

The Problem of Muhammad

One last question deserves a chapter to itself. Even if it is not always raised explicitly, it remains in the sub-conscious of those with whom we talk, prompting many of their reactions. It came up in the first official encounters in dialogue between Christians and Muslims after Vatican II. We are also likely to find it hard to take a new step on the way to dialogue unless we have seriously reflected on it. The question is this: Who is Muhammad for Christians?

The issue can come up in two ways:

Muslims may say clearly to Christians: we recognize Jesus as a prophet. Why do you not recognize Muhammad as a prophet?

Or they may recall what the mediaeval West said about Muhammad, making bitter and unjust attacks and slandering his name.

It is not worth spending long on the mediaeval statements. We need only recognize that they are unacceptable today. Such legends show at what point ignorance of the other was total. As for the falsity of the affirmations, the hurtful character of many assertions, they can be explained against the background of a time when education was weak and there was lively resentment of Muslims in the wake of their military invasions of the West. Today there is no question

of Christians repeating the slanders, and on the Muslim side we must hope that the page will be turned. At one meeting between Muslims and Christians, when a Muslim began to list all these charges all over again, one of his fellow-Muslims in effect said to him: 'Are we going to keep turning over the past, as the pre-Islamic Arab tribes used to do in their literary jousts and rivalries of honour?' That made good sense.

The first argument is more specious. The parallel between the respect Muslims have for Jesus and the attitude of Christians to Muhammad seems so clear that more than one person has been disturbed by it. It runs counter to what would be unjust depreciation of the personality of Muhammad. But to push it to a conclusion would be to go far beyond its premises, for in fact the parallel between the two attitudes conceals a very different *de facto* situation.

While Muslims may seem welcoming in their regard for Jesus as a prophet, this approach does not completely modify their basic attitude, since in Islam Jesus speaks like the Qur'an and lives like the Qur'an. To recognize Jesus as a prophet does not put Muslims under any further obligation. It does not cost them anything, but it is useful to them, since one of the roles of Jesus in

Islam is to support Muhammad. The Jesus of Islam is at the service both of the Muhammad whom he announces and of the Qur'an. Muslims, too, have every interest in proclaiming him a prophet so as to give more weight to his support.

By contrast, if Christians were to accept the prophecy of Muhammad in the strict sense, they would have to go against everything they are told by the weightiest religious documents in their possession. The situation is certainly not the same in the two cases.

What precisely do our friends want?

The mass of Muslim believers are convinced that Islam is the true religion, and the impression that its truth is evident prompts many Muslims to seek the conversion of Christians. This involves an explicit and total recognition of the prophetic character of Muhammad.

For most Muslims, a prophet is a man who brings a message from God and who must be obeyed unreservedly. So there was an immediate effect when a Christian bishop, full of good intentions but not realizing the effect of his words, proclaimed to the Islamic-Christian Congress in Tripoli (Libya) that dialogue would be impossible as long as Christians did not accept a certain number of positions – and in particular that they should recognize the prophetic character of Muhammad. He himself affirmed that he accepted that God was one and that Muhammad was his Messenger. The next day the local papers announced in bold headlines that the bishop had been converted to Islam, which was hardly the intention.

But what of those other Muslims who are well aware that we are Christians and have serious reasons for wanting to remain so?

During a meeting between Muslims and Christians at al-Azhar, in Cairo, in April 1978, the grand imam Sheikh al-Azhar, one of the leading figures in Islam, told the partners in dialogue representing the Vatican of his deepest reactions. In essence, he said that no dialogue would be possible as long as Christians did not

The Qur'an recalls God's goodness to Muhammad as a child

Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?

Did He not find you in error and guide you?

Did He not find you poor and enrich you?

Therefore do not wrong the orphan,

nor chide away the beggar.

But proclaim the goodness of your Lord.

Qur'an 93, 6-11

modify their attitude on a number of points. In particular he mentioned respect for the person of Muhammad. I no longer recall whether he spoke of recognizing him as a prophet.

When we were relaxing after this first working session, I was talking with one of the Muslims in the official delegation from al-Azhar and told him that the grand imam had asked Christians to respect Muhammad. I put it to him that everyone is agreed on rejecting the manner of speaking which was current in the Middle Ages and which is now inadmissible. We know that Muhammad was a religious figure, an exceptional politician, a brilliant man. But if Christians respected Muhammad as Muslims do, they would become Muslims. 'How do you want us to respect him,' I asked, 'while remaining Christians?'

In essence, the sheikh replied that he personally was not a Hindu, but that he had a great respect for Gandhi and admired his person and actions.

This was talk in parables, and every story which adopts this literary genre has to be interpreted. Moreover, his was a personal opinion. What are we to conclude from it? A first very useful step would be for Christians to be aware of the historical person and role of the founder of Islam. It is all too easy to explain away the great events of history which do not take the direction we would like by irrelevant arguments. Here again, to recognize in all honesty what is the case will allow us to protest more firmly where our own actions are attributed by our conversation-partners to non-existent motives or it is claimed that we are convinced of the truth of Islam but refuse to proclaim it out of envy or bad faith. On both sides, the banishment of caricatures is an indispensable preliminary to any mutual understanding.

The question of the person of Muhammad and of his place in the divine plan of salvation began to be posed in a new way by some Christian theologians in the 1930s. Since then, several standpoints have been adopted: I shall try to describe the main ones.

The first is pragmatic. It consists of drawing conclusions from a certain number of observations. First, it is a fact that millions of human beings have heard God spoken of through Islam, that they have learned to pray in a Muslim setting, and that they have received a set of moral rules from Islam. Their experience of God lies within Islam, even if they often appeal to basic human religious attitudes. Christians have to respect this relationship between Muslims and God and the role which Muhammad played in achieving this openness to God. In short, Christians should recognize the action of the Holy Spirit in the world and accept that he was equally at work within the Muslim community and even, to some degree, in its founder.

Christians who adopt this first position will not forget that in many other areas Christians and Muslims are in confrontation and that we cannot recognize other basic affirmations of our brothers and sisters as coming from the Holy

Spirit. In the end, Christians remain silent before the mystery of the action of God on this earth and the way in which human action works with or against that of God. Those who hold this first position feel an invincible antipathy to what was once called indiscreet theology, i.e. theology which did not accept that there are areas in which we are ignorant, and wanted to have its say on everything, even when what had been revealed was too tenuous to allow us to say anything. Moreover, these same people will note that no matter what theories are developed about Muhammad as a prophet and what form the refusal to give him this status may take, in practice the attitude of open Christians will always be the same with Muslims. So what is the point of embarking on nebulous theories?

Then there is the position which is sometimes called minimalist. Noting how Christianity collapsed in the face of the Islamic advance and the rivalry of the two religions, those who hold this position give the least possible credit to the founder of this community, which they think was a scourge of God. For them there is no question of speaking of Muhammad having been a prophet, or at least a true prophet. Since Jesus has told us that a prophet can be recognized by his works, just as a tree can be recognized by its fruits, they stress above all the negative aspects of Muslim influence. Here too there is no possibility for dialogue. There can only be struggles, interspersed by times of peaceful coexistence. This perspective is too well known for us to need to dwell on it.

Over against this attitude there is another which could be called maximalist. It sees no problem in saying that Muhammad is a prophet sent by God. However, there are many different nuances within this tendency. There are those who seek to associate Islam with the blessing of Ismail in Genesis. Abraham is thus said to have had two religious lines of descendants, that of Isaac and that of Ismail, and a parallel is drawn between the work that Jesus accomplished in the descendants of Isaac and that which Muhammad

accomplished among the descendants of Ismail. Given the very scanty biblical basis on which this theory rests, and that it goes against the whole of Christian tradition, which sees the descendants on whom the great promise of God to Abraham rests as one great history, this theory, which is put forward within small groups, has not yet received much support. Besides, it goes against all that the Muslims have so far believed.

In another direction, in the new perspectives of Catholic theology since 1950 many Christians have sought to discover principles on which it becomes possible to call Muhammad a prophet. They stress above all the psychological and experiential aspects of prophecy. The revelation of God to his prophet was through the prophet's experience, and there is no reason, they say, to refuse the title of prophet to Muhammad, given his real and profound religious experience which marks the beginning of the powerful movement of Islam. In this perspective the word prophet has taken on a new significance; however, it is hard to see whether those who use it are calling for obedience to the prophet or whether they are leaving each individual to choose what he or she likes in Muhammad's message and leave aside the rest.

How the problem that a prophet's message may contain errors is tackled depends on the particular group. There are those who affirm that the Qur'an contains nothing which contradicts the Christian message and that its condemnations relate only to distortions of Christianity that we too would reject. Others do not feel disturbed that a prophetic message could contain dogmatically doubtful expressions. Besides, for some theologians today, what is a dogmatic formulation anyway?

The future will tell whether this attitude favours dialogue. So far it is clear that Muslims react when the word prophet is devalued, even if only slightly. At the second colloquy in Cordoba in 1977, a Christian theologian surveyed the different meanings of the word prophet. He

explained that nowadays the word sometimes has the very broad sense of a man with insight and intuition, who is sensitive to situations and makes a mark on the course of history. One might, he said, call Karl Marx a prophet. He added that in this sense he had no objection to Muhammad being called prophet. But the majority of Muslims present did not like this parallel; it made them feel uneasy.

Would it be preferable to talk of a kind of prophecy akin, with some qualifications, to that of the Old Testament? It is not clear whether our friends would accept that. Many of them, usually very open thinkers, have argued that if a Christian says that Muhammad is a prophet and does not become a Muslim, either he does not know his religion or he is a hypocrite.

Could not respect manifest itself in another way?

It is not easy to say, because any approach risks hurting very sensitive feelings. Even the omission of certain formulae of respect which are not customarily used in European languages can be misunderstood.

If we look at the most reliable ancient documents which have come down to us, the strong personality with which Muhammad was endowed stands out. He had a profound religious sense and he felt called to proclaim ceaselessly the primordial truth which is at the heart of Islam and which Fr Abd el-Jalil described like this:

The claim that God has the sole right to Lordship (*rububiya*) and worship (to the service of humankind: *ubudiya*) underlies all the other affirmations of the Qur'an. In the soul of every Muslim who has grown up in an Islamic milieu, however uneducated and insignificant, even if he or she engages in popular devotions which are not very Islamic, this claim of the exclusive right of God to worship, to the service of his creatures, is more or less alive. It militates against all 'associationism' (*shirk*) and therefore against all idolatry: to worship only God, to serve only Allah, to expect all from Allah and nothing from his creatures,

however powerful and effective they may seem to be. That is the heart of Islam.

Endowed with a strong personality, Muhammad exercised an indubitable ascendancy over his companions. A leader of men, he was capable of demanding much at certain times and leaving people free at others. He had a considerable influence over them, and it is through his teaching that many people have learned to pray and to worship God.

He himself was a very simple man, contenting himself for most of the time with a minimum of physical necessities. At his death he possessed just a few pieces of land, plunder taken from the Jews, in an oasis in northern Arabia. He worked alongside everyone else when that was necessary, for example in the building of the mosque of Medina or in the digging of the famous ditch which protected the city from the attack of the confederates in 627. A brave man, he faced the enemy in battle, and at the time of the defeat of Uhud in 625 his tenacity succeeded in redressing the situation and avoiding disaster.

A skilful politician, he could make concessions when they were needed, for example at the truce of Hudaibiya, and give pardon after victory. A number of declarations which lighten the obligations imposed by Islam are attributed to him. He knew his compatriots and acted in such a way that they were finally converted to Islam. The plunder which he promised them served to rally them; but at the same time he was very firm with those who, like the nomads, thought only of plunder. He wanted both this world and the next, and claimed that he could lead people to happiness in both. He preached a religion of mutual support and force; he was not a monk, and the great effort demanded was that of obedience and will. This solidarity and the holy war were both in the Arab tradition.

The beginnings of Islam were hard and formative. The influx of riches and plunder came only after his death and provoked a terrible crisis in the divided community. Before that, for almost twenty years, Muhammad was accused by his

enemies of ruining Arab values, of opposing the patrimony of the fathers. In reality, the message which he preached grafted simplified biblical or para-biblical ideas on to an Arab stem and today, for the vast mass of Muslims, he has become the very symbol of Arab authenticity.

To complete the picture, however, we would have to note that he was harsh at certain moments of his life: he approved the violation of a sacred month so as not to miss attacking a caravan, took vengeance on a number of his enemies, and arranged the political assassination of Jews. He could not bear poets to write verses against him. A well-known *hadith* says that he loved 'prayer, perfume and women'. And certain traditions praise his virility. Here he behaved like a chief of his time, susceptible to feminine beauty but also concerned by his marriages to consolidate alliances with those clans or families from whom he took a wife; and he was far more moderate than many others.

In short, he was a great politician and a religious genius. His life marks a decisive moment in the history of humankind.

Two delicate points

However, thinking Christians have always been preoccupied with two specific points, and any complete survey needs to examine them. First, there is the question of Muhammad's sincerity, and secondly, the assertion that Islam is the crown of earlier religions, summing them all up and proclaiming that nothing essential on the level of religion and human conduct has been omitted from the Qur'an.

The problem of Muhammad's sincerity has often been discussed among Christians: it goes without saying that for Muslims it does not arise. And Muslim manuals go into great detail to prove that Muhammad was, all in all, the most faithful of men. On the Christian side, even if the excesses of mediaeval polemic have now been abandoned, difficulties nevertheless remain. The Qur'an asserts that Muhammad did not

know any of the ancient stories, whether in the Bible or not, and therefore that their presence in the surahs is miraculous. Now on the one hand the Qur'an does no more than allude to this past and does so in a very simplified way; it is not that it knows the Bible so much as that it takes up scattered elements from a Qur'anic perspective, often in a very tendentious way. Because the Qur'an has such an allusive character, it evokes the past only in a number of rapid surveys. Basically, only Moses has any personality in the Qur'an – and perhaps also Abraham and Jesus – the other figures perform roles rather than having any individual features.

Furthermore, some documents claim that there were people at Mecca, including members of Muhammad's own family, who knew these stories. Opponents, too, as the Qur'an recalls quite clearly, accused Muhammad of having all these stories told to him and then affirming that they had been revealed by God.

A text in the surah called 'The Bee' records this charge that Muhammad used information provided by others, i.e. had informants.

We know that they (the opponents) say: 'A mortal taught him'. But the man to whom they allude speaks a foreign tongue, while this is eloquent Arabic speech (Qur'an 16, 103).

This text is a reply: Muhammad is accused of having received the text of the Qur'an from others. So in all probability this accusation once again presupposes that there were people at Mecca who knew these stories.

The reply is a denial. But the argument is about the style and not about the content of the ideas. It is certain that if this informant was a foreigner, he could not have been the author of the remarkable style of the Qur'an. Someone who stumbles through Arabic cannot produce a masterpiece in that language. So if the passage is accepted in its literal sense, and there is no reason not to do so, its point is the need to recognize the impossibility of the text having been composed at Mecca by a stranger and then dictated to Muhammad.

At this point the commentators on the Qur'an give the names of several slaves or freemen whose workshops or homes Muhammad visited; they are described as having known earlier stories or even books. So it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a large number of accounts which figure in the Qur'an were known at Mecca and came to the ears of people who had not themselves engaged in any course of systematic study in this sphere.

In that case what does it mean to say that Muhammad was sincere? For those who want to explain everything by purely human causes, there is such a thing as subjective sincerity. Given the intensity of feeling which can drive a person to speak, those of former times could easily think that they had been given superhuman or even divine inspiration when in fact the drive came from the sub-conscious, which had stored this knowledge and then forgotten that it had acquired it. This position, which is that of rationalists, is also adopted by the 'minimalist' Christians whom I mentioned earlier.

However, it remains the case that in itself divine action is in no way incompatible with the role of the human sub-conscious. Christian theology thinks that God often acts by using human beings, their psychology and their knowledge as his instrument. So far, Muslim theology has never accepted this in the case of the Qur'an. However, when Christians see in the Qur'an stories which were well known at this time and which bear the mark of a characteristic environment, they do not feel that it tells against subjective sincerity, nor does it in any way rule out the possibility of a divine action which could be identified more specifically. The question remains open.

The second delicate point is that of the complete, finished character of the message of the Qur'an. We saw earlier that some Christian orientalists were of the opinion that the Qur'an did not contain anything which went against the Christian message of the mainstream church: the criticisms of the Qur'an would bear only on

heresies that we too reject. Others, by contrast, think that the Qur'an contains a condemnation of several essential features of the Christian message of the mainstream church.

Without going into the details of the debate, it is possible to make one comment. Regardless of the position of the Qur'an itself, it is clear that from the beginning of Islam almost all Muslims have interpreted it in a sense which is the opposite of the position of the mainstream church; from the beginning the exegesis of several key passages has almost always been anti-Christian.

Another factor must be taken into consideration by anyone who is trying to get a rounded view of the question: even if the Qur'an passed over the main Christian dogmas in silence and did not attack them, its silence would nevertheless be a condemnation, since the Qur'an is presented as being complete and its message as finished, valid until the end of the world – and any substantial addition would be tantamount to a distortion. In the final analysis, any silence is more than silence: it signifies that God does not want, and would never want, to say more. No revelation may follow that of the Qur'an.

If we take the situation as it is, the Qur'an truly is a new message of good news, i.e. a new gospel, different from that which the church claims to have received. And even if an angel came down from heaven to bring a different gospel from that which has been entrusted to it, the church would not feel it right to accept it (cf. Galatians 1.8).

Nevertheless, anyone who leaves this aspect of completeness out of account will note that Islam contains great intuitions which are profoundly true, the importance of which Christians are beginning to forget. There is, for instance, the belief that God himself has supreme Lordship by right.

To this should be added the Islamic protest against divisions among Christians, whose churches, which have become nationalist, are opposed to one another under the cover of

different theological positions. One might also add the protest against the pretensions which end up by excluding the Arabs from their religious world, not to mention the other criticisms of the all-too-human conduct of certain monks and rabbis.

In short, at that time what Christians needed was a reform or a revival of the Spirit of Jesus. From this perspective, the remark by Arnold Toynbee which I cited above becomes fully valid.

Islam, like Communism, succeeded to the degree that it claimed to be reforming the abuses which had crept into the Christianity of the time. And the success of Islam from the beginning shows the power that a heresy can have when it claims to be reforming an orthodoxy which does not seem inclined to reform itself (*The World and the West*).

The role of Muhammad in the religious history of the world must be seen in the light of these observations.

A charisma for reformist leaders?

The word reform will take us in an even more precise direction. The term prophet is in fact the cause of many misunderstandings. The period in which the only alternative was that of true and false prophets gave place to times during which the notion of prophet became singularly flexible, was stretched and transformed. Nowadays the only points which seem clear are these:

1. If the word prophet is given an absolute sense, and denotes someone all of whose words pronounced in the name of God are vested with divine authority so that all then have to obey them, Christians cannot concede this title to the founder of Islam. They cannot obey him without reserve, for that would be to become Muslims. To accept Muhammad as a prophet in the strict sense, which includes showing faith and obedience, is impossible for Christians. Christians will always use the word prophet with qualifications; in other words they will not accept all that a

'prophet' says, but accept some things and reject others. Here the criteria of acceptance is no longer faith but personal judgment.

2. Within the religious history of the world, Christians recognize that the prophets who prepared for the coming of Christ have a unique character. Even minor prophets like Zephaniah share in this unique character; minor prophets in a major line, read in the communion of the church, they are followed in the faith.

In the steps of a teacher who has been called to God and whom I do not want to name, so that he is not identified with all that this book says (since perhaps he would not have agreed with it), I personally think that in the present instance we have to avoid the word prophet. To use it would entail giving it a limited sense which Muslim faith would not accept. It is better to express ourselves in another way: to recognize the truths that the Muslim message contains, to respect the spiritual journey of sincere Muslims, and to see Muhammad as a religious and political genius. Or alternatively, we should recognize that within Islam numerous believers are in a relationship with God that grace has brought about in them.

3. Finally, set in the context of the religious history of the world, Islam appears as an attempt at reforming Judaism and Christianity (by replacing them). And a comparison between this attempt and others which took place in the course of the history of the church could be illuminating.

Every time that the Christian message has been too influenced by the society in which it has been presented instead of remaining universal, and each time its messengers have forgotten the meaning of one or other of the basic intuitions of Christians, the need for reform has emerged. And when Christians have delayed or gone adrift in their attempts at internal reform, the situation has blown up in their faces and the reform has been made in groups which have separated from the church or have become opposed to it. This is very clear in the case of the

Protestant Reformation: a reform was needed; it had been required for two centuries, but nothing had happened. The basic intuitions of the Reformation were specific ones, and Catholics recognized them, particularly the insight that we are justified by faith in the grace of God. But the church of the time could not manage to revive these values within itself, and the situation exploded, to the detriment of both sides.

Similarly, the birth of Marxism went with a lack of Christian involvement at the time of the formation of the working class and the inadequacy of the efforts or the intelligence of those who had grasped the problem. And what could and should have been a new humane development within this emergent class, which was being shamefully exploited at the time, has become the ideological and ultimately totalitarian movement that we know. Is it also worth recalling movements which wanted to retain a number of African practices in the face of Europeanized Christianization, and ended up in the birth of separate African churches?

Islam, too, was born in the face of a Christianity which was divided, complicated, a prisoner of nationalisms – in an abnormal situation. Like the reformers I have just mentioned, it too founded a separate movement.

At the present time it seems necessary to invent a new theological category to denote those who are profoundly religious but are in radical opposition to existing official frameworks, and who are rebelling against forms of Christianity which have either become fossilized or are caught up in cultural or national questions. If the Christian message is presented with too many purely human elements, it will have difficulty in getting through. A saint could achieve genuine reform without betraying the essentials of the message. Rebels who are not saints re-read the message of the Bible in their own way, in their own cultural context. This new form may illuminate particular points (in Islam, for example, the Lordship of God), but reject other essential ones. It is a kind of devaluation

which for the moment lets part of the message get through. Might Islam not have been born in this way, in accordance with the will of God, given the circumstances and the situation of the time? God only knows.

In his *Summa Theologica* St Thomas once recognized that God could send an angel to reveal or teach specific truths to men who would speak without delegation on his part. In this way he would guarantee the knowledge of several absolutely necessary truths to those who could not acquire them otherwise. Would it be permissible

to suppose that reformers (and their followers) who opposed a fossilized church were strengthened by grace from God which confirmed their true intuitions, and that God's inspiration will have helped them to express certain true and essential aspects of their message? Their very existence might then have stimulated the church to emulate them and drive Christians to reform themselves without abandoning the other truths which the explosion of the reform had failed to recognize. In this way they would rediscover the aspects of their ideal that they had neglected.