

Muhammad (saws): A Role Model for a New Millennium

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The human need for role models

Have you ever heard of Moses, Jesus, Confucius, Krishna or the Buddha? How about Gandhi, Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King? If you live in the West, there's a good chance that you know a bit about these people and their accomplishments. In man's eternal search for immortality and meaning, many leaders and heroes, both true and false, have made their appearance on the world stage. The respect and reverence shown to such figures among people of every nationality, in every age, points to a deep human need to believe in someone greater than oneself, in an attempt to transcend the confines of one's own limited existence. We see this theme recur in world myths, legends, hero stories, and in the idealisation of people who have been raised by their followers to superhuman or godly status.

Most educated people today are sceptics,

and view such stories as the charming remnants of a simpler age. And with globalisation and the steady stream of new religions and ideologies that people are exposed to, it may be hard to know what to believe. Some find it easier to ignore spiritual questions altogether, focusing instead on their relationships, careers and 'getting ahead'. Yet we know that excessive materialism stifles the mind and spirit; despite technological advances, the deep yearning to believe in a

Higher Power, true leadership, and an ultimate purpose in life remains. In this day and age, who can be trusted as a guide in both spiritual and worldly matters?

There is one leader,

still largely unknown to the West, who is an extraordinary role model that people of all backgrounds can relate to: the Prophet Muhammad. The details of Muhammad's remarkable life have been carefully preserved and have been subjected to the scrutiny of historians, east and west. In contrast to others who have achieved renown for their accomplishments in a limited sphere of activity, Muhammad's achievements span all major areas of life. The historian Michael H. Hart wrote:

My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels. Hart, Michael, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*.

Why does the average European or American

know so little about a man whose life was so exceptional? Irrational fears and negative propaganda, dating back to the Crusades and exaggerated by the media, have created a 'mental block' for many people against all things Arab or Islamic, and the two terms are often mistakenly confused. As we enter the age of the global village, is it not time for those who pride themselves on being unprejudiced, independent thinkers to put aside these mental relics from a bygone era?

We invite you to take a few minutes to explore a new understanding of religious leadership, and in so doing, to catch a glimpse of a man who is loved by one-fifth of the people on this planet.

The concept of Prophethood in Islam

For a Muslim, a Prophet does not primarily imply someone able to foretell the future - although most of Muhammad's predictions have already been fulfilled in astonishing ways - but a man sent by God to call people to repent, have faith, and dedicate their lives to doing good, thereby helping them rediscover the purpose for which they were created. Prophets are not considered to be Divine, and are not prayed to or worshipped - though they were men of outstanding character and spirituality who were protected from committing sins, performed miracles, received revelation and communed with God. Islam teaches that God is One, without partner or associate; no human being can share in any of the qualities that are unique to the Intelligent Creator and Sustainer of our vast and complex universe. Muhammad was no more than God's honoured servant and Messenger, yet he embodied the best of human potential, and that is what continues to make him so appealing and accessible today. Last in a line of Prophets and Messengers sent by God to all people on earth - including Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus - who effected the large-scale transformation of individuals and society, Muhammad was unsurpassed as teacher and guide. Speaking of his own role as the last true Prophet before Judgement Day, he said:

'The parable of me in relation to the Prophets who came before me is that of a man who built a house beautifully and

well, except that one brick in its corner was missing. The people went around it and wondered at its beauty, but said: "If only that brick were put in its place!" I am that brick, and I am the last of the Prophets.'

Muhammad's personal life

Muhammad was born in 570 AD to a noble family of Makkah, and was a descendant of the Prophet Abraham. Orphaned at six, Muhammad was a thoughtful youth who worked as a shepherd and helped his uncle with the trade caravans. As a teenager he rejected the immoral customs of his people, who had become steeped in idolatry, and joined a chivalrous order, earning the nickname 'The Trustworthy'. At age 25 he found employment with a wealthy widow of 40 named Khadijah, managing her business. Impressed by his honesty and character, Khadijah proposed marriage and he accepted. Despite their age difference, they were happily married for 25 years, and were blessed with six children. After Khadijah's death Muhammad married several women for political and humanitarian reasons, as was expected of a man of his position; all but one were widows and divorcees. He was a loving and considerate husband and father, and his family was devoted to him despite his voluntary poverty, for he put into practice his own advice, 'the best of you is the one who is best to his own family.'

Muhammad, the Prophet

Muhammad received his first revelation from God at 40, through the Angel Gabriel. He continued to receive revelations for 23 years, on topics ranging from the Oneness

of God and His wondrous handiwork, to stories of earlier prophets, morality and ethics, and life after death. These revelations became collectively known as the Qur'an, and are considered by Muslims to be the literal word of God; the Prophet's own words were collected separately. Muhammad's call to monotheism and social reform was heavily opposed by the Makkan elite; after enduring thirteen years of intense persecution, he and his followers were invited to relocate to Madinah, a town to the north that had been torn apart by generations of intertribal warfare. Muhammad successfully settled their differences and forged a bond of brotherhood between the two warring factions, as well as between the locals and the new emigrants. For Arab tribal society, this was an amazing accomplishment. The early Muslims learned to implement the golden rule under the Prophet's tutelage: 'No one truly believes until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself.'

Muhammad's legacy: the Madinan model

For Muhammad, religion was not a matter of personal conviction alone but a complete way of life, and Madinah flourished under his leadership. The Madinan model of government, based on justice, respect for human dignity and God-consciousness, became the template to which Muslims have looked for guidance and inspiration ever since. The Prophet drew up the world's first constitution in which the rights of religious minorities were protected, and entered into treaties and alliances with neighbouring tribes. He sent letters to the rulers of the Persians, Egyptians, Abyssinians and Byzantines, announcing his message of pure monotheism and inviting them to accept Islam. For the first

time in history, women, children, orphans, foreigners and slaves were granted extensive rights and protection. Many of the Prophet's concerns seem surprisingly 'modern': he condemned racism and nationalism, saying 'there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, or a white man over a black man, except in righteousness.' He established laws protecting animals, trees and the environment. He encouraged free trade and ethical investments, but secured workers' rights and forbade usury. He worked for peace, but defined the parameters of the judicious use of force, when force was needed. He convinced people to give up alcohol, drugs, prostitution and crime, and promoted healthy living. He condemned domestic violence, encouraged his wives to speak their own mind, and granted Muslim women many rights not dreamed of in Europe until centuries later, including the right to own property, reject arranged marriages, and seek divorce because of incompatibility. And the Prophet encouraged his followers to seek beneficial knowledge wherever it could be found, with the result that Muslims never experienced a conflict between science and religion, and led the world in many fields of learning for centuries afterwards. Although his enduring legacy can be observed in everything from art to politics, Muhammad's greatest achievement by far was to re-establish pure monotheism. As simple and straightforward to understand as the nucleus at the centre of an atom, the concept of One God lies at the heart of Islamic culture. Muslims turn to their Creator for guidance, without the need for intermediaries, or the loss of dignity that idolatry and superstition bring. The Prophet accomplished all this through the strength of his character and personal example; he inspired in his followers a love, devotion and sense of awe that was unparalleled.

While other men would have been corrupted by the absolute power that he wielded in his later years, Muhammad remained humble, ever aware of the Source of his blessings. 'I am just God's servant,' he said, and 'I have only been sent as a teacher.' Although he spent his days in serving people and his nights in prayer, he preached religious moderation and balance; he forbade his followers to adopt a monastic lifestyle and preferred that they establish strong families and engage themselves in bettering the world around them, while remaining deeply conscious of God.

In the brief space of one generation and during his own lifetime, the Prophet Muhammad* successfully transformed the faith, mentality and culture of the people of Arabia; within 100 years his message had touched the hearts and lives of millions in Africa, Asia and parts of Europe. The Prophet foretold that each succeeding generation would be worse than the one before it, and true to his prediction, Muslims have not always understood or honoured his example. But Muhammad's teachings, speeches and customs were carefully noted down by his Companions, and compiled into books of authentic sayings which are available in translation. Along with the Qur'an, they form the holistic foundation of a satisfying way of life for practising Muslims, while for others, they provide a fascinating glimpse into the heart and mind of an exceptional man and role model from whom much can be learned.