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**AFKĀR**

ISSN 2616-8588 (Online)

ISSN 2616-9223 (Print)

afkar.com.pk; iri.aiou.edu.pk

## *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters*

Omid Safi

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**Publisher:** New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

**Paperback:** 352 pages. **Language:** English

**ISBN-10:** 0061231355. **ISBN-13:** 978-0061231353

It was sometime in December 1977 that my father took us for the first time for a visit to the city of the Prophet ﷺ. I vividly remember the instructions that he gave us on the way; we were going to the tomb of God's most beloved Prophet ﷺ and therefore had to show the requisite propriety and honour due to him. All the bedtime stories that my father had told us revolved around the prophets of Allah, particularly Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and as a result, all his marks of greatness and distinction that a five year old could possibly retain in his head were in my head as well. We were also instructed on how to pay our salutations to the Prophet ﷺ. We were to face the grill of the blessed tomb, say the *salām* chanting the known formulae which we had already been taught and finally raise our hands and say, "O Prophet! please pray to Allah that He may grant me faith, wisdom, knowledge..." and the list flowed on eternally.

My first encounter with the Prophet ﷺ had been clearly marked; in his presence the preferred way to pray was to ask him to pray for you since he was your *wasīlah* to Allah. In a couple of years however, things started changing. We were taught in school that one was supposed to say *salāms* to the Prophet ﷺ facing the blessed grill but then you turned your back to the grill, faced the Qiblah and prayed to Allah directly. The *wasīlah* doctrine had fallen in disfavor and lurked



dangerously close to *shirk* (associating other gods to Allah). The pet verse of the Qur'an that was drummed into our heads was now "Say (O Muhammad): 'I am no more than a human being like you...'"

I left Saudi Arabia in 1985 with my back resolutely turned to the grill of the tomb of the Prophet ﷺ little realizing that my prayers facing the blessed grill of the tomb and my prayers turned away from the blessed grill were two entirely different ways of encountering the Prophet ﷺ.

Mine however, was not a solitary experience. Thousands, if not many more, of modern-day Muslims have experienced this shift of 'encounters' without realizing that this shift was more or less a shift of worldviews as well. Perhaps, Omid Safi's *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters* was written against this backdrop.

The author is a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina specializing in Taṣawwuf, contemporary Islamic Thought and Medieval Islamic History. The inner lapel of the cover describes him as standing 'at the forefront of the debate to engage the spiritual legacy of *Islām* with a progressive commitment to social justice and pluralism'. This commitment of Safi is evident throughout the book in the way he handles some of the thorniest issues of contemporary scholarship on *Islām* but more particularly in the Introduction entitled "Muhammad Problem". After a brief survey of how the Prophet has been variously viewed by different audiences of the western world ranging from the founding fathers of America to the Danish cartoonist who kicked up an unprecedented controversy by depicting the Prophet in aggressively vile ways, Safi lays down the rules of engagement if there is to be progress in the mutual relations of Muslims and the West. The introductory paragraph of this particular section is extremely powerful and perceptive, yet it is a wonder how easily the idea it is trying to underscore goes unnoticed in important works of religious dialogue.

Safi says, "the rules for having a productive and insightful conversation across religious and cultural lines are not all that different than the rules for having meaningful interpersonal relationships. One has to be mindful of one's own baggage, avoid projecting one's own problems onto other people, listen carefully to what others are telling us about their own story, and avoid jumping to quick conclusions." (Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters*, p.24)

The author wishes to engage these rules in making some sense of the Muhammad Problem. "Using the most authentic and historical sources about Muhammad", he wishes to make memories of Muhammad..... intelligible to

multiple audiences, both Muslim and non-Muslim.”

Now, hasn't this kind of work been done before? Of course it has and that too both by top-notch Western and Muslim scholars of contemporary times. Western scholars have generally been concerned with and driven by their own polemical stance on the Prophet but ever since the colonial period Muslim scholarship has also become preoccupied with what western scholars have had to say about Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. This has resulted in a plethora of writings by established and mediocre Muslim scholars who betray their inferiority complex by addressing, even ruminating over the same polemical issues such as the spread of Islam by the sword or the Prophet's marriage life or his treatment of the Jews of *Banū Qurayzah*.

Safi dedicates the first chapter of the book to “The World before Muhammad ﷺ. Here he describes the social fabric of the Arabian society and their religious beliefs giving a bird's-eye view of the other religious dispensations prevalent in Arabia such as Christianity and Judaism.

Unlike many *Sīrah* works which tend to inform their readers about the pathetic state of the Arabian society in a bid to highlight the excellence of the Prophetic character even before his prophethood was announced and how he managed to distance himself from all the evils of the society, Safi highlights a more or less felicitous view of the same Arabian society and interestingly it does little if at all to compromise the excellence of the Prophetic character.

The next chapter is about the *Muhammadi* Revolution. Here is one chapter that should form part of the reading material for all those folks out there who want to bring about any sort of change in the society, particularly the Islamic movements. Eschewing the political ramifications of the word revolution, Safi concentrates on revolution as Heart-Transformation. This is possibly one decisive point which many *sīrah* writers today miss out in their fervour and enthusiasm for a social or political transformation. No change or revolution in the society is possible and would be lasting if it doesn't come from inside first. The change of the heart should be the starting point for any outward change. If there was one thing common to all the prophets of God, it was the fact that they endeavoured to reconnect the creatures of God to God after their so called 'Fall' to use a Christian terminology or having strayed away from the Right Path. This reconnection is what Safi calls spiritual reawakening.

Moreover since this *Muhammadi* Revolution starts with the heart it necessarily 'replicates' what Safi calls 'the rhythms of the heart'. Life is sustained through the beating of the heart which consists of both contractions and expansions.

Contractions of the heart are what one would call in common parlance sorrow, pain and setbacks. Safi cites the example of the year of sorrow to depict such contractions in the life of the Prophet ﷺ. And here comes one of the most powerful sentences of the entire book. "The contraction of the heart...is also part of the path. This is one of the differences between any genuine spiritual path and the New Age spiritual fluff, which promises abundant happiness and fulfillment without any parallel process of suffering, penitence and repentance along the path."

The next chapter entitled "The Ascension of Muhammad" takes the motif of *Isra'* and *Mi'rāj* of the Prophet ﷺ and mixes it with theological and mystical insights, paired with historical and biographical details. This spiritual journey of the Prophet ﷺ also happens to be the journey that all Muslims try to undertake when they stand in unison five times a day in front of their Lord. It is little wonder that the Prophet said *Al-Ṣalat M'irāj Al-Mu'min*.

Chapter 5 entitled "Life after the Prophet, Death after Hossein" traces the historical reasons leading to the *Sunnī-Shi'i* divide. With respect to historical accuracy, Safi clearly shows his *Shi'i* affiliations and remains unapologetic about it. So far so good. But then he becomes infelicitous when it comes to the companions of the Prophet ﷺ. His critique of the companions of the Prophet smacks of lack of understanding and possibly trust. Suddenly the great *Muhammadi* Revolution to which he had dedicated well over 60 pages starts waning. I feel compelled to make a point here. Had the companions of the Prophet ﷺ been so overtaken by bigotry that except for a handful of them none could realize that the Prophet had actually designated his heir and that they were supposed to pay their allegiances to him? Not only that, for a full 26 years the companions continued to marginalize *Sayyidunā 'Alī* before paying their allegiances to him. Perhaps, the *Muhammadi* Revolution was not a great success after all since the Prophet could not produce more than a handful of companions who could actually understand and faithfully and with fidelity carry out the political plan that he seemed to have chalked out for his community. Moreover, it needs to be pointed out that all *Sunnis* have actually towed the *Shi'i* line of thought as the same traditions regarding the excellence and incumbency of the family of the Prophet ﷺ prevail in both *Sunni* and *Shi'i* circles. But one with difficulty comes across *Shi'i* scholars acknowledging the significance of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ as important sources for the understanding of Islamic history and legal system. As has happened so often in the intellectual discourse between *Shi'a* and *Sunna*, *Shi'ism* seems to have got the better of Safi.

It is the last chapter which is the icing on the cake. Entitled “Echoes of *Muhammadi* Grace”, Safi demonstrates his vast knowledge of the Sufi tradition and its role in preserving images of the Prophet which have by far surpassed the images created by theologians, jurists and historians. These are images of the devotion with which Muslims have, through the centuries, beheld the Prophet ﷺ. Safi cites numerous examples from the life of the companions and great sufi masters to demonstrate that a true following of the prophet was only possible through sheer love of the prophet, perhaps a mirror of the love that *Majnūn* had for *Laylā* in its selflessness and profundity.

Fortunately, it was this tradition of love and devotion which captured the hearts of the majority of the Muslim communities throughout their history. It was also this tradition which produced the *Burdah* and *Dala’il al-Khayrat* which have spread from traditionally Muslim countries and are now sung and recited with equal passion and love on the farthest coasts of the United States of America.

These traditions have not sprung in a void. Their roots are scattered all over the Qur’ān and the Prophetic Tradition, i.e. the *sunnah* of the Prophet ﷺ.

Underscoring this tradition is a cosmological view of the person of the Prophet ﷺ which the *Ḥadīth* of *Law lak* helps to fortify. Just as God is *Rabb Al-‘Ālamīn*, the Prophet ﷺ is *Raḥmatul Lil ‘Ālamīn*, a mercy for the whole universe. It was for him that the world came into being and it was by him that Prophet Adam interceded in God’s presence for his forgiveness. What more! He was a prophet when Adam peace be upon him was still commingled in water and clay. These traditions helped in the creation of a world view and social setup which dominated the Muslim world for a solid 12 centuries. They also led to the preservation of all aspects of the Prophet’s public and personal life, his looks, his manners and his memories in the form of the *Shamā’il* tradition. To ensure that the Muslim community does not forget these traditions, poetical *mawlid* celebrations were enacted. These *mawlid* celebrations were possibly the most effective way for drumming the love of the Prophet through his memories in the lives of common and more or less ignorant Muslims. Indeed they were innovations, but innovations much needed. It is also from these traditions that the fantastic *Hilya* tradition of the Ottomans emerged. They further reflected in the miniatures that were produced by the Muslim communities the world over. To cut a long story short, the Muslim world had preserved the memories of its Prophet ﷺ quite effectively throughout its history.

With the rise of modern science coupled by reactionary puritanical movements in the Islamic world, this rich spiritual plane was laid almost barren. While

science reduced God's ultimate blessing water depicted as life and mercy to H<sub>2</sub>O as Seyyed Hossein Nasr would put it, puritanical movements cast aside the whole breadth of Islamic tradition in a bid to cleanse the Islamic world from its several innovations. With this done, many in the Muslim world were free to see the authoritative texts of the Qur'ān and *sunnah* through the categories of their own times; Safi captured the mood quite well when he said:

"This is particularly the case for modern Muslims, who have in many ways become quite Protestant in their religious sentiments. Many modernist Muslims like the moderns of all religious varieties, have come to accept the siren calls of all the new gods of science, Reason, and Rationality, the market, and the Nation, that have flattened the cosmos, both spiritually and metaphysically. [In the same vein], many modern Muslims have come to view Muhammad in juxtaposition to Christians understanding of Christ. If Christ is said to be divine, a miracle-worker, a healer, and the Logos then many modernist Muslims have emphatically come to adopt the mantra of Muhammad was a man, just a man. From this point of view, any mention of miracles of cosmic significance, or mystical powers associated with the Prophet are downplayed or dismissed. At the risk of poetic exaggeration, we can say that the modernist Muslim estimation of the role of the Prophet is not much more elevated than that of a UPS delivery man, dropping off the divine revelation of the Quran at the doorstep of humanity, maybe pausing long enough to obtain a signature to ensure that the item has been delivered and then departing never to be seen again."

One is reminded of Mawdūdī, one of the most prolific scholars of modern times, and the author of the incomplete *Sīrat-e Sarwar-e 'Alam* in two volumes. One can go over his whole *Sīrat-e Sarwar-e 'Alam* as it chalks out a wonderful plan for a revolutionary to bring about a change in the society and links it to the life of the Prophet ﷺ. The one thing it doesn't do is warm the heart with the love of the Prophet, the ultimate spring board to action as I have already mentioned. This warming of the heart can only take place on a spiritual plane, a plane which many modern *sīrah* writers are slow in acknowledging. Safi was quick in acknowledging this fact and this is what makes his book ground-breaking in modern times.



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