it comes to Muhammad we don’t believe in him because he’s a human, how can a human get divine revelation?”

In the Qur’an we find a number of examples that refer to the human behaviour of the prophets. We do not read of superhuman qualities being imputed to them.

First they ate and drank like all of us, as in Chapter 25: verse 20, it says,

“And before you [O Muhammad,] We never sent as Our message- bearers any but [mortal men,] who indeed ate food and went about in the market-places.”

Talking about, for example, Prophet Jesus and his mother (may peace be upon both of them) it says,

“... the Messiah, son of Mary was no more than a messenger, as were many messengers that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth. They had both to eat their daily food.”

As a basic rule it also says that the prophets in general got married and had children, with the exception of a few like Prophet Jesus and John the Baptist because they didn’t have the opportunity to live longer.

In describing family life, one verse of the Qur’an says,

“We did send apostles for you and appointed to them wives and children.”

The Qur'an also shows in Chapter 26: verse 80 that apostles of God may suffer agony and disease such as with Prophet Abraham:

“And when I'm ill, [Abraham] it is He [God] who cures me.”

And in Chapter 21: verse 83, with regard to Prophet Job it says:

“And remember Job when he cried to his Lord,
Affliction has befallen me: But You are the most
Merciful of the Merciful.”

The Qur'an indicates that the prophets may even be killed by their enemies. For example in Chapter 2: verse 87, we read,

“That whoever comes to you a prophet or a messenger which you yourself desire not. You're puffed up with pride - some you call impostors and others you slay.”

Also we are reminded that Muhammad is:

“... no more than a messenger. Many messengers have passed away before him. If he dies, or were slain will you then turn back on your heels?”

And finally the Qur'an indicates that the prophet does not control his own destiny because that too is controlled by God. Prophet Muhammad was made to declare, in Chapter 7, verse 188:

“I have no power to bring any good or harm to myself unless God wills.”

PROPHETS OF REVELATION

Prophethood – in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and in Islam

We have earlier mentioned some of the shared values between Islam and the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Here we need to be clear, firstly on the parallels and secondly on the differences in the matter of Prophethood.

There are several very important similarities between the concept of Prophethood in Islam and the concept of Prophethood in Judaism and Christianity.

One similarity is belief in God as the ultimate authority in the universe. Although, as Muslims, we might differ on the question of Trinity and “chosenness,” the essential notion of believing in God is there. In Prophethood, the general notion of God

sending prophets or messengers to guide humanity is the same in the three faiths. The concept of revelation is also accepted in some form or other.

Yet despite these important similarities, there is a very important difference. Muslim scholars call this difference *theisma* or the infallibility of the prophet. To clarify this, it is important to refer to how prophets are portrayed in both the Bible and the Qur'an.

One major problem Muslims have with the Bible is that there is one extreme of the deifying of prophet (Isa) to the level of Godhood and another extreme

In the Old Testament we find stories that would stun any Muslim

of attributing cardinal sins to great prophets. Muslims accept neither. Earlier we have discussed the deification of humans and given evidence from the Qur'an against this, so our focus now will be on the question of the fallibility or infallibility of the prophets.

In the Old Testament we find stories that would stun any Muslim. An example of one of these stories is the Old Testament version of the story of Prophet Jacob and his father Prophet Isaac.

The tradition in the Old Testament is that the elder son inherits the honour. The Book of Genesis, Chapter 27, states that Esau was the elder son of Isaac and he was the one supposed to receive the blessings as he had the birthright.

Somehow, the information reached Jacob that his father, Isaac, was going to bless Esau, so he went to his father, exploiting the fact that Isaac was almost blind, and pretended that he was Esau. Isaac then blessed Jacob by mistake, thinking he was Esau. Later on, Isaac discovered his mistake but refused to change the blessing because he had already blessed Jacob.

This kind of story depicts a great prophet, Jacob – a man who is adored by Muslims – as a cheater and deceiver who goes to his father, lies to him and pretends that he is the other son in order to get that blessing. Muslims have serious problems accepting a story like this.

The Book of Exodus, in Chapter 32: verse 136, describes how Prophet Aaron, the Brother of Moses, participated in collecting gold to make the golden calf. Here is a great prophet, another man respected and adored by Muslims, yet depicted as someone who not only acquiesces in idolatry but even participates in the making of the idol. Muslims cannot accept this kind of accusation.

Even stranger to the sensibilities of Muslims, is the story of Prophet David. In the second book of Samuel, it talks about the incident in which Uriah, one of the commanders of Prophet David, was away on the battlefield. It says that David went to the roof of the king's house. From the roof he saw a beautiful woman bathing. When he enquired about her, he was told that she was the wife of his commander, Uriah. Nevertheless, he sent for her and committed adultery with her and she became pregnant. When Uriah came back, the Bible depicts Prophet David as a person who played all kinds of tricks to hide the sin that he had committed. He first asked Uriah to go and wash his feet inside his house in the hope that Uriah would sleep with his wife and this would hide the source of the new baby. Uriah, however, being faithful to his soldiers (as he had made a pledge with them that they would not touch their wives until the battle was won), refused and he slept outside on the doorstep of his house.

Since this trick did not work Prophet David sent a message with Uriah himself to his other commander, Joab, asking him to put Uriah in the hottest part of the battlefield. This was in the hope that he might be killed and the crime hidden. Of course, Uriah was slain.

Now, for Muslims, this is totally unacceptable. Muslims believe that this cannot be an original or genuine revelation because a prophet who does this type of thing would be acting in contradiction to the concept of Prophethood as explained in the Qur'an, and also contradictory to the very logic of Prophethood as presented in Islam.

In fact, these are not the only incidents that disturb Muslims.

There is the famous story about Prophet Abraham when he went to Egypt with his wife. She was so beautiful that he was afraid Pharaoh would take her away or kill him.

So, he claimed that she was his sister and even let her go inside the house of the Pharaoh who tried to approach her to have a relationship with her.

In addition, there are similar things mentioned about Prophet Solomon getting married to pagan wives and then his heart was inclined towards their gods.

This whole description is totally contradictory to the beliefs and values of Muslims, to the text of the Qur'an, and to the role and perception of who a prophet is.

There is not a single passage in the entire Qur'an that attributes such cardinal sins to a prophet; sins that really blemish the moral character of the prophet, like the passages that we have cited from the Old Testament.

In fact, the contrary is true. All of these prophets are mentioned with great adoration and respect.

The Prophets David and Solomon are mentioned as people who are returners to God; i.e. people who are faithful to God.

Prophet Jacob was not a deceiver or cheater, but a respected and holy Messenger.

Prophet Abraham was described in the Qur'an as a man of truth. This can be found in Chapter 19, verse 41. He is also described in Chapter 16, verse 120 as devoutly obedient to God and true in faith.

In Chapter 19: verse 54, Prophet Ishmael is described as one who was strictly true to his promise. Ishmael is the ancestor of the Arabs and Prophet Muhammad, and Isaac was an ancestor to the Israelite Prophets. Ishmael was the first son of Abraham. Initially, Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren but later on she gave birth to Isaac.

In the Qur'an it is also mentioned that Ishmael was true to his promise to obey God and be faithful to Him.

Prophet Moses is described in the Qur'an as *Mokhlasan*, which translates roughly as "the one who was specially chosen" (Chapter 19, verse 51).

In the case of Prophet Jesus, he is given a very tender description in the Qur'an as *Wajihan Fiddunia Wal'akhirah*. In English it means that Jesus is one who is held in honour in this world and in the Hereafter and is in the company of those nearest to God. The reference to that in the Qur'an is in Chapter 3: verse 45.

And Prophet Muhammad is described as a model. For example, as we read in Chapter 33: verse 21,

"You have indeed in the Messenger of God a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any whose hope is in God and the Final Day."

This is not the only citation. There are many more. But instead of examples of prophets we can look at the types of

generalisations that are made about more than one prophet. In Chapter 21, verse 90, for example, we read that,

“These (prophets), were ever quick in emulation in good works. They used to call on Us (God) with love and reverence, and humble themselves before Us.”

This refers to all of the great prophets.

Therefore, these stories which we have cited from the Bible are inconsistent with the Muslim view of the role and nature, as well as the logic, of Prophethood.

As we said before, a prophet is not somebody who merely comes and communicates the words of God to people. He is a person who exemplifies in his own behaviour, in his own moral standards and actions, the message that he is preaching. He does not preach one thing and then do something contrary. If he did, how could a prophet be an example, a model for people, when he is a liar, a cheater, a drunkard, or an adulterer?

All of these descriptions are of people who are really very wicked. How could a prophet be a model of faith in God when his heart is inclined towards idols and other pagan deities? This is something that is totally illogical and that is why the Qur'an always indicates that the prophets were specially chosen because they were pious people who did not commit any of the major sins that blemish the moral character.

To stress this further we can cite three verses from the Qur'an:

“God chooses Messengers from Angels and from people.”
(Chapter 22: verse 75)

And surely the choice of God is much better than what these stories depict.

Also, in Chapter 6, verse 86, we read,

“And to all (prophets) We gave favour above the nations.”

And in Chapter 21: verse 73:

“We made them leaders guiding (men) by Our Command and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers and to practise regular charity and they constantly served Us.”

This last verse clearly shows that it is not just by message and knowledge that the prophets served God but also by showing the meaning of the message by the actions in their own lives. This is the essence of the Islamic concept of *ismah* or the infallibility of all the messengers and prophets of God.

Can human prophets be infallible?

Now it may be that some will feel there is a kind of inconsistency here. On the one hand we have quoted chapter and verse in the Qur'an to prove the humanity of the prophets. From this we may get the impression that, although they are human, they are infallible and this may seem like a contradiction. How can a human be infallible?

But infallibility isn't inconsistent with humanity. If you make a distinction between different types of sins then the problem is resolved very easily.

There are at least three kinds of sin. The first of these are sins which relate to deviation and error in belief in God, such as belief in or inclination towards other gods. A second type of sin is what you might call a “cardinal sin”: something really bad like cheating or committing adultery. This is a very major, distinct group of sins. Then there is a third type of sin which could be a human error in judgement which neither constitutes a violation

of basic moral law, nor reflects any bad intention on the part of a prophet in making this error.

If we take that structure to facilitate our answer then we can say, first of all, that all prophets and messengers of God are absolutely infallible with respect to the first and second types of sin.

As for the first category – that of deviation or error – they cannot be fallible in regard to the communication of the message of God because, if the prophet makes an error in conveying the message of God, then he is not qualified to be a prophet. The Qur'an says in Chapter 69, verses 44-47,

“And if the messenger were to invent any saying in Our Name, We should certainly seize him by his right hand and We should certainly cut off the artery of his heart nor could any of you withhold him (from Our wrath).”

That is a symbolic statement.

What it really means is that no prophet can fall into an error of conveying the proper pure belief as dictated or communicated to him by God, or else God would definitely stop him from making a falsification and leading people astray if he were really a genuine messenger and prophet.

The second category of sin are those that – even though we are human and we are tempted – everybody agrees are really cardinal. To steal somebody else's wife, commit adultery and then cheat and try to do all kinds of tricks to avoid facing punishment for this kind of crime is definitely something that is not acceptable to most people.

We know that many people who are reasonably pious do not do these things. If a pious person does not do these things, then what about the select few who are supposed to be the prophets

or messengers of God? Certainly, they would not do these things either.

The third category – errors in judgement but not deliberate errors – are not necessarily in contradiction with the infallibility of the prophets. These errors do not affect their basic function as prophets, as sources of revelation and models of human behaviour.

There are many examples that one can offer to support this. One particular example, surprisingly enough, applies to Prophet Muhammad himself. It also serves as an important rebuttal to those people who are not familiar with the true facts about Islam and who insinuate that Muhammad wrote the Qur'an himself.

If this were true then, definitely, he would not include in the Qur'an any verse or passage that appeared to rebuke himself. It isn't human nature to write something self-incriminatory.

We find in the Qur'an that there has to be another authority above Muhammad that gave him this instruction and revealed this information to him.

The example of a prophet making an error of judgement comes from a very famous chapter of the Qur'an – Chapter 80, Surah 'Abasa, "He frowned" – which was revealed as a commentary on a particularly interesting story. In the early days of Islam Prophet Muhammad was trying to invite the leaders of the noble tribe of Quraish to Islam. He had a very good reason to focus on them. The Quraishi leaders had great influence on public opinion and he thought that if he won them to Islam and they believed in God and rejected idolatry, then this would encourage other people to follow suit.

Furthermore, these people were involved in persecuting Muslims because they were powerful. If those people were won to faith and understood Islam properly, perhaps this would lead then to be more sympathetic and stop the persecution.

So, what did the prophet do wrong?

It was while he was talking to the Quraish earnestly and with much concentration – doing this not for any personal gain, but for the propagation of the message of truth – that there came an old and poor blind man by the name of Abdullah Ibnu Makthum.

He wanted the prophet to teach him something about the Qur'an and so he kept asking him.

The prophet, again in his human judgement and with all good intention, showed a little impatience and frowned because he felt that since this man was already a believer he should wait until the prophet had finished talking to the Quraish, which he felt was more important. The Angel Gabriel came to him and said:

“He (Muhammad) frowned and turned away because there came to him the blind man interrupting. But what could tell you that he (the blind man) might be purified or he might receive admonition and the teaching might profit him. As to one who regards himself as self sufficient (the rich the powerful) to him (O Muhammad), do you attend, though there is no blame to you if he is not purified.”

This is a very powerful rebuke of Prophet Muhammad, but still it does not accuse him of any moral sin or any mistake, but of an error in judgement with good intention.

Still, God shows him that there is a wisdom higher than the human wisdom and that a poor blind person who sincerely

believes is better than this group of rich, powerful unbelievers who are so puffed up with pride that they are not listening to the message of the prophet.

Indeed it is interesting to note that after this incident Prophet Muhammad used to hold Abdullah in great esteem and whenever he met him, he said:

“Welcome to he for whose sake God rebuked me.”

That is why many people misunderstand statements made in the Qur'an reprimanding the prophets. They say that here is evidence that those prophets are sinful. This is an erroneous and superficial way of looking at it.

Firstly, because it is only an error in the sense of an error in judgement although one made with good intention. Secondly, the point that seems always forgotten is that a mistake for the prophet is not like a mistake for a common man.

For a prophet, because of the very high standard demanded of his morality and behaviour, even the slightest mistake is a serious one. This is not because it is serious in itself, but because of the standard expected of him.

No matter how worshipful and how sincere he may be, he always feels he is not really doing worship as he should or he is not doing enough. So, he always asks God for forgiveness.

PROPHECY AND THE INGENUITY OF MIRACLES

Prophecy and Prophethood

The reader of the Old Testament may get the impression that prophesying is a necessary condition for a person to be called a prophet.

But prophecy is different from Prophethood. Prophecy does not make a prophet, nor is it a sufficient or necessary condition for a person to become a prophet. It is a gift endowed by God on certain prophets and a gift that God even gives to some people who are not prophets.

Many people may have experienced the phenomenon of having things that they see in dreams come true in real life. That is why

Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying that: “If you have this phenomenon of seeing dreams coming true, it is metaphorically equivalent to 1/40 of Prophethood. It is only one minor aspect of Prophethood.”

Prophecy is not the only test of Prophethood

Certainly, a prophet may be given information by God foretelling certain things that are going to happen in the future and this applies to many prophets in the Old Testament and also to Prophet Muhammad. We also find examples in the Qur'an of events that the Qur'an said would happen and these events actually did occur. So, in that sense, a Muslim does not reject the notion of prophecy, but, at the same time, he does not over-emphasize prophecy either, because it is not the only test of Prophethood.

Prophets must be able to reach people

In trying to understand the qualities of a prophet some may suggest that a prophet has to be a genius; that there must be some kind of ingenuity. From the Islamic standpoint, there is no question of the prophets being ‘ingenious’ in the sense that prophets were intelligent, wise people. Undoubtedly they received revelation, but they also had to know how to reach people, how to attract people to the wisdom of their revelation and how to guide them through their lives.

In that sense,
you could say
that wisdom and
intelligence would
be useful tools for
the prophet to fulfil

***God chose people not only
because they were pious,
but also because they could
communicate his message to the
rest of humanity***

his mission. So, there is no question that God chose people not only because they were pious, but also because they could communicate his message to the rest of humanity.

Still, some people would explain the concept of revelation as a

prophet merely being a very intelligent person or even a genius who is able to see things more vividly than others and able to teach the people his wisdom. Muslims find this explanation objectionable, not only with respect to Prophet Muhammad, but also with respect to all prophets, on two important grounds. In the first place, the main reason that humanity needs prophets is that there are certain types of information that are not obtainable from sources such as science.

Knowledge of the unseen or what will happen in the life Hereafter or the date of the end of the world, is something no one, no matter how intelligent or wise he may be, can really know for certain. We need direct communication from God.

Another ground for objection is even more important. All of the great prophets in history – Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus or Muhammad – insisted very positively that what they said was a direct revelation from God, from *Allah*. It was not something that was a product of their own intelligence or their own ingenuity.

Therefore, to say that there was no revelation, merely ingenuity, would be to accuse them of lying and cheating when they say that prophecies are not their own thoughts but a revelation that has been given to them. The prophets were intelligent, and they were wise, but their intelligence and their wisdom were not the source of their revelations.

On the subject of miracles

Another manifestation of Prophethood that is sometimes misconstrued is the performance of miracles. And so we should ask how Muslims regard miracles and whether every prophet has to perform miracles.

Like many other issues, when you look back over human history and at how people try to explain things, these explanations range between extremes, and this applies to miracles as well.

We find some people who are preoccupied with miracles to the point of being somewhat superstitious. This opens the door wide for others who want to exploit this kind of tendency.

We will all have heard of individuals who have claimed to be able to perform all kinds of miracles such as healing people. Sometimes this is done for commercial purposes in order to exploit a human inclination to think something spiritual, something unseen will take place in their lives. This is one extreme.

There is an opposite direction and another extreme. Some may react to this tendency by claiming that miracles are just a superstition, and that, even if something is difficult to explain now, eventually we will be able to explain it in some scientific way.

Note everything can be explained by science or rational interpretation

This intellectual approach to miracles is also erroneous because not everything can be explained by science or rational interpretation.

The approach taken in the Qur'an can be understood by using the term that is used for miracle, *ayah*, which is translated roughly in English as *sign*. This sign is given by God (Allah) to a prophet in order to show his trustworthiness and it becomes one aspect or one manifestation of his claim.

The prophets definitely performed miracles. You can refer to the Qur'an. For example, in Chapter 21: verses 68-69, we can read the story of Prophet Abraham and how his people tried to burn him. They put him inside the fire, but *Allah* ordered the fire not to burn him.

Again, you cannot explain this scientifically. It simply happened and Abraham was saved.

In Chapter 26: verse 63, the Qur'an talks about Prophet Moses parting the sea to save the Israelites.

We find in the third chapter of the Qur'an, the discussion of the miraculous birth of John The Baptist, despite the fact that his mother was barren and she and her husband Zakaria were both very advanced in age.

In the same chapter, in verses 45-49, there is even a discussion of a more miraculous birth, that of Prophet Jesus.

Chapter 17, verse 88 also talks about the most outstanding and perpetual miracle of Prophet Muhammad and that is the Qur'an itself, which is not just a physical miracle, but something which is available for investigation.

It is important to realise that there were prophets who were given this ability to perform miracles to appeal to people and to attract their attention.

However, the Qur'an is adamant in clarifying that these miracles were not produced by the prophets themselves. They are something given by God, as is affirmed in Chapter 40, verse 78:

“It was not possible for any Messenger to bring a sign except by the will of God.”

Are Miracles Important in the Message of a Prophet?

Prophecy is one aspect of Prophethood and miracles are another aspect of Prophethood, but not necessarily the central core of the message of a prophet.

A prophet or messenger of God, as viewed by Islam, is not someone who makes prophesies or does miracles. A prophet is basically a guide. The core of his mission is to communicate the message given to him by God, to exemplify the revelation in their life, and to lead people in the right direction.

Of course, it is quite safe to say that physical miracles are something stunning that a prophet can perform; which will appeal to a person who lacks spiritual maturity and for whom only physical manifestations will make him think further about the message of the prophet.

A more mature person would not concentrate on the physical miracle, but rather on the intellectual and spiritual miracle in the message provided by the prophet and the evidence of his truthfulness in conveying that message.

The Qur'an indicates that, even if some of those physical miracles were done by the prophets, they in themselves were not conclusive in the sense of attracting or proving to people the truthfulness of a prophet. In Chapter 7: verse 183 and Chapter 17: verse 58, we find the message that even though physical miracles had been performed in the past, people (the deniers and unbelievers) still rejected the message of the prophet despite these miracles.

There is another verse that says that there were times when a prophet was murdered by the very people who had already seen him perform those miracles.

The Foolish Things that were demanded of Prophet Muhammad

During the time of Prophet Muhammad, people came to him and started demanding all kinds of miracles. At times these requests and demands were silly, as in Chapter 17, verses 90-93, where the demand made to him was reported that: if you are truly a prophet, he should cause a spring to gush from the earth; cause the sky to fall in pieces on us; bring God and the Angels to us face to face. If you are a prophet, you should have a house of gold. If you are a prophet you should have a ladder and we should see you climbing up that ladder right into the sky and then you should come down and bring us a Book that we can read.

Even if all these requests had been fulfilled, it is obvious that people with this kind of attitude would never appreciate a prophet no matter how much is shown to them. That is why these verses conclude appropriately saying:

“Say (O Muhammad) Glory to my Lord! I am only a man – a messenger (of God).”

We are not saying, of course, that Prophet Muhammad did not perform any miracle.

The Qur'an as the Greatest Miracle of Prophet Muhammad

As we have said before, his miracle is perhaps the greatest miracle given to any prophet because it is perpetual. It is in our hands so that we can see it and it can challenge our intellect and our spirit.

We as Muslims should not overemphasize the role of miracles, but, because of this miracle of the Qur'an, neither should we brush it aside.

How many prophets are mentioned in the Qur'an?

We have talked here about prophets in the plural and so the question may be asked as to how many prophets are we talking about. The reader of the Old Testament, for example, realises very quickly that there are scores of prophets mentioned, with whole books being named after them.

By comparison, in the Qur'an, there are twenty-five prophets mentioned specifically by name, eighteen of whom appear in four successive verses of the Qur'an. In Chapter 6, verses 83-86, we read:

“That was the reasoning about Us (God) that We gave to Abraham to use against this people. We raise whom We will degree after degree: For your Lord is full of wisdom and knowledge. We gave him Isaac and Jacob. All three we guided and before him We guided Noah,

and among his progeny David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses and Aaron. Thus do we reward those who do good and Zachariah and John (the Baptist) and Jesus and Elias all in the ranks of the righteous. And Ishmael and Elisha and Jonah and Lot and to all We gave favour about the nations.”

In these four verses you have already the names of eighteen prophets. In five other places in the Qur'an, the other seven are mentioned. They include Adam, Hood, Shuaib, Idris, Zulkifli, Salih and Prophet Muhammad.

In that total of twenty-five specifically mentioned by name in the Qur'an we can notice that most of them will be familiar to our Judaeo-Christian brothers and sisters.

Which prophets should Muslims accept?

Since they are mentioned in the Qur'an, it is taken for granted that Muslims have to believe in their existence. But what is the attitude of Muslims towards other prophets outside this set of twenty-five?

Now when the Qur'an mentions the twenty-five names, it also indicates that these were not the only prophets that were sent to humanity. Indeed, we read in the Qur'an, for example in Chapter 35: verse 24:

“We did aforetime send Messengers before you (O Muhammad). Of them there are some whose story we have related to you and some whose story we have not related to you.”

So, there are prophets whose names do not appear in the Qur'an and this is quite interesting because some people might wonder as to why the Qur'an always mentions prophets who appeared only in the Middle East. We cannot simply say the grace of God is limited to the Middle East as it is clear that there were prophets elsewhere.

We must realise that the emphasis on the descendants of Abraham is for a good reason because these prophets are the foundation of the three basic monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – who are definitely a lot closer in terms of monotheism, despite the differences among them, than other nations in the past who deviated from the original message of monotheism and turned to idolatry or polytheism.

Again, the Qur'an does not say that there was no possibility of other prophets.

In a country like South Africa, for example, you can learn that the Zulu have some belief in a higher God and one wonders whether this is partly because of the influence of Islam which spread into Africa a long time ago, or whether it is possible that they might have had a prophet of their own. There is no historical record, but perhaps the idea of one supreme God might have come through a genuine prophet of God.

What of prophets not mentioned in the Qur'an?

All of this prompts questions: what should be the position of a Muslim vis-à-vis the prophets whether they are mentioned in the Qur'an or not? Should a Muslim just believe in their existence or, if there are any special stories about them mentioned in the Qur'an, does the Muslim have to believe these stories literally or take them as historical lessons or the historical background of the Muslim nation?

The Qur'an mentions the stories of these prophets and sometimes mentions them more than once in different ways. It also mentions the lessons that can be learnt from studying the history of those prophets, but we must make clear that this is not merely for historical interest.

In fact, to believe in these prophets is part and parcel of being a Muslim. In making such a statement we recognise that there are so many people who try to make reconciliatory statements just

for a kind of 'public relations' purposes. We should stress that this is not just some sort of public relations statement.

We can document right from the Qur'an that belief in all these prophets is an obligatory duty on every Muslim.

For example, in Chapter 2: verse 136, it says,

“Say you (Muslims) we believe in *Allah*, and the revelation given to us and the revelation given to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes and that given to Moses and Jesus and that given to all prophets from their Lord. We make no difference between one and another of them and we bow to God in Islam (in surrender).”

This citation is, like the Qur'an in which it is contained, a 1,400-year-old revelation and not a recent creation. As we have observed earlier, it makes a Muslim obliged to accept all these prophets. In addition, the Qur'an goes further and emphasises the tie between belief in a prophet and the quality of righteousness. We cannot claim to be righteous and still reject a genuine prophet. For example in Chapter 2: verse 177, it says,

“It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards east or west. But it is righteousness to believe in *Allah* (God) and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your sustenance out of love of Him for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer and practice regular charity, to fulfil the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and patient in pain or suffering and adversity and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God fearing.”

The Qur'an also indicates, in many verses, that to deny one genuine prophet means that you are denying all of them. For example, in Chapter 4: verses 150-151, it says,

“Those who deny God and His Messengers and those who wish to separate God from His Messengers saying: ‘We believe in some but reject others’; And those who wish to take a course midway – they are in truth equally unbelievers.”

The first qualification that a Muslim has for accepting a prophet as a genuine prophet is that, at least, his name should appear in the Qur'an. We do not deny that there might have been other prophets, but to say for sure that someone was a prophet it must be confirmed in the last revelation revealed by God, which is the Qur'an. That is one qualification. The second qualification is that the Qur'an indicates very clearly that Prophet Muhammad was the last of these prophets, which means that anyone claiming Prophethood after Muhammad is not a genuine prophet. Other than these qualifications no one has the right to say that he or she believes in or rejects any prophet.

THE FINAL PROPHET

The main mission and task of Prophethood

We have looked at some of the misconceptions about the concept of Prophethood and emphasised that every Muslim has to believe in prophets and Prophethood. We should now define what is the main mission and task of Prophethood.

In the first book in this series – on monotheism – we mentioned that the word ‘Islam’ means submitting yourself to the will of God and accepting His guidance to conduct your life according to His teachings. We also indicated that this is the essence of the message of all prophets from Abraham until Muhammad; and of those before Abraham, like Prophet Noah. It follows from this that all the prophets are regarded as brother Muslims. In fact the Qur’an uses the word Muslim to refer to prophets and their followers. They are Muslim in that sense that they submitted willingly to the will of Allah. If you want to explore it further by

specifying which areas of knowledge are derived from prophets or their mission we could summarize that in four basic points.

First, a prophet is essentially sent to help us understand something about God and His attributes, and to give us this knowledge that we cannot obtain by our own means. This is essential to our understanding so that we do not get mixed up in the whole realm of philosophy and theology. We have to get the correct knowledge through prophets. It would help us to avoid having divided loyalties by knowing that there is only one Creator for the entire universe. We could document that from the Qur'an, as an example of the basic call of the message of the prophets. In Chapter 21: verse 25, it says,

“Not a Messenger did we send before you (Muhammad) without this inspiration sent by Us to him: that there is no God but Me, so worship and serve Me.”

In Chapter 11 of the Qur'an, you find that there are stories about different prophets. All of them say identical words to their people: “Worship God. You have no other deity but Him.” So that shows that this is the unifying theme in all the messages of the prophets.

In addition, to make it clear, the Qur'an indicates that one cannot really achieve servitude to God alone unless one shuns false gods. One verse in the Qur'an, Chapter 16: verse 36, stresses this point:

“For We assuredly sent amongst every people a Messenger with the command: ‘Serve Allah (God) and shun false gods.’”

The second basic mission of a prophet is to communicate to us the information about the unseen, because we cannot obtain information about the unseen in the lab or by our own thinking. What is going to happen in the future? What is the destiny of the Earth or the universe? Is there any life after death and what

form it is going to take? The questions of punishment, reward, the signs of the approaching Day of Judgement – these are matters that have to be communicated directly. To document this the Qur'an, in Chapter 72: verses 26-27, says,

“He (God) alone knows the unseen. Nor does He make anyone acquainted with His secret except a Messenger whom He has chosen.”

So, the knowledge of the unseen is not only for God, but certain information is also made available to a messenger or prophet.

A third basic function of a prophet is to show us the way to achieve salvation in this life and the hereafter. How do we conduct our lives? What pleases God? What displeases Him? What is our role on earth? What is our position in the world at large? Where are we going? What should our relationship be with each other? These are all things that we need a great deal of guidance about.

Concerning the third issue, we should be aware of the Islamic approach to guidance. It is not necessarily preaching or just moralizing. Guidance of the prophets means that they as prophets should exemplify what they are preaching. That is the reason why we have discussed this infallibility of the prophets and their high moral character.

But more than this, they are also supposed to help people improve themselves. They are not just preachers. They also help people reach a higher spiritual plateau.

An example of this is in the Qur'an in Chapter 3: verse 164, which mentions the mission of Prophet Muhammad, one that was similar to the mission of other prophets:

“Sanctifying them and instructing them in scripture and wisdom.”

A fourth mission of Prophethood might surprise some people, although within the Islamic approach of integrating life it is very relevant. This mission is to participate in the struggle to establish social justice on earth.

This means physically, if necessary, to participate in fighting the forces of evil oppression and exploitation.

We have several pieces of evidence in the Qur'an, but one verse may suffice. In Chapter 57: verse 25, it says,

“We (God) sent aforetime Our Messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of right and wrong) that men may stand forth in justice.”

This shows that a prophet or messenger's participation in leading his people to fight Evil and to establish justice on earth is part and parcel of his mission.

These four basic points can be summarized, basically, as true submission to God on an individual as well as a collective level.

Is there a hierarchy of prophets?

This brings us to a question that is very often raised in an Islamic context and in the other faiths as well, and that is the, if such a thing applies. Does Islam view the prophets as being represented in a perpetual hierarchy? In other words, does Islam differentiate or distinguish between prophets on any level?

The answer to this is that it depends, of course, on what we mean by hierarchy or status. The basic rule is that if a person makes a distinction between prophets and says that this prophet is better than that one just from a perspective of prejudice then this is forbidden by the Qur'an itself. For example, in Chapter 2: verse 285, we read that:

“The Messenger (Muhammad) believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the men of faith. Each of them believes in Allah, His Angels, His Books, His Messengers. We make no distinction between any of His Messengers. And they say: ‘We hear, and we obey. Grant us your forgiveness, Our Lord and to You is the end of all journey.’”

That then establishes the basis. However, within this basic rule that you might call the brotherhood of all prophets, we can make a distinction in the sense that some prophets played a more important role than others in the upbringing or uplifting of their people. For example, in the Qur’an, in the same Chapter: verse 253, it says,

“Those Messengers We endowed with gifts, some above others.”

God has chosen to give more to one than the other. Even within this general distinction that God mentions about prophets, there is one term used to specify a characteristic of certain prophets. The English translation of this is: *prophets with resolution*. This term appears in Chapter 46: verse 35,

“Therefore patiently persevere (Oh, Muhammad!) as did (all) Messengers.”

The Messengers who suffered more had to persevere a great deal. Many jurists believe this includes five prophets who are mentioned together in one verse in the Qur’an, Chapter 33: verse 7, from whom the Qur’an says God has taken a solemn covenant. In this sense prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are regarded as the five greatest among all the prophets.

Furthermore, within this category of resolute prophets, the greatest of all prophets and the one who played the greatest

role among all of them, is the very last prophet, Prophet Muhammad. The fact that his message was universal and directed to all humanity to bring them together under the same final revelation from God shows that his role was the greatest among all the prophets.

But it is important to emphasise, as we have mentioned before, that any distinction between prophets on the basis of some kind of fanaticism, or in the sense of setting “my prophet” against “your prophet,” is rejected in Islam. All sincere followers of previous prophets should regard all prophets as one brotherhood, one family. They are all *our* prophets, not ‘mine’ or ‘yours.’

Why the need for Prophet Muhammad to be the final prophet?

We have mentioned the finality of the revelation given to Prophet Muhammad. But there may be some sceptics who would ask why a final revelation should be needed.

Some people may take Prophethood in a very loose sense; as if anybody with good qualities and morals could qualify to be a prophet. But we are talking about the need for a universal and final revelation.

To start with, the bedrock of Islam, the very cornerstone, is belief in monotheism, that there is

***You also have one
humanity . . . one earth
. . . one basic law . . . one
Prophethood***

one invisible Creator. You also have one humanity. The Qur’an emphasises all humans belong to Adam. As the prophet of Islam said, “You all belong to Adam and they (Adam and Eve) were both created from dust.” So, we have this common heritage and common linkage. Then we have one earth, which we all share. We have one universe, which is part of the whole system. We also have one basic law that rules the universe. That is the law that God has established in nature. (Note that we do not say the laws of nature, but the laws that God created in nature). We also have one basic aim for humanity in its pursuit of material as

well as spiritual progress. It follows that from all these aspects of Oneness, that there must also be one Prophethood, one mission that all the prophets have carried out throughout history.

So, in considering the question from the sceptics, if you look at the history of previous prophets, you will notice that, in many cases, a prophet was sent and then, after a few hundred years, another prophet was sent simply because the teachings of the other prophet were either lost, forgotten or changed. So, for that reason there was a need to have another prophet. Another reason is that, without this unity and universalism, some people would be tempted to say: "I follow my prophet; I follow this prophet or that." Yet all prophets were carrying essentially the same message. So it makes a lot of sense that a final prophet would be sent with the guidance of God to culminate, to crystallise, to bring together the entire essence of the divine revelation throughout history.

This person must be a prophet whose revelation will never be lost or changed, and that is what we find in the case of the Qur'an. It is the only scripture in the history of mankind that was written down directly from the mouth of its prophet and a great deal of evidence is available to show that it is still intact in the very same form in which it was revealed.

There was also a need for a prophet whose scope of mission was not only to his own people, as was the mission of all prophets before Muhammad, but rather to all humanity, and whose mission was not only valid or related to the time in which he was sent but which carried within itself the elements of flexibility and applicability for all time to come. Taking all these elements together, including various aspects of Oneness, we should see the sense in uniting all humanity at this certain point of time under the same aim, under the same God, and under the same prophet.

A question of timing – Why in Islam do we learn of the final Prophet?

Why, we may ask, does the finality of revelation have to appear at this particular point in history?

Firstly it is amazing that no prophet or messenger before Prophet Muhammad claimed that his message was the last one or that it was the conclusion of prophecy. On the contrary, we find that in both the Old and New Testaments prophets are always speaking about somebody, some prophet, who is to come, and no one claims that he is the final prophet. It is only in the case of Islam that we find this documented in the word of God in the Qur'an as well as in the words of Prophet Muhammad. This is a significant point.

To start with, we have to say that the selection of the proper time was not something that was done by a person but by God Himself. God chose that time as the

God chose that time as the most appropriate time . . . we, as humans, cannot really judge the wisdom of God.

most appropriate time. If we, as humans, try to understand why, then it is only our human attempt to understand. We cannot really judge the wisdom of God.

At least four basic points may be very relevant here. First of all, there is the question of the means of transportation and communication. In the past it was very difficult to communicate. It was not practical to have a prophet who had enough followers to spread out all over the world and bring the message to other people. There were degrees, of course, but you could say that from the seventh century A.D. onwards, the extent of movement and contact between people had become greater and now, with modern technology, it is becoming much easier to communicate the message.

A second basic reason concerns the means of writing and preserving the message. A prophet was a human being. He would live for a few decades and then die. The only authentic teaching would be something that was preserved, preferably in writing, so it would not be forgotten or mixed up. We know this, and there is a lot of evidence available that the revelations given to previous prophets were not kept intact over the centuries. There were various reasons: the believers were attacked, they were persecuted, their Holy Books were destroyed, and some people started to write whatever they recalled.

So, there were problems and this is something that is readily admitted when you study the historicity of the various scriptures before Islam. With these difficulties then, it is quite possible that, even though the prophet was honest in communicating what had been given to him, this message after his death might have experienced some partial loss, and possibly some changes.

A third possible reason is that whatever remains of the teachings of the prophets before Muhammad has often become mixed up with philosophical ideas, with theological speculation and sometimes even with some of the mythology that preceded the mission of this prophet. That has made it very difficult for people to sift out what were the exact words of the prophets and what was just mere theorising or putting theology and philosophy into the picture.

The fourth, and perhaps most important reason is the stage of maturity of humanity. Previously, a prophet would be sent, then another prophet would come with some kind of slightly modified mission even though the message is basically the same. It made more sense that when humanity reached a certain level, a universal general message could be given to them that carried the elements of flexibility and applicability so that there would be interaction between the divine and the human. The divine gives you the permanent, unchangeable laws and framework of life which the human mind tries to interpret and from which

details and specific applications can be found depending on the needs of time and place.

Now, if we look at all these four points, we find that with the appearance of Prophet Muhammad, the message given to him was preserved intact and not mixed up with the teaching of anyone else, and ample historical evidence is there to support this.

What you find in the Qur'an is separate even from the words of Muhammad when he is not receiving revelation in words, i.e., the *hadiths* or prophetic traditions. It is even in separate books.

The purity of revelation has been preserved

So, the purity of revelation has been preserved and we also see that within a few years after his death, the message of Islam reached nearly half of the known world at that time and today it has reached the rest of the world. So, as we have already said, the timing was selected by God, but we can recognise a good number of logical reasons why that particular time was chosen.

Muhammad as the final Messenger – no more guidance from God?

Some may look at the concept of finality of the message of Muhammad and ask the question, is the door of guidance closed?

They might ask that if Muhammad is the seal of the prophets, does that mean there is no more guidance to be sent from God?

Prophets, reformers and a completed message

However, questions like these seem to mix up the role of prophets with that of reformers. A prophet is not sent to us to show us where to place traffic lights, how to collect municipal taxes, or how to organize the school board. A prophet gives broad guidance, especially in the last message of Islam, which has principles that cannot be changed by time and place.

Once the message of the prophet has been completed, the revelation preserved (and the Qur'an itself asserts that this is a final revelation, the most perfect, complete and comprehensive code of life) then you do not really need another prophet for details. You can use your mind; you can think.

The concept of *ijtihad* in Islam

Of course there are some problems, for example, with people having difficulty understanding – this is the concept of *ijtihad* in Islam: in applying the laws by exerting effort and trying to see how the divine law could be applied under certain conditions or in a certain period of time.

So there is no contradiction between the finality of Prophethood, and continuation of guidance in a different, lower form. But we cannot accept anybody coming and claiming that he is a new prophet or that he had received any new revelation.

We are not saying that people will not deviate any longer since the final messages and that people are going to be angels forever. People are still going to deviate from the proper path but they do not need a prophet every time. They need a reformer or a rejuvenator.

It is amazing to notice that since that assertion was made in the seventh century of the Christian era, that Muhammad was the last prophet, there has never been a prophet who can really resemble, in any remote form, any of the great prophets of the past – people such as Abraham, Moses or Jesus – or anybody who can claim to have a revelation that in any way can be compared with the Bible or with the Qur'an. We are not saying that there have not been claims, but we can judge them as compared with the greater revelations.

The Qur'an itself testifies to the finality of the Message

In Chapter 33: verse 40 of the Qur'an we can read:

“Muhammad is not the father of any of you men, or your men. But he is the Messenger of God and the Last of Prophets.”

Also in Chapter 7: verse 150, it says,

“Say, Oh! Muhammad, I am the Messenger of *Allah* to you all.”

And finally, in Chapter 5: verse 3, it says,

“This day, have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour on you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.”

THE QUR'AN ON JESUS

Jesus in the Qur'an

Now, since we have talked of 'the great prophets of the past' we should mention here the extent of the coverage in the Qur'an of the life of Jesus.

In Chapter 11 in the Qur'an we can read the name of Jesus and something about him, his birth and life. There are other references too. The total number of chapters in the Qur'an is 114 but there is mention of Prophet Jesus in Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 19, 21, 23, 43, 57 and 61. This means that the Qur'an clearly has a substantial coverage on the life and person of Jesus.

To add to this we can cite the titles of three chapters to show how much importance is given to the story of Jesus as represented in the Qur'an. One chapter in the Qur'an, Chapter

19, takes its title from the name of the mother of Jesus. The title is *Surah Mariam*, or the *Chapter of Mary*.

Another chapter in the Qur'an, Chapter 3, takes its title from the family of Mary. It is called *Ali Imran* or *The Family of Imran*. There is another chapter in the Qur'an, Chapter 5, which takes its title from the Muslim version of the last supper. It is a different story but it is called *Al-Maidah* or *The Table*.

In some verses the Qur'an uses the name *Isa*, which is equivalent to *Jesus* in Arabic. In some places it also uses *Al-Masih*. This could mean *Messiah* but it also could mean *the Anointed*, since kings and great people used to be anointed with oil. The word *Masih* could also be a title.

The Qur'an gives some brief discussion of the background of Jesus and the conditions at the time of his birth but basically the impression that one gets is that the time of the mission of Jesus was a time when the main problem with his people was extreme ritualism and materialism. That is corroborated in other references as, for example, in the Bible, with the story of Jesus dismissing the moneylenders from the temple.

But what is also obvious is the fact that the mission of previous prophets has been misinterpreted by many people to mean that you have to just stick to the letter of the law, forgetting the spirit of the law itself. Just as when the notion of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' is remembered but when the spirit of charity and forgiveness could, at times, be applied and be more beneficial for all concerned. So his birth, in fact the miraculous aspect of his birth, is somewhat consistent with the kind of reminder that people at that time needed about the existence of the spiritual world.

The ancestors of Jesus

The Qur'an also talks about the ancestors of Prophet Jesus since, according to the Qur'an, he is regarded as one of the descendants of Abraham.

In fact, all the famous prophets who emerged in the Middle East are the descendants of Prophet Abraham because the first son of Abraham was Ismail. The only prophet that comes from the descendants of Ismail is Prophet Muhammad, the last prophet, and then from the second son, Isaac, came all the Israeli prophets. Chapter 6, verses 83-85, clearly implies that Jesus is the descendant of Abraham.

To speak more specifically about his last linkage, in terms of this mother, we find that the Qur'an traces the story of Prophet Jesus to his grandmother, Mary's mother. She is called, in the Qur'an, *Imranatul Imran* or *the wife of Imran*. If we summarise the main points, it will be easier to follow the citation from the Qur'an:

The wife of Imran became pregnant and she vowed to God to devote her child to His service (some interpret that as the service of the temple). But when she gave birth she found that the child was a girl, Mary. At the beginning, she was a little disappointed because, according to Mosaic law (the law of Moses) a girl cannot serve in the temple. However, she accepted whatever God had blessed her with and she prayed to God to bless her daughter Mariam and all her descendants.

Mariam (Mary) – the mother of Jesus

The Qur'an also says that, later on, Mariam (Mary) was raised in the care of Prophet Zakaria who was a relative within the same family. He was also the father of John the Baptist (called Yahya in the Qur'an). As she grew up under his supervision, he noted strange things about Mary. Whenever he entered her sanctuary he found that she had lots of food. He asked her: "Mary, where did you get this food?" She said to him, "God has provided me with it."

He was very impressed with this very pious and pure girl to the point that he started praying to God to give him a child.

It is important to notice here at that time Zakaria was very old and so was his wife. Not only this, his wife was barren and the Qur'an tells that there was a miraculous birth of John the Baptist, Yahya.

In fact the very miraculous birth of John the Baptist to a barren mother and parents advanced in age was a prelude to another greater miracle, or greater miraculous birth that was to shortly take place and that was the birth of Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him).

The Qur'anic verses give the flavour of it. In Chapter 3: verses 33-37, it says,

“Allah did choose (for His Messengers) Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of Imran above all people – offspring, one of the other. Allah hears and knows all things. The wife of Imran said: ‘My Lord, I dedicate to you what is in my womb for Thy special service, so accept this offering of mine for you hear and know everything.’ When she delivered her child, she said: ‘Lord, I have delivered a girl’, – and Allah knew very well what she had delivered – ‘and the male is not like the female. I have named her Mary and I implore your protection for her and for her future offspring from the mischief of Satan the accursed.’ So her Lord graciously accepted the girl and made her grow up as a good girl and entrusted her to the care of Zakaria. Whenever Zakaria entered the sanctuary to see her, he found some food with her. He would ask, ‘Oh Mary! From whence has this come to you?’ She would answer, ‘It is from Allah. Allah provides without stint for whom he will.’ Thereupon Zakaria invoked his Lord and said, ‘Oh my Lord, grant to me from You a progeny that is pure, for You are He that hears prayers.’”

The virgin birth

According to the Qur'an, Mary had some idea of the kind of miracle that was to take place through her. The birth of Jesus was a virgin birth. There is no dispute. And she gave birth to Jesus before she got married to Joseph the carpenter.

This is perhaps the most outstanding miracle of Prophet Jesus, the way he was born, and when we talk about this we cannot really speculate much.

The summary of the Qur'anic verses concerning this is that one time Mary went into seclusion away from her family, and, while she was alone, there appeared to her an angel of God in the form of a human being.

In the beginning, she was frightened, of course, since she was a girl alone. She started imploring him not to get near her or touch her if he really feared God. Then he told her that she should not fear. He was not there to hurt her or anything. He was simply coming to her to bring the news of the birth of a noble pure child. This is the basic story. It appears in Chapter 19 (the chapter of Mary): in verses 16-21 we read,

“Relate in the Book [the Qur'an] the story of Mary when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen (to screen herself) from them; and We sent to her Our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects.”

We know that the angel Gabriel appeared to Prophet Muhammad in the form of a human being so this is not unusual.

“She said, ‘I seek refuge from you God most gracious, come not near if you fear God.’ He said, ‘Mary! I am only a messenger from thy Lord to announce you the gift of a holy son.’ She said, ‘How shall I have a son,

seeing that no man has touched me and I am not unchaste?’ He said, ‘So it will be: Your Lord says, “That is easy for Me and We wish to appoint him as a sign unto men and a mercy from Us.” It is a matter so decreed.”

This is how the news of the future birth of Jesus was related to Mary.

The infant Jesus defends his mother

There is no evidence in the Qur’an that her pregnancy was unusual. It was just like any woman’s pregnancy and, in fact, the Qur’an talks about her suffering the agony of birth like any other women would, but the Qur’an also adds that she was particularly distressed psychologically because she was very worried as to what her people will think of her. How was she going to explain to them this virgin birth? Nobody would believe her. The Qur’an also indicates that something miraculous happened immediately after Jesus was born, when she was suffering that stress and pain: He (Jesus) reassured her and told her what to do when people asked her this type of question. The Qur’an shows later on that as a baby, even as an infant in her arms, he started to defend his mother against the accusations that were made. The story that I have just summarised is also in Chapter 19: verses 22-26,

“So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place, and the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She cried in her anguish: ‘Ah, would that I had died before this, would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!’ But a voice cried to her from beneath the palm tree [that voice was interpreted in some versions as a voice of an angel, but another, very legitimate interpretation, is that this was the voice of Jesus himself]: ‘Grieve not for your Lord has provided a rivulet beneath you, and shake towards yourself the trunk of the palm tree. It will let fall fresh ripe dates upon you, so eat and drink and cool your eyes.

And if you do see any man say I have vowed a fast to God most gracious and this day I will enter into no talk with any human being.’”

The reaction of Mary's people

In the following verses, 27-40, in the same chapter we read of the kind of reaction the people had, the kind of condemnations and accusations they made against Mary:

“At length, she brought the babe to her people carrying him in her arms. They said, ‘Oh! Mary truly an amazing thing have you brought! O Sister of Aaron!’”

This term, “Sister of Aaron,” needs some clarification because it doesn't mean that she was a blood sister. This has been a misconception and the basis for a challenge by some western writers who say that the Qur'an confuses her with the sister of Moses who was also called Mary.

The Qur'an says that all believers are one brotherhood and some commentators say that she was a sister of Aaron in the sense of having a similar devotion to God. Whichever meaning you choose, it is still consistent.

“O Sister of Aaron, your father was not a man of evil, nor your mother a woman unchaste. But she pointed to the babe (Jesus). They said: How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?’ He (Jesus) said: I am indeed a servant of God. He has given me revelation and made me a prophet. And he has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing or miserable. So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the Day that I shall be raised up to life (again)! Such was Jesus the son of Mary. It is a statement of truth, about which they vainly dispute. It is not befitting to the majesty of Allah that He should beget a son. Glory be to Him! When he

determines a matter, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. Verily Allah is my Lord and your Lord. Him therefore serve you. This is a way that is straight. But the sects differ among themselves, and woe to the unbelievers because of the coming Judgement of a momentous Day! How plainly will they see and hear, the Day that they will appear before Us! But the unjust today are in error manifest! But warn them of the Day of Distress when the matter will be determined. For, behold, they are negligent and they do not believe! It is We who will inherit the earth, and all belongs thereon. To Us will they all be returned."

Who was the father of Jesus? – A question of miracles

This then brings us to the ultimate rhetorical question: if the Qur'an says that Jesus had only a mother and did not have a father, who was his father?

To this question we can respond by asking who Eve's father was or who was Adam's father? If a person does not have a physical, human father, does this mean he is divine? If so, then Eve must have been God and Adam must have been God because they don't have a father. The Qur'an answers this question, indirectly, in Chapter 3: verse 59:

"The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; he created him from dust. Then he said to him: 'Be' and he was."

According to the verse, God was able to create Adam without a father or a mother and to create Eve from Adam's side. Indeed, we should remember that it is not only the birth of Prophet Jesus that is miraculous.

It's unusual, but it's just as miraculous as the birth of any human being. If you really study how the various genetic characteristics

are passed on from parents to children, that is a miracle in itself. All we can say is that it is both miraculous and unusual in the case of Prophet Jesus.

We should not imply in any shape or form that God is bound to follow the same laws of nature as us

The point to remember is that we should not imply in any shape or form that God is bound to follow the same laws of nature

as us because God created these laws and He can break them whenever he wishes.

Of course, most of the time there is harmony between what we perceive as natural laws and the will of God. But, at times, he should have the discretion and prerogative to give us some special signs for a certain purpose.

We cannot limit the power of God.
In the same chapter, verses 45-49, it says:

“Behold! The angels said: ‘O Mary! *Allah* giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him. His name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the hereafter and of the company of those nearest to *Allah*. He shall speak to the people in childhood and in maturity, and he shall be of the company of the righteous.’ She said: ‘O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?’ He said: ‘Even so, *Allah* creates what He wills. When He has decreed a plan, He but says to it ‘Be’, and it is. And *Allah* will teach him the Book and wisdom, the law and the Gospel, and appoint him a messenger to the Children of Israel (with this message): ‘I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breath into it, and it becomes a bird by *Allah’s* leave. And I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and I quicken the dead, by *Allah’s*

leave. And I declare to you what you eat and what you store to your houses. Surely therein is a sign for you if you did believe.”

It is obvious that he Will of God does not need a human intermediary for such a thing as a pregnancy. If He decides something, He can simply order that a child would be born from a virgin.

There is a beautiful comment by an Egyptian scholar. He said that if you look into the various unusual methods of creation you will find that the creation of Prophet Jesus completes the picture. First, there was the creation of a human being without a father or a mother – this is Adam. Then, there was the creation of a human being from a man’s side, but not from a woman’s side, and that’s obviously Eve. She came from a man but not from a mother. And then there is the normal creation of a human being from both a father and a mother, and that’s every one of us. Lastly, there is the fourth type of creation of a human being from a woman’s side but not from the father’s side. So that beautifully completes the various signs or miracles of God. All are equally important. All are equally stunning miracles. All are signs of the omnipotence and power of *Allah*.

THE QUR'AN ON HUMANITY

Now, since the Qur'an admits to the virgin birth of Jesus, there must be something unique about him because this miracle did not happen to anyone else. There is no question that it is unique. Every prophet's miracle is unique. There was the miracle given to Prophet Abraham when he was put in the fire and came out alive and unharmed. Although that is unique, i.e. it didn't happen to any other prophet, that does not make him special in the sense of being divine, simply because it is different.

The uniqueness of the miracles of each prophet

The point to remember here is that the miracles of various prophets are unique because each prophet was given a miracle which was suited to the circumstances of the place he was sent to and the time he was sent there.

For example, in the days of Prophet Moses, the Pharaohs were very skilful in magic. So, when Moses appeared before the Pharaoh, the Qur'an narrates that God ordered him to throw down his cane and it became a huge snake that swallowed all the magic creations that the magicians had made. The Egyptians immediately saw this as a sign from God that this person cannot be a mere magician. He is really a prophet. So, that was suited to the circumstances of his time.

In the case of Prophet Muhammad, since he was the last prophet, his miracle was not a mere metaphysical miracle that took place in the sight of some people. Instead, it was a miracle that we still have in our hands.

By the same token, at the time of Prophet Jesus people had forgotten the spirit of the law. They were too concerned with ritualism and formalism. There were also people who denied the existence of the world of the spirit. Some used to say that the spirit or the soul of anything is in its blood.

Others were influenced by the Greek philosophy of cause and effect and they concluded that God is the first cause. So, it was necessary at that time for God to show them that he is above what human philosophers interpret as a cause / effect relationship. People also needed to be reminded of the spirit of the law and the spiritual world and it was very appropriate to have this type of miraculous birth to remind them that the spiritual world does exist.

We should stress here that when we talk about miracles given to the prophets, we are not talking about something that is generated, but rather a divine gift given to the prophet to support him in his message. A prophet, whether he is Abraham, Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad, is not miracle worker, but a medium through whom God manifests His power and signs to mankind.

Jesus spoken of as 'the word'

The Qur'an, in talking about Jesus, refers to him sometimes by the term *kalimah*, which means word, and the Bible refers to him in the same way. Since this is the case how can we explain the differences between the understanding of Christians and that of Muslims?

We need to recognise that there is an essential difference between the understanding of *word* among Christian theologians and the Qur'anic usage. The theological interpretation is that *word* here is related to some kind of attribute of God. They refer to the Gospel of John, Chapter 1, verse 1, which says that: "The word was with God and the word was God." According to many Biblical scholars this seems to be an influence of Greek, Platonic philosophy, which considers the word as the divine intelligence.

The Qur'anic understanding of it has nothing to do with this philosophy of *the word (logos)*. In the Qur'anic usage, the term *word* means a command or sign from God. One verse, Chapter 16: verse 40, will perhaps explain it:

"For everything that We have willed we but say, 'Be!' and it is."

The command of God is a word of God and all of us are being created by the word of God

This means that the word *Be* symbolises the Will of God. The command of God is a word of God and all of us are being created by the word of God.

In that sense, we can say that, according to the Qur'an, the same term was used for Jesus, and for all creatures including all of us as humans. All of us are words of God because we are created by the command or word of God in the Qur'anic usage of the term.

We should add that, in the Qur'an, there are at least twelve places where *word of God* is used in the plural which further shows that it was never used exclusively to mean that only Jesus is *the word*.

The Holy Spirit – another source of misunderstanding

Another word that seems to create some ambiguity is the term 'Holy Spirit.' Since the Qur'an refers to Jesus as the Holy Spirit, some will see this phrase as having the same meaning as the Christian one and so we have the possibility of some kind of misunderstanding.

Once again this goes back to the influence of Greek philosophy, particularly the Platonic ideas, on the writer of the Gospel of John in particular. In this gospel the term *Holy Spirit* is frequently used. The whole idea of 'God the father, the Son and the Holy Ghost' is based very closely on this same Greek philosophy that the spirit of God (or holy spirit) is a component in Godhood.

The Qur'an and two meanings of the word 'spirit'

If you refer to the Qur'an, there are two different meanings of the word spirit (or *rooh*, in Arabic). We find the first meaning used in reference to Jesus. The Qur'an mentions that Jesus was *Roohol Minh*: a spirit proceeding from God.

What does the Qur'an mean when it says this? Is it an exclusive term for Jesus or does it apply to people as well?

The answer is that it applies to all because the word *rooh*, as it appears in the Qur'an, has various meanings that relate to the context of the verse.

***The Qur'an mentions
that Jesus was
Roohol Minh: a spirit
proceeding from God.***

For example, in Chapter 42: verse 52, the word *spirit* is used to refer to revelation. In Chapter 58: verse 22, it is used in the

sense of support from God.

“The support of God is a spirit from Him.”

It is used also as *a secret of life* or *the source of our spirituality* and this is what is referred to in the Qur'an in respect to Jesus as well as in reference to other human beings.

This term is mentioned in Chapter 4: verse 171 in reference to Jesus, but it is also mentioned in a general sense to refer to all human beings. In Chapter 32: verse 9, it says:

“But He (God) fashioned him, fashioned the human being in due proportion and breathed into him something of His Spirit.”

This means that every human being derives his spirituality, his instinctive feeling of a relationship or rapport with his Creator, from that spirit of God breathed into him at the time of Creation.

The other terms in the Qur'an that are used to mean Holy Spirit refer specifically to the archangel Gabriel. He is called *Roohul Qudus*, which roughly means *Holy Spirit* or *Roohul Amin*, which means the *Honest Spirit*.

The archangel Gabriel is called Roohul Qudus, which roughly means Holy Spirit

The Qur'an mentions Gabriel as the Angel who brought revelation to the previous prophets as well as to Prophet Muhammad. In verses such as

Chapter 2: 87, Chapter 5: 113, and Chapter 19 : 16 the term *roohul qudus* refers specifically to Gabriel. According to Islam, Gabriel and all other Angels are creatures of *Allah*. They are not part of God. They are all servants of God just as the prophets were.

The Deification of Jesus

Now there may be some who would protest that we are negating the divine nature of Jesus since the Qur'an only denies the Fatherhood of God and the Sonship of Jesus. They might argue that it does not touch very much on the identification of Jesus.

In answer to this we should make clear that some writers, especially non-Muslims, do not have much depth of understanding of the Qur'an. They just quote one verse without relating it to other verses that deal with the same subject.

In fact, what the Qur'an negates is all forms of deification. For example, in Chapter 5: verses 116-120, it says:

“And Behold! God will say (on the Day of Judgement): ‘O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say unto men: Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God?’ He (Jesus) will say: ‘Glory be to You (God)! It is not my place to say what I have no right to say. I never told them anything except what You commanded me to say, that is, Worship God, my Lord, your Lord.”

What of those who say Jesus is God?

We also need to consider people who said that Jesus is God himself. The Qur'an talks about this in the same chapter verses 72-73:

“Certainly! They disbelieve who say God is Christ, the son of Mary. But said Christ: ‘O children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord’. God will forbid the garden to anyone who associates anything else with God. His abode will be the Fire. For the wrongdoers there will be no helpers. ‘Certainly they disbelieve who say God is one of three in a trinity. For there is no God except God alone. If they do not stop their blasphemy a painful torment will afflict those of them who disbelieve.

Why do they not turn toward God and seek His forgiveness? God is Forgiving, Merciful. Christ (the son of Mary) was only a Messenger (of God). Messengers have passed away before him.”

Even the idea of God sending his son to take away the sins of humanity is also negated in the Qur'an in Chapter 112, one of the shortest yet most important chapters in the Qur'an. It says:

“He is *Allah* (God) the One and Only; God, the Eternal, the Absolute. He begets not; nor was He begotten, and there is none like unto Him.”

The idea of the only begotten son is negated as are all forms of deification.

God spoken of as ‘We’ in the Qur'an

Some who read the Qur'an ask why the term ‘We’ is used when God speaks about creation. This wording is exactly the same as in the Old Testament but it is not to be taken as any proof of the existence of the trinity even though ‘We’ in Arabic refers to at least three.

It would be a very superficial kind of proof because it is well known that many languages – Arabic and English included – use this same terminology so that when a king speaks of himself he uses the pronoun ‘*we*.’ This is known as the royal ‘we’ or majestic plural. Naturally, when God speaks of himself He is also entitled to use this form of language.

The Qur'an is replete with so much conclusive evidence about the absolute Oneness of *Allah* and that Christ was a Messenger of God.

‘Lord’ or ‘Son of God’ – a Muslim response

In the New Testament of the Bible we can read the terms ‘Lord’ or ‘Son of God’ but in fairness to our Judaeo-Christian

brothers and sisters, in order to comment on that we need to look carefully at how the Bible itself uses the term *Lord* or *Son of God*.

For a start the term *Lord* does not necessarily means divine. In England, there are many Lords, but nobody says there are many gods in England. *Lord* means *master* and apparently, this was the meaning that people intended when they addressed Jesus as *Lord*.

The second term, *Son of God*, was used in the Old Testament to mean a person who is close to God because he is good. It was never used in a sense of divinity. In Exodus 4: 22-23, Israel was called a son of God, but nobody says that Israel was divine. In the Psalms of David 2:7, David was referred to as a son of God, and in First Chronicles 22:10, Prophet Solomon is also referred to as a son of God.

In the Qur'an, we find that Ezra (known as Uzayr in Arabic) was also referred to as a son of God because of his crucial role in recollecting and rewriting the Laws of the Torah a thousand years after Moses, during the Babylonian exile.

Even the New Testament uses this term in a very similar way to the Old Testament. For example, in Matthew 5:9 it quotes Jesus as saying:

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of god in heaven”.

And we find similar quotations in Matthew 5:45 and 23:9.

So, it is very obvious that when Jesus used the term *father* to refer to God, or *son* to refer to himself, he only meant this the metaphoric sense, in the same way that all human beings are children of God because they depend on Him.

Also God is the father of all because He loves and cares for all his creation.

The denial of his divinity by Jesus himself

The verses we have quoted from the Qur'an make it very clear that Jesus absolutely and conclusively denied his divinity and rebuked those who would develop this philosophical idea after he was gone. In fairness, however, we have to refer to the Gospels.

We can take, for example, the famous story of the Temptation, when Satan came to Prophet Jesus and tried to tempt him, as it appears in Matthew 4:1-11. Now the question is: How could Satan tempt God? It is conceivable that a person can be subjected to temptation because they are human and that is what Jesus spoke of himself as: a human being.

In another story, Jesus was said to have gone into the wilderness to pray. Now, what is the significance of this praying? It means that he is praying to someone who is greater than he is. He is praying to God.

This does not fit the definition of the Trinity because, if all the persons in the trinity are the same, nobody prays to himself. If Jesus was God incarnate, he need not pray to himself. So, he is human in that sense. In Matthew 24:36 Jesus denied any knowledge of the unseen, e.g. the knowledge of the hour. Yet the knowledge of the unseen is definitely one of the divine attributes.

If somebody does not know the future then he is not God. He may be pious, or a Messenger, but he is a human being. He is not God.

Also, we find in the Gospel of Mark, 10:18, an incident in which somebody ran after him and said: "Good Master" and Jesus replied, "Why do you call me Good? There is none good

but one and that is God.”

So, he denied this label. Of course, it does not mean that Jesus is not good, far from it! What he means is that goodness, in the absolute sense, is a divine attribute and ‘I am not divine. I am a human being, so why did you call me good in that absolute sense?’

Even outside the three synoptic Gospels – in the Gospel of John, for example – we find John 14:28. Jesus says: “My father is greater than I.”

This is very clear evidence if we take it in the straightforward sense rather than imputing any philosophical or theological meanings. It is very clear from the words of Prophet Jesus that he never really meant that he was divine and he even stated directly and indirectly that he was simply a human being and a Messenger of God. This is exactly what the Qur’an, 600 years later, confirms.

THE QUR'AN AND THE MISSION

The Scope of the Mission of Jesus

When the Qur'an considers the scope of Jesus' mission on earth it describes it as exclusively to the children of Israel. Israel. In Chapter 3: verse 49, it says:

“And appoint him (Jesus) a Messenger to the children of Israel.”

This is very specific.

Also, in Chapter 61: verse 6 in the Qur'an, we read:

“And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary said: ‘O children of Israel! I am the Messenger of God sent to you.’”

In Chapter 5: verse 49, after talking about various Israelite prophets, it says:

“And in their (the Israelite Prophets) footsteps we sent Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming the law that has come before him.”

The Qur'an is very clear on this, and even the New Testament of the Bible attests to this.

In the Gospel of Matthew 15: 24, there is the famous story of the Canaanite woman who wanted him to cure her daughter. Jesus said to her: “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Even though, later on, he responded because of her faith, his statement is very clear.

In Matthew 10:5-6, when he was giving instructions to two of the disciples it says:

“These two Jesus sent forth and commanded them saying: Go not into the way of gentiles and into any city of the Samaritans enter you not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Again he is repeating the same principle that he was sent basically as an Israelite Prophet. This is also implied in Matthew 19:28 in a very similar confirmation.

Two observations are necessary here to avoid any misunderstanding of these quotations. Firstly, the conclusiveness of the words of Jesus, as quoted in the Gospels, definitely overshadows any claim that was developed much later, such as we find in Paul's letter to the Corinthians or Romans claiming that Jesus ordained the disciples after his resurrection to go and preach to all mankind.

The other observation is that when we say that both the Qur'an and the Gospels confirm that Jesus' mission was to the children of Israel, this does not mean that his teachings are not valid for anyone other than the Israelites. In fact, the teachings of all prophets are relevant. Knowledge of God is relevant to all times and places. However, even though it was valid for all times and all people, still, God's plan was to send after Jesus one final and universal messenger and that was Prophet Muhammad.

The Essence of the Mission of Jesus

The message of Prophet Jesus was to invite people to know God, to worship Him and to obey Him and there is one verse in the Qur'an which combines the essence of his message with other parts of his message that were meant specifically for the Israelites. This appears in Chapter 3: verse 50 in the Qur'an and it says:

“I [Jesus] have come to you to confirm the law which was before me.”

So one of his tasks, according to this part of the verse, is to confirm whatever remained intact and unchanged of the law, the Torah. Then it continues:

“And to make lawful to you part of what was before forbidden to you.”

We know that in Judaic law certain restrictions were imposed on people as punishment and not because they (the things restricted) were bad. And then the verse continues:

“I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, so fear God, and obey me.”

So, in addition to this specific part of his mission that was directed to the Israelites, he emphasised that you should fear and obey him (ie, Jesus).

The Qur'an on the Miracles of Jesus

In Chapter 3: verse 49, the Qur'an speaks of the miracles of Jesus:

“And when he (Jesus) came as a Messenger to the children of Israel, he said: ‘I have come to you with clear signs from your Lord. In your very presence I make the likeness of a bird out of clay and breath into it and it becomes, by God’s command, a bird. I heal the blind and the lepers and I bring to life the dead by God’s leave. I inform you of what you eat and what you store up in your houses. Surely therein is a great sign for you in all these if you believe.’”

But we should note here that the Qur'an says: “By leave of God.” In other words, Jesus is saying that he is not divine but that God has given him this power.

On the Question of Jesus Being Given the Gospels

One of the articles of faith in Islam is to believe in God, His Prophets and

His Books and in the Qur'an, we find specific books mentioned like the Zabur (the Psalms of David) and the Suhuf (the leaves of Prophet Abraham). The Torah is also mentioned in the Qur'an and the Qur'an specifically mentions the Gospel.

The original Arabic word is *Al-Injil*, which some scholars translate as *good news*. When the Qur'an talks about the *Injil* it is curious to note that it is not mentioned just once. It is mentioned twelve times in six different chapters in the Qur'an that God gave Jesus the *Injil*.

The Qur'an also talks about the *Injil* in the context of other Holy Books, which gives you the distinct impression that the Qur'an does not refer to good news in a broad sense but rather to a specific Holy Book that was given to Prophet Jesus. Most of our Christian brothers and sisters believe that the Gospels were

biographies written about Jesus, but not necessarily something that was explicitly revealed to Jesus.

The *synoptic problem* – comparing the four Gospels

There is a well-known problem in Biblical studies called the *synoptic problem*, which occurs when scholars compare the contents of the various four Gospels trying to see what sources they were probably drawn from.

In one reference they use the term *Q* meaning that there was a Gospel called *Q* which some of the writers of the synoptic Gospels have used as a source of information. There was probably a different Gospel from which earlier Gospels were copied, which could be the original Gospel given to Jesus.

Let us also not forget another, separate issue: the canonised Gospels. The history of the Church shows that there were a large number of Gospels and it was only in the fourth century that the Church canonised the four Gospels and burned the others. So it is quite possible, both from Christian and Muslim sources, that Jesus did have a Holy Book that was unfortunately lost.

On the Prophethood of Jesus, Crucifixion and Ascension

The New Testament offers plenty of evidence on the prophethood of Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, 13:33-34, it says:

“Nevertheless I must walk today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet perished out of Jerusalem. Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem which killeth the prophets.”

In this Jesus is talking about himself as a prophet.

More explicitly in the Gospel of John in 8:40, we read:

“But now ye seek to kill me – a man who has told you the truth which I have heard of God.”

So, he himself admitted that he had heard certain truths from God and he is conveying these truths to them. This is definitely the characteristic of a prophet.

In addition, his contemporaries also thought of him as a prophet. The Gospel of Luke, 7:16, talks about the visit that Jesus made to the city of Nain and it says that: “A great prophet is risen up among us.” So people knew that he was a prophet.

When it comes to the discussion of crucifixion and ascension we should confine ourselves to the wording in the Qur'an because this is a matter on which very little information is available. Even early Christian sects disputed whether it was Jesus or Judas Iscariot who was put on the cross.

The Qur'an specifically mentions the crucifixion in Chapter 4: verses 156-158. In talking about the contemporaries of Jesus, it says:

“That they rejected Faith; that they uttered a false charge against Mary, a grave, false charge; that they themselves said (in boast): ‘We have killed Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’ – but they neither killed him, nor crucified him.”

The Qur'an is very clear on this. They did not slay him nor did they crucify him, but ‘the matter was made dubious for them’ and in other translations it is translated as “the matter was made to appear to them as such”.

There must have been some kind of confusion and they got the wrong impression that it was Jesus who was put on the cross.

And then the verse continues:

“And those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no certain knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not. Nay! Allah has raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power and Wise.”

So, according to this specific text of the Qur'an, it is conclusive that he was not the one who was killed, no matter how common the belief may be.

The Qur'an says, 'God raised him [Jesus] unto Himself'

The last part of the verse we have just quoted says that they did not kill Jesus but God

raised him to Heaven. In the original wording in the Qur'an, the Arabic says, if you translate it literally,

“But God raised him unto Himself.”

The best way to understand that, without going into philosophising, is to stick to the term *raffaa* or *raising* as it appears in the Qur'an, which appears in three different meanings in the Qur'an. One, according to some interpreters, is that God raised Jesus in body and soul. We should not say that this is impossible. It cannot be proven scientifically but God is definitely able to raise Jesus or take him away before crucifixion in body and soul. So, this is one possibility.

A second possibility is that the Qur'an also used the term *raffaa* to refer to the taking away of the soul. That is, the body would be on earth but the soul will be taken away, which could possibly mean that Jesus might have died somewhere else. But again, we do not have any conclusive proof that this is the interpretation.

It is one of the possibilities. In fact, there might be some indirect evidence of this point. In the Qur'an, in one verse, it says:

“O Jesus, I am raising you.”

The word *mutawwaffika* (raising) has two meanings. A common meaning would be *causing you to die*, which means a natural death, and the other meaning is *completing your term*, which could mean completing your message, bring your mission to a halt and raising you.

The other indirect evidence is that the Qur'an says very clearly and conclusively:

“Every soul will taste death.”

Jesus, being a prophet and human being, would definitely have to taste death like all other human beings. And here we can look again at the verse that we quoted earlier, in which Jesus spoke to his mother and said:

“Peace be upon me the day I was born and the day I die.”

The third meaning that is used in the Qur'an about raising is when it is used allegorically to refer to a raising of status. The Qur'an uses the term to refer to the raising of the status of mosques of knowledgeable people. In the Qur'an in Chapter 24:36, 19:33, 19:75 and 58:11, we find that the term *lifting* is used not necessarily in the physical sense but in the lifting of status. The Qur'an talks of Prophet Idris, for example, that God raised him to a high position.

These are all possible interpretations. The Qur'an does not tell us in a conclusive sense how he was raised. But, from the practical point of view of the Muslim, it does not make much difference whether he was crucified or not. Many prophets were

killed. Crucifixion was a common method of killing.

On the return of Christ

There is nothing in the Qur'an that conclusively says that Jesus would have a second coming. However, there are some sayings of Prophet Muhammad in which he talks about the second coming of Jesus. But it is quite different from the meaning understood among our Christian brothers and sisters. That is, he will not be coming, as some believe, as a judge, or as God to rule and judge. Rather, he will be coming as a follower of Islam and, as we mentioned before, Islam is the faith of all prophets, not just Prophet Muhammad.

This [second coming of Jesus] is quite different from the meaning understood among our Christian brothers and sisters

This prophetic tradition also says that he will come to declare the truth about

himself and may even break the cross which he will regard as something that came from pagan symbols or mythical ideas before Christianity.

It also mentions, interestingly enough, that towards the end of time, he would be participating with the believers in fighting the false Messiah or the anti-Christ.

NON-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Peaceful Co-existence

We have talked of the belief in all prophets and it is necessary to look into some of the practical applications of this on the thinking, attitudes and actions of Muslims.

More specifically, what is the effect of the Muslim belief in Prophethood on the attitudes of a Muslim towards non-Muslims? Does the Qur'an contain instructions on how Muslims should relate to others who are non-Muslim?

The general rule of the relationship between the Muslim and the non-Muslim is . . . peaceful co-existence

To take this further, is there any basis in the Qur'an for peaceful co-existence and what are the general rules and exceptions concerning

the relationship of Muslims to non-Muslims?

In Chapter 60: verses 8-9, the basic rule for the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim is very clearly spelled out.

This is one of the key citations. In the translation of the meaning from the original Arabic, it reads:

“Allah forbids you [the Muslims] not with regards to those who fight you not for (your) faith, nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: For Allah loves those who are just.”

The next verse, 9, says:

“God only forbids you with regard to those who fight you for (your) faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances) that do wrong.”

Now, we notice in these verses there are three important observations:

Firstly, it is clearly stated that the general rule of the relationship between the Muslim and the non-Muslim is, as the verse says, *justice and kindness*. In other words, peaceful co-existence.

But it is obvious, also, that if there is any deviation from the basic rule of friendship and fellowship it is only because of certain exceptional reasons. According to the verses quoted here, these reasons include, for example, people who are fighting you because you are a Muslim; those who are trying to destroy your religious identity.

As a second exception the verse mentions, “Those who drive you out of your homes”; that is, those who are engaged in actual violence and hostility against Muslims, or those who are supporting others in driving you out of your home.

It seems reasonable to question whether any sane person would extend intimacy and friendship to those who are trying to destroy him.

Be just with them

The third observation on this is that the verse uses two words *tabarubum watuksitualaibim*. *Watuksitualaibim*, which is the second term, means *to be just with them*.

The word bir in Arabic has no exact English equivalent – It's kindness; it's decency; it's respect; it's compassion

Justice means that you cannot prosecute them, take away their rights or hurt them because they are not Muslim.

The first term is quite interesting. *Tabarruhum* comes from the Arabic verb *bir* and the word *bir* in Arabic does not just connote kindness or justice. It goes beyond that.

The word *bir* in Arabic has no exact equivalent in English. That is why a translator of the Qur'an may just interpret it as *kindness*. *Bir*, in fact, in Arabic means everything that is good, decent, respectable and compassionate.

Just to clarify that further, we find that in the Hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, he uses the term *bir* for the relationship between a person and his parents.

In other words, one should have this *bir* (*birawallidain* in Arabic) for parents, which is lot more than kindness. It's kindness; it's decency; it's respect; it's compassion.

So, it is obvious then that any non-Muslim who agrees to have a peaceful co-existence with the Muslims is to be treated justly and kindly.

On the other hand, it is also obvious and practical to say that those who promote hostility or hatred towards the Muslims and try to destroy them cannot expect to have this kind of intimacy or close friendship.

The relationship between the *Ahlul Kitab* – the People of the Book

The verses that we have been discussing seem to refer to the situation of non-Muslims in general but there are many verses which speak more specifically about the particular relationship between Muslims and Jews and Christians.

The verse cited before was general and applies to Jews, Christians or others, but to clarify the situation, over and above this general treatment of other non-Muslims, we find that the Qur'an called Jews and Christians a particular name, and that, in Arabic, is *Ahlul Kitab* or *People of the Book*.

There are at least twenty-nine places in the Qur'an where the term *Ahlul Kitab* is used to refer to Jews and Christians. This might prompt the question as to the significance of the Qur'an singling out Jews and Christians among all non-Muslims with this particular term.

The reason is that the word *kitab* in Arabic means *Book*. And *Book* refers in Islamic terminology to scripture.

The closeness of the *Ahlul Kitab*

That in itself is the greatest manifestation of the special status given to this group of non-Muslims, the Jews and Christians, because they are closer to Muslims than are others who are either believe in a tribal god or believe in a multiplicity of gods. They are closer because of five basic reasons:

First of all, all of these great faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have one thing in common: the belief in one God. All these three religions believe in One Supreme Loving Father.

This phrase *Loving Father* should not need to provoke qualms as it is used in a metaphoric sense rather than to impute divinity to any human being.

There may be differences with respect to issues like the Trinity, for example – which is not accepted by the Muslims – or the *sonship* of Prophet Jesus. But again, that does not bear on the basic concept of belief in God.

Secondly, in all these three faiths, there is a belief in Prophethood; the idea that God sent messengers or prophets throughout history in order to guide humanity, to reconcile them to their Creator and to guide them onto the path of truth.

Of course, the prophets died, but their message is never dead. Their followers carried that message to others.

Thirdly, these three faiths also believe in divine revelation. There are scriptures that have been revealed to these prophets in order to guide humanity and, though there might be differences as to which scripture is relatively more authentic or which one was unchanged, the whole notion of belief in scripture is common.

A fourth common belief is the belief in the law of punishment and reward; that is, in accountability and the Hereafter, and that people in the Hereafter will be rewarded or punished depending on their correct belief and proper behaviour and their compliance with the moral code which has been echoed by all prophets throughout history, all the way from Adam to Prophet Muhammad.

So, in that sense then, we could say that, regardless of these differences, these areas which we have described provide a lot more ground for a commonality between Muslims on the one hand and Jews and Christians on the other hand as distinct from those who are atheist or polytheists.

Verses taken out of context – on not befriending

Sometimes, the claim is made that there is a verse in the Qur'an which actually implores or discourages Muslims from befriending Jews and Christians.

However, the verse that we have earlier cited is so conclusive and so clear that it is the general rule. So, if there is anything else in the Qur'an it has to be interpreted within the context of that general rule.

It seems that one of the main difficulties with some people who are not well- informed about Islam or knowledgeable of the entire Qur'an is that they take certain things out of context and give them exactly the opposite meaning.

By way of example there is a verse in the Qur'an that says:

“Do not approach or go to prayer when your mind is beclouded.”

If you recite just the words “do not approach prayer,” it means that you should not pray, which is the exact opposite meaning of what the verse intends. Or if someone were to recite the Islamic testimony which says that there is no god but One God and he says “there is no god” and stops then not only do they ignore the proper context of the verses around it but also the other supporting verses in the Qur'an.

So, in regard to the suggestion that Muslims should not befriend Jews and Christians, there is a verse in the Qur'an, in Chapter 5, which may give the mistaken impression, for someone who is not familiar, that a Muslim is not supposed to be friends with these people. But there is a following verse that is normally neglected and not referred to when people quote this verse. This first verse is number 54 and it says:

“O Ye who believe! take not the Jew and the Christians for your friends and protectors. They are but friends and protectors to each other and He amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily, God guides not a people unjust.”

The following verse really makes it clear as to the conditions under which this would be applicable. It speaks of:

“Those in whose hearts is a disease – you see how eagerly they run about among them saying: ‘We do fear lest a change of fortune brings us disaster.’ Perhaps God will give thee (O Muhammad) victory or a decision according to His will, then will they repent of the thought which they secretly harboured in their hearts.”

Any interpretation of the Qur’an must consider the reasons for Revelation and the conditions under which this verse was revealed. This verse deals specifically with some of the hypocritical people who were within the ranks of the Muslims and who, on the surface, claimed to be Muslims. However, they felt that it was quite possible that the non-Muslims, who were in conflict with the Muslims at that time, may achieve victory.

So, they tried to be friends secretly with them, even though these non-Muslims were trying to obliterate the Muslims. If the Muslims were the winners they would accept it as Muslims. But, if the non-Muslims won they would tell them that they were their friends and ask for some favours and protection.

So, it is obvious then, that what the Qur’an really condemns is this kind of duplicity and hypocrisy on the part of some people. But there is something more important, and that is the original word that is used in the Qur’an. The verse we have cited says:

“Do not take Jews and Christians *auliak*.”

The word *auliak* in Arabic does not necessarily mean just *friend*. The closer meaning is what Yusuf Ali included as an explanatory term in his translation of the Qur'an. The word is *protectors*. Actually, it is much closer to the meaning of the term *protector* than *friend*.

There are a lot of verses in the Qur'an that confirm and explain this particular meaning of *auliak* being *protector*.

It is very erroneous, as many Muslim jurists have pointed out, to take this verse to apply to every individual Jew or Christian. That is far from the intention behind it and contradictory to other instructions that appear in the Qur'an.

So, in that sense then, one cannot say that this verse applies to a Jew or Christian who is a decent neighbour, a decent colleague or a decent acquaintance.

The circumstances for the application for the verses are quite different. This is the problem of misquotations or partial quotations out of context.

We have talked about friendship and co-existence and about the Qur'anic teachings on relationships between Muslims, Christians and Jews and it is important to stress that friendship and co-existence is the rule in Islam and that the restrictions that are placed on friendship in Islam are the exception.

There are three portions of the Qur'an we can turn to. The first appears in Chapter 3: verses 118-120 where it talks about one of the cases where one should not have friendship with non-Muslims. It also gives the reason:

“O you who believe! Take not into your intimacy those outside your ranks. They will not fail to corrupt you. They only desire your ruin. Rank hatred has already appeared from their mouths. What their hearts conceal

is far worse. We have made plain to you the sign if you have wisdom. Ah! you are those who love them but they love you not. Though you believe in the whole of the Book. When they meet you they say: 'We believe', but when they are alone, they bite off the very tips of their fingers at you in their rage. Say, 'Perish in your rage.' God knows well all the secrets of the heart. If anything that is good befalls you (O Muslim) it grieves them. But, if some misfortune overtakes you, they rejoice at it. But if you are constant and do right not the least harm will their cunning do to you. For God compasseth round about all that they do."

The meaning of this quotation is that there are people who are bent on corrupting the Muslims and who envy or have bad feelings towards them and will take any opportunity to ruin the Muslims.

The second quotation is in Chapter 60: verse 1, in which the Muslims are again instructed:

"O you who believe! Take not My enemies and yours as friends (or protectors) offering them your love, even though they have rejected the truth that has come to you and have (on the contrary) driven out the messenger and yourselves from your homes."

That again is a reference to people who were harbouring aggressive feelings towards the Muslims and actually participated in driving them out of their homes.

The final quotation is in Chapter 58: verse 22, which shows that one should not have a close relationship with those who are not sincere towards God, who are, as the verse calls them, *resisting God*. One should not have intimate relationship with them even if they are one's friends or relatives. It says:

“You (Muhammad) will not find any people who believe in God and The Last Day loving those who resist God and His Messenger even though they were their fathers or their sons or their brothers or their kindred.”

And then it praises people who refused to have intimacy with those who resist God and the truth.

So, in that context, we can see there is ample evidence. These are just three quotations. There are more.

Room for reconciliation

Having said that, it is clear that there is plenty of room for reconciliation if a hostile attitude towards the Muslims changes. In fact, if there is any restriction on friendship or fellowship with any non-Muslims, especially the Jews and Christians, it has to be regarded as only temporary and, since that restriction must be because of specific reasons, if the reasons are removed, then friendship could be extended.

This very noble rule can be found in Chapter 60: verse 7 of the Qur'an:

“It may be that God may grant love (and friendship) between you and those whom you now hold as enemies. For God has power (over) all things and God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

Islam, of course, allows a person to defend their rights and their existence. However, you find the appeal to return evil with good if that would really lead to the improvement of the situation.

We see this, in particular, in Chapter 41: verse 33 where it says:

“Who is better in speech than one who calls men to God, works righteousness and says, ‘I am of those who bow in Islam [submission] to God.’ Nor can goodness and evil be equal. Repel (evil) with what is better. Then

will he between whom and thee was hatred become, as it were, thy friend and intimate. And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercised patience and self-restraint – none but persons of the greatest good fortune.”

It shows very clearly that, as the prophet of Islam, Prophet Muhammad, once said:

“Goodness is not to be good to one who is good to you. But goodness is to do good to someone who wronged you.”

This interaction between Muslims and others is given a practical application in a number of ways in Islamic law. In the same chapter of the Qur'an that we quoted from earlier – the one that provided the restriction on friendship under certain circumstances – we find a verse, verse 6, that really says that the Muslim is permitted to eat animals which are slaughtered by the Jews and Christians.

We well know that in Islamic law, one is not permitted to eat this same meat if it has been slaughtered by an atheist or a polytheist. But perhaps the clearest evidence that in Islamic law there is an attitude of tolerance and openness to followers of other faith is in the question of marriage.

About this the Qur'an says:

“One of the Signs of the God is that He created for you from your same kind mates that you may find comfort and tranquillity them. And He ordained between you Mercy and Love here in Our Signs for those who think or contemplate.”

According to that very verse, it says that a Muslim male may marry, besides a believer, a Jewish or Christian woman. And what could be closer in terms of intimacy and friendship than the noble relationship of marriage?

THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

We turn now to a claim that has been repeated a great many times over the years – the claim that Islam was “spread by the sword.” In this description you either converted to Islam or you died. It is important to recognise what the Qur’an has to say about this. Being a complete revelation, the Qur’an does not leave out any aspect of human life.

There can be no compulsion in religion

To begin with we must say that there is no single verse in the entire Qur’an or in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad that either encourages or condones compulsion in religion and the clearest documentation of this is found in Chapter 2, verse 256 where it says:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error.”

In other words, the Qur'an very clearly and positively forbids a true Muslim from committing the act of compulsion.

The Qur'an further indicates that the matter of guidance is not something that we decide on. Guidance is totally in the hands of God. For example, in Chapter 10, verses 99-100, we read:

“If it had been thy Lord's Will, they could all have believed – all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe! No soul can believe, except by the Will of Allah.”

We also find that the concept of judging people on whether they believe or not is a matter that is not up to us. Only God is the judge. Indeed, the Qur'an is very clear that the mission of Prophet Muhammad and those who follow him is simply to convey the message. In Chapter 13: verse 40, it says:

“Thy duty is to make (the message) reach them. It is Our part to call them to account.”

There are numerous other examples that you can find in the Qur'an – for example, the verse that says that “you (Muhammad) are only a reminder”; you are not a guardian or controller over them.

In Chapter 22: verse 17, there is a similar statement that the matter of faith is something that no power on earth can force. It lies in the hand of God when the heart is enlightened. The mind is open to receive the truth but no other human effort can bring it forth.

The question of compulsion is very clearly condemned in the Qur'an, whether it is by force, pressure or manipulation.

The permissible method of spreading the message

If the Qur'an forbids Muslims from using force in spreading Islam, we need to be clear which methods are permissible, according to the Qur'an, for taking the message to people who are non-Muslim.

There are a number of verses that are relevant to this. The first one appears in Chapter 16: verse 125 which applies to all, whether Jews, Christians, or others. It says:

“Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: For thy Lord knoweth best who have strayed from His path, and who receive guidance.”

As for the Jews and Christians in particular, we find that the Qur'an makes a special reference to the approach to be taken in discussing religious matters with them.

That appears in Chapter 29: verse 46, where it says:

“And do not dispute with the People of the Book except in the best way, unless it be with those of them who do wrong. But say, ‘We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we submit (in Islam).’”

Understanding the word ‘Jihaad’

When we are talking about the use of force we must recognise that the word Jihaad (or Jihad) is a word that has been heard quite often so it is necessary ask how the teachings that we have just been discussing from the Qur'an relate to the concept of jihaad.

The biggest problem when you discuss the concept is that, in English, the common translation given to *jihad* is *Holy War*. To start with, nowhere in the entire Qur'an or in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad is the equivalent of the English term *Holy War* found.

Holy War in English implies fanaticism and forcing people into the faith, and even if you translate *Holy War* into Arabic (*harb muqaddasah*), that term never appeared anywhere in the Qur'an or in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad.

The word *jihad* in Arabic means the exertion of effort or struggling. In that sense then, the true of the term *jihad* as found in the Qur'an means simply to exert effort, to strive or struggle in the path of God and for His cause.

It is erroneous when some people say that there used to be another pillar of Islam and that was *jihad*. It is not the fifth or sixth pillar. *Jihad*, in terms of striving or struggling, is the essence of Islam.

We have said that Islam means submission to the will of God. The question then is how do you submit – the answer is that you submit through *jihad*; by struggling and striving and exerting effort in order to please God and to follow His commands.

The term *jihad* is used in the Qur'an in reference to striving. In Chapter 29: verse 69, it says:

“And those who strive in Our (cause) – we will certainly guide them to Our paths: For verily *Allah* is with those who do right.”

There are other citations, for example, Chapter 22: verses 77-78, where it is very obvious that *jihad* is related and connected to worship and even prayers.

This shows that any action the individual performs for the sake of God is actually within the confines of the definition. The fact that one aspect of that *jihaaad* might take the form of a military encounter for self-defence or for fighting of the oppressors, is not excluded. But it is erroneous to say that *jihaaad* means fighting. Legitimate fighting could be one aspect of *jihaaad* but not the totality of *jihaaad*.

The various levels of *jihaaad*

If the essence of Islam is *jihaaad* or struggling in the path of God then you might divide that into three levels. One is *jihaaad* within oneself, on an individual level; the second is *jihaaad* at the level of community; and the third is *jihaaad* on the global level.

The very foundation of jihaaad is jihaaad against the evil in ourselves

As for *jihaaad* on the individual level, when he was returning from the battle with the pagans the prophet of Islam

himself told his companions, "Now, we are returning from the minor *jihaaad* to the major struggle."

They asked, "What is that major *jihaaad*? What could be more than that?" He said, "*jihaaadun nafs*" – struggling against evil inclinations within ourselves.

This means that the very foundation of *jihaaad* is *jihaaad* against the evil in ourselves and that is the cornerstone for any other form of *jihaaad*.

The second level could be regarded as *jihaaad* within society – struggle against evil, indecency, oppression and injustice. This is known in Islamic terminology as ordaining all that is good and forbidding all that is evil.

You struggle in society when you try to change rotten and corrupt things. You have to face some difficulties and you have to exert a certain effort. *Jihaaad* is not only by the sword, but also by speaking and by writing.

The third level is the global *jihad*, which could also mean the fight against oppression globally, and not just within one limited community. Islam does not acknowledge the artificial lines that determine that this land belongs to this or that state. Oppression is oppression. Whenever it is found in the world, Muslims have the obligation to try and fight it and to stop it. And this is one aspect of the universality of Islam. Fighting oppression may take the form of actual battles, if all other peaceful means fail to bring a halt to this oppression.

Was Islam ‘spread by the sword’?

Historically speaking, it may be asked whether these teachings of the Qur’an have been adhered to by Muslims. Now when we address a question like that, we have to be perfectly honest and we should avoid two very common extremes, not only in dealing with Islam but whenever we discuss the history of any people or followers of any faith.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that the history of Islam which extends over 1400 years and into all parts of the world, and which has included hundreds of millions believers, has been nothing but a series of violations of the teachings of the Qur’an. This is going too far.

But there is also another, very similar extreme.

The stereotypical claim that Islam was spread by the sword is nothing more than a legend or myth

Anybody who says that the history of any people or followers of any faith is nothing but a history of angels, where no infraction or deviation took place, is not being honest. This applies to followers of any faith.

No sincere Christian will accept the statement, for example, that if you want to understand Christianity, you have to explain the barbarous Crusades, or the Inquisition in Spain, or the fighting in Northern Ireland between Protestant and Catholic.

Any sincere Christian would tell you to look at the teaching of Christianity and find whether these people's behaviour measures up to those standards or not. The same thing applies to Islam and to any other followers of a faith.

However, suffice to say at this juncture, because the details would require a separate series on history, that the stereotypical claim that Islam was spread by the sword is nothing more than a legend or myth.

This claim was deliberately circulated in mediaeval times for well-known reasons. However, it is something that no serious modern scholar or historian accepts.

Spread by the sword? Western writers refuting the claim

And this reference to "modern historians and scholars" is not confined to Muslim scholars and historians. We can look to a number of well-known names in the West.

For example, the Reverend, Dr. De Lacy O'Leary in his book *Islam at the Crossroads* says,

"History makes it clear however, that the legend of fanatical Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of the sword upon the conquered races is the one of the most fantastically absurd myth that historians have ever repeated."

The author and philanthropist, James Michener, wrote an article in which he said,

"No other religion in history spread so rapidly as Islam. The West has widely believed that this surge of religion was made possible by the sword. But no modern scholar accepts that idea. And the Qur'an is explicit in support of the freedom of conscience."

A. S. Tritton was a noted scholar on religion and former Professor of Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. In his book *Islam* he writes,

“The picture of Muslim soldiers advancing with the sword in one hand and the Qur’an in the other hand is quite false.”

The prolific British writer, H. G. Wells, says that,

“Islam flourished because it was the best social and political order that the time could offer.”

Another Orientalist, Edward Gibbon, has said that the claim that Islam was spread by the sword is a pernicious tenet that has been imputed on Muhammad:

“This charge of ignorance and bigotry is refuted by the Qur’an, by the history of Mussulman [which means Muslim] conquerors and by their public and legal toleration of the Christian worship.”

Gibbon observed that as early as the sixth year of Hijrah (the migration of the Prophet to Medina) the prophet granted to the monks of the monastery of Saint Catherine near Mount Sinai, and to all Christians, a charter which secured to the Christians all their privileges and immunities.

And the Muslims were enjoined to protect the Christians, to guard them from all injuries and to defend their churches and the residences of their priests. They were not to be unfairly taxed, no bishop was to be driven out of his bishopric, no Christian was to be forced to reject his religion, no monk was to be expelled from his monastery; no pilgrim was to be detained from his pilgrimage; nor were Christian churches to be pulled down for the sake of building mosques or houses for Muslims.

Christian women married to Muslims were to enjoy their own religion and not to be subjected to compulsion or annoyance of any kind on that account.

If the Christian should stand in need of assistance to repair their churches or monasteries, or any other matter pertaining to their religion, the Muslims were to assist them.

All of these authors quoted above are Christian historians, writers and scholars. No respectable and serious author can any longer hold to this claim that Islam was spread by the sword.

A misunderstanding of the early wars

The biggest mistake that some people make is to see the early Muslim wars during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad and immediately after, as wars only to compel people to accept religion.

As we have said, the Qur'an does not accept that, and this would not happen. Their wars and their fighting were either in self-defence against those who tried to destroy them, or they were to remove human tyranny.

Everybody knows what kind of treatment the subjects of the Persian and the Byzantine empires were getting. Many non-Muslim historians have indicated that there is evidence that some of the natives in those countries that were conquered by Muslims, welcomed Islam very warmly and some of them even joined the Muslim lines to fight against their emperors.

There is a lot of logical and factual information that makes it clear that this conclusion is not really something that you get out of thin air.

First of all, the whole notion of compulsion in religion is not only contradictory to the very text of the Qur'an as we have amply documented.

The very logic of Islam is surrender or commitment; to voluntarily choose to submit to the Will of God and follow His commands and His way of life.

No power on earth can impose something in your heart. So in Islamic Law, it is not acceptable.

The second point to keep in mind is that any cursory look at the map of the Muslim world today, with the

The largest Muslim country is Indonesia with an estimated 205 million Muslims. Where was the sword?

global Muslim population in excess of 1.6 billion, shows very conclusively that the great majority of Muslims now live in places where conquest by the sword could have had no role whatsoever. Indonesia, for example, with an estimated 205 million Muslims is the country with the largest Muslim population.

In this case where was the sword?

Between 6.5% and 11.5% of the population of Russia – ie, between 9.4 and 16.4 million – are Muslims. How did Islam spread in Russia? Or in China? And it is not just there. We find that in areas like Central and Southern Africa there are many countries that have a Muslim majority or a substantial Muslim minority.

And it is well known that in many of those places, the sword had no role to play. In other faraway places, like the Philippines and Thailand you find substantial Muslim minorities and it is obvious that Islam spread through merchants, and holy people who devoted themselves to that particular mission. Every day, people in both the United States and Canada are turning to Islam, and that includes people who are among the most educated and the most religious people in North America.

Another point is that, if it is true that Islam spread by the sword, how is it that Islam continues to spread much faster at the time of the Muslim defeat?

Those who invaded Muslim lands themselves became Muslims. There are records of some highly placed people amongst the Crusaders who came to attack Muslims under the excuse of liberating the Holy Land, but ended up embracing Islam.

As one Orientalist has said, it is very strange that those who attacked Islam, like the Turks and the Mongols, themselves, as conquerors, should then come to embrace Islam.

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## NOTES

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Prophethood

# PROPHETHOOD ●

After believing in God (Allah), it follows also that you have to believe in the prophets who communicated that message from God.

By believing in Muhammad as the last messenger, Muslims also must believe in all prophets throughout history as Muhammad recognised those who came before him.

The Quran clarifies that all prophets sent from Adam to Muhammad were sent by God.



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