

KNOWLEDGE OF ALLAH AND THE ISLAMIC VIEW OF OTHER RELIGIONS

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[One way to submit oneself to the will of the divine is to contemplate the revelations of the Qur'ân. For Muslims, it is God manifested in human speech and for centuries Muslims have attempted to study the surface and hidden meanings of the Qur'ân in order to know more of Allâh's presence. The author explores how Muslims have used their sacred scripture, the customs of the Prophet Muhammad, and various mystical teachings to become closer to God. The process of knowing God meant being tolerant to other religions, especially to Christians and Jews who are understood as believers of the same God. The issue of pluralism and tolerance of others in Islam is examined to illustrate the complexities of religious ideas of exclusivity.]

THE RELIGION OF ISLAM is rooted in the theological idea that a one single God, Allâh, is the source for existing things, seen and unseen, known and unknown. Islam is not a faith centered on individuals like prophets or on the personality of the messenger, although a great deal of the theological, mystical, and metaphysical tradition is rooted in the Prophet Muhammad's life. In Islam, the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) is the vehicle through whom human beings received a message regarding the Real and Absolute one God.¹ The message contains both doctrine and method for

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¹ A number of good studies on the Prophet Muhammad are: Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985); Jeffrey Arthur, "The

followers to adhere to so that they may understand, practice, internalize, and ultimately surrender themselves to Allâh. These followers take on the Arabic word “Muslims” literally those who adhere to one God and completely surrender themselves peacefully to the Absolute beneficent compassionate one God.² The central focus is on God and the human struggle to grow and mature in a loving and compassionate relationship with the deity at all times in all places of our existence.

In the Buddhist tradition, as John Makransky clearly points out in his article, one area of emphasis in understanding others is in the representations that may have been formed and the way the doctrine of skillful means as an expression of inculturated wisdom supports their understanding. In Christianity, the human-divine personality of Christ and his sacrifice are central to the faith as an ultimate truth expressed in human terms. However, in the Islamic tradition, it is Allâh—the One God—who is the central reality of the religion and out of his deep commitment to his creatures he communicates to human beings through human prophets and/or messengers. Both the Prophet Muhammad in Islam and Christ in Christianity are different in their roles as “messengers” yet there are many similarities to each other. The focus in Islam is not how Allâh manifested himself to his creatures, rather it is God’s nature and his essence in all things that is captured in living, in things known and unknown, in the temporal realm and in the world beyond our understanding.³

Quest for the Historical Muhammad,” *Muslim World* 16 (1926) 327–48; Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Prophète de l’Islam*, 2 vols. (Paris: Vrin, 1959); Martin Lings, *Muhammad* (London: Islamic Texts Society, 1983); Ghulam Dastgir Rasheed, “The Development of na‘tia Poetry in Persian Literature,” *Islamic Culture* 39 (1965) 53–69; ‘Abd-al Rahmân al-Sharqâwî, *Muhammad rasûl al-Hurriya* (Cairo: ‘Âlam al-Kutub, 1962); and Ali Asani and Kamal Abdel Malek, *Celebrating Muhammad: Images of the Prophet in Popular Muslim Piety* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1995).

² The term surrender should not imply that there is no reason or thoughtful inquiry allowed in the tradition. On the contrary, there is a greater burden to use the intellectual to understand better the presence of the divine in all things. Many critics unfamiliar with the tradition have incorrectly used this “surrender” element in Islam as an obstacle to meaningful dialogue with Muslims. In fact, history demonstrates that Muslims developed many areas of rational discourse, were and still are vigorous in theological argumentation, Qur’anic hermeneutics, epistemology, ethical studies, and other areas of intellectual and moral thought, all of which created tolerant pluralistic societies in medieval Spain, North Africa, Persia, India, and other regions. Surrender does not mean to forsake the human quest to understand with the mind, rather, it brings about a deeper commitment to explore God’s mercy in all existing things with a greater attention to the details and using all God given intellectual faculties to reciprocate the loving mercy shown by him.

³ For more on the nature of God in Islam, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine* (Albany: SUNY, 1993) and his *Knowl-*

My contribution examines the multiple lenses in which Muslims understand both their religion and themselves as practicing believers of Islam. The insights of some notable Muslim theologians of the past are explored to underscore the most significant features of a Muslim believer. My first part studies the way revelations (Qur'ân) serves as the primary authority for all matters of religious practice, guidance, insight, serious theological reflection, legal understanding, philosophical inquiries, and everything dealing with social, economical, and political dimensions of life. After analyzing some major themes of the divine's message to creation and the relationship of creation with Allâh, and the intense importance of scriptural authority, I then proceed to assess the heavy influence of Prophet Muhammad's life in Islamic religious ethos and self-identity. Far from being just a record of historical facts, the life of the Prophet serves as a model for Muslims to embody, emulate, and to recapture in everyday faith. It is within this realm, I think, that self-identity for Muslims is the most prominent because the legacy of the Prophet's example is centered on different modes of remembrance of the one God while venerating the Prophet. Some samples of panegyric poetry will demonstrate the deep yearning for Muslim writers to completely engross themselves in the minutiae of the Prophet's words, actions, and customs.

The first part of my study reveals how the Islamic tradition articulates truth and the necessary attributes to live by it which provides a good deal of self-identity in the world. The second part seeks to analyze how "others" or non-Muslims are treated in the Qur'ân and in the customs of the Prophet. To view the Qur'ân merely as a revealed text from the divine for a group of people to interpret and around which to structure one's faith would be to neglect the complexities of the content as well as the enormous histories associated with interpreting the Qur'ân. To appreciate fully the theological or philosophical assertions of the "other" in the tradition, I suggest in this section that the presence of multiple "other faiths" in the Qur'ân and in the life of the Prophet represents a religious obligation to recognize the pluralism that is grounded in the scripture. It is common for Muslim scholars to utilize easy digestible terms such as monotheists vs. polytheists or Muslims vs. non-Muslims or believers vs. non-believers to assert unique authoritative values. However, I argue that while all of these categories exist in the historical and present Islamic literature, these categories of the "other" are written for polemical purposes to prove the authenticity of one's own tradition over another and this approach does not

edge and the Sacred (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976); *Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Michael Marmura (Albany: SUNY, 1984); and Henri Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1978).

assist in interreligious dialogue and mutual understanding. At the end of my study I recommend some alternative views to think about religious pluralism in the Islamic tradition.

QUR'ÂN: REVELATION OF THE DIVINE

The holy scripture in Islam is the Qur'ân or literally translated as the “the recitation.” It is the complete revelation of God’s message to the Prophet Muhammad via Angel Gabriel from 610–632 in the Arabian peninsula. Muslims understand the Qur'ân as being the firm speech of Allâh (*kalâm Allâh*), uncorrupted by human experience, and viewed as one revelation in a chain of revelations from God. God’s interest in communicating to his creation is achieved by God selecting unique human beings as a prophet. According to the Qur'ân, each community in history was given a prophet and there has been about 124,000 prophets since the time of Adam and Eve. Distinct prophets such as Moses, Jesus, and the Prophet Muhammad were given specific divine messages so that the community would possess God’s revelation. In return, the community of believers need to acknowledge the eternal message of the divine by obeying the revelations and by worshiping the one creator. According to the Qur'ân, historically, these messages—Torah and the Gospels—had taken a subordinate place in their own tradition, and the opinions of the interpreters of scripture or the priestly class superceded the original message. The Qur'ân’s critique against any priestly class was mainly to avoid having the authenticity of the message lost to the human process of interpretation. The other main reason in avoiding a priestly class in Islam was to ensure that believers of the faith understand that there is nothing between the individual believer and the creator. A class of experts would make the revelations divert the attention from the relationship of the creator and individual and would suggest an exclusive group as the sole bearers of the faith.

It is divine revelation taken not in human form but in human speech. This manifestation of the divine in sound was to draw attention to the human senses of listening, touching, feeling, and thinking of God. Revelation is meant to guide followers to God’s will so that they may adhere to the guidance in all aspects of life. The Qur'ân is revelation for humankind and is aimed for redirecting human beings toward Allâh. It calls itself “guidance for humankind” (*hudân li'l nâs*) in *sûrâ* 2:185. This often repeated reference to humankind and not to Muslims, Arabs, Chinese, or the Quraishi tribe is to underscore the Qur'ân’s eternal and universal message. It is not directed to any one specific ethnic, religious, tribal, or racial group. Rather, God is speaking to the entire humankind. The Qur'ân is not a treatise about God and his nature, instead it is a reminder for humankind

of God's infinite mercy, God is Creator, sustainer of the universe and of human beings, and in particular the giver of guidance to his creation.⁴

God's existence is self-evident in every aspect of the universe, but those who reflect on the divine will understand that He gives meaning and life to everything. In the Qur'anic *sûrâ* 50:33 it states, "Who is humble before the unseen and brings with a heart such that it can respond when the truth hits it." The verse continues "it is a reminder to whoever has a heart and surrenders whoever ears in witnessing" (*sûrâ* 50:37). The discovery of God's presence in all things is to know that there is no sharing of being between the Original Creator, and the created. This means that human beings and other forms of creation are not left alone in this world; instead, their purpose is to know God is not an item among other items of the universe or just an existent among other existents. God is with everything; He constitutes the integrity of everything. Everything is related directly to Him, so is everything, through and in relation to other things related to God as well.⁵ This integrity of inter-connectedness is affirmed in *sûrâ* 59:19, "Do not be like those who forgot God and eventually God caused them to forget themselves." The Qur'anic way to remind the faithful of God's presence is that in everything there is a "sign" that points to the direction of God's activity in the universe.⁶

The Qur'ân as a revelation to the Prophet Muhammad and to believers was adamant in emphasizing Allâh's lordship and ultimate power in all of creation. *Sûrâ* 27:61–64 speaks of his sustenance and provision for creation, particularly for human beings and of recreating of new forms of creations. It states:

And who other than Him made the earth a firm abode for you, and set rivers

⁴ The Qur'ân adjoins itself with the class of previous revelations given to humankind. In this light, it does not see the need to duplicate the creation stories or the lives of the Prophets. Instead, some chapters in the Qur'ân take the names of well-known biblical figures such as Jonah, Joseph, Noah, Mary, and Abraham while other names of the chapters come from the event being discussed. In addition, references to the biblical narratives are meant to be complimentary, not a complete regurgitation of the past. For more works in this area see *Three Messengers for One God*, trans. Roger Arnaldez (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994); Louis Massignon, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident* (Paris: Mouton, 1962); *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2001).

⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ân* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica) 4–5.

⁶ The word "*ayât*" is translated as a "sign" and it is the exact word to refer to a verse in the Qur'ân. This is because when the revelations came to the Prophet they were referred to as signs of God's existence. For a good study see Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: SUNY, 1994).

traversing through it, and put firm mountains therein and sealed off one sea from the other? Is there, then, a god beside God? Indeed, most of them do not know!

And who other than Him responds to the distressed and Who has made you (human kind) his vicegerents on earth? Is there, then, a god beside God?—little do you reflect?

And who other than Him guides you in the darkneses of the land and the sea? And who sends forth winds heralding His mercy rain? Is there, then a god beside God? Far exalted be He above what they associate with Him!

And who other than Him brings forth His creation and then re-creates it? And who gives you sustenance from the heaven and the earth? Is there, then, a god beside God? Say Oh Muhammad: Bring your proof If you are right in associating others with God.

His power, creation, and mercy are not only co-extensive but completely interpenetrating to the core of each existing thing. For example “My mercy comprehends all” (*sûrâ* 7:156) and “He [God] is nearer to man than is man’s jugular vein” (*sûrâ* 50:16) reflects a God that is integrally part of creation and also the source of its existence. The reminders of his signs are then meant for: (1) that everything except God is contingent on God; (2) that God, with all his might and glory, is essentially the All-Merciful God; and (3) that this establishes the relationship of human beings and God, where humans are made to love him through surrendering the entire self to him. These three basic points reveal an important idea of God’s centrality in all existing things, whereby the Qur’ân is mainly concerned with the relationship of human beings to other existing things to prove their devotion to the one God.⁷

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD, PROPHETHOOD, AND MUSLIM MODEL

The Prophet in Islam is purely a human being that was divinely selected to serve as a messenger of Allâh’s message to humanity. As stated in *sûrâ* 41:5, “a servant to whom revelation has come” and often Muhammad was challenged by the oligarchy Meccan tribe who insisted that the Prophet perform miracles to support his prophetic claims. Prophet Muhammad was reminded repeatedly that he was only a human being, a person, who was called to preach the message of strict monotheism, of absolute surrender to the One God who is the Creator of all worlds, Sustainer of all things, and the final Judge in the hereafter.⁸ The revelations instructed the Prophet to respond to harassment by saying: “Say: I do not say: ‘With me are the treasures of God’ and I do not know the Invisible, and I do not say that I am an angel, I only follow that which is revealed to me” (*sûrâ* 6:50).

⁷ Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ân* 6.

⁸ These characteristics of Allâh are repeated in each chapter of the Qur’ân.

Specific instructions came from Allâh's grace to the Prophet to remind the dominant Arab pagan community that "You cannot guide on the right path whom you want. It is God who guides!" (*sûrâ* 28:56). The revelations from Allâh to the Prophet Muhammad was to bring the religious practices of Arab idolaters back to the surrendering themselves to the will of the single God, while ensuring that they understood that their place in the world was part of a grandeur order that belonged to God. Consistent revelations to the Prophet stated: "Your God is one God" (*sûrâ* 37:4) and "The only straight path goes to God, while others are deviant" (*sûrâ* 16:9).⁹

Prophet Muhammad expressed his humbleness in serving Allâh and the grace of God, although he repeatedly stated he did not deserve to have been selected messenger of God. God swiftly admonished him in the Qur'ânic verse, "Verily if We wanted We would take away what We have revealed to you, and then you would not find for yourself a defendant against Us" (*sûrâ* 17:88). The Prophet had never imagined being given the burden of revelations but again he was reminded that he "was saved by the mercy of your Lord" (*sûrâ* 28:86). In light of a hostile climate against Muhammad's prophetic work and against his small but growing followers, Allâh made explicit Muhammad's extraordinary role as a messenger. Just as God "taught Adam the names" (*sûrâ* 2:30, i.e., the names of God), God taught Muhammad the Qur'ân (*sûrâ* 96:3). God's personal guidance to the Prophet was revealed that Muhammad was sent "as a Mercy for the worlds" (*rahmatan lil- 'âlamîn*) (*sûrâ* 21:107), and Allâh and his angels recite blessings over him (*sûrâ* 33:56). The Qur'ân instructed the believers to "obey God and obey His messenger" (*sûrâ* 4:80) as a divine command for early Muslims to completely adhere to the Prophet's teachings, customs, and life.¹⁰ At all times of the revelations to the Prophet, believers were being instructed on how to live an ethical life on earth with God as the center of all of human activities. It is the combination of the Prophet Muhammad's humble transmission of God's revelations to the community and his embodiment of the Qur'ân that affected the hearts, souls, and spirits of the community of Arab polytheists.

For Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad has provided a paradigm for establishing legal, personal, spiritual, and social norms for their societies. In the words of the Qur'ân: he is "a beautiful model" (*uswâ hasanâ*) (*sûrâ* 33: 21) whose example is to be followed by the faithful. According to Qur'ânic revelations the nature of Muhammad's mission was succinctly explained as: "We have sent thee as an evidence of Our grace toward all the worlds"

⁹ For more, see verses 16:51; 3:18; and 17:42.

¹⁰ On works on Prophet Muhammad's attributes, see Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London: SPCK, 1960) and Zaki Mubarak, *Al-madâ'ih an-nabawiyya fi'l âdâb al-'arabî* (Cairo: Mustafa al-babi al-halabi wa auladuhu, 1943).

(*sûrâ* 21:107). The obedience due to the Prophet was a crucial factor in the development of Islamic piety and the basis for veneration of Muhammad that exceeded other prophets in history. The deep veneration and devotion to the Prophet Muhammad, and the ways in which all Muslims developed a meaningful spiritual model to emulate his existence was a way of creating a spiritual connection to the Prophet. It is important to remember that all acts of worship were still directed to the submission to one single God.¹¹

In the Islamic profession of faith, “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God” (*Lâ ilâha illâ Allâh, wa Muḥammadûn rasûl Allâh*) the first part defines the unconditional surrender to a One God who is one at all times. The second half reflects Muhammad being chosen, truly being singled out for the work of God. The Prophet is clearly *al-Muṣṭafâ*, “the Chosen one” and that God’s activity was crucial with the life of the Prophet.¹² The assertion of a one God was necessary in an religious environment where idolatry was the official religion of the seventh-century Arabia. It stressed the uncompromising commitment to the One God who was far more omnipotent than all of the idols combined and that Allâh was beyond any human conception. The concentration on the Prophet Muhammad as God’s messenger was to remove any misapprehension in the minds of unbelievers that the Muhammad was a false messenger. The tying of the Prophet as the messenger of God revealed his notable position amongst all prophets and also his human proximity with the divine too. For these main reasons, the Prophet Muhammad’s life and customs (*sunnâ*) became the primary rule of conduct for Muslims to follow. As the Prophet had stated: “Whoever follows me, belongs to me, and whoever does not love my customs, does not belong to me” is a clear indication for Muslim believers to strive toward encapsulating the life of the Prophet in every aspect of one’s life.¹³

The significance of the Prophet in the life of a Muslim can not be over-emphasized, as the renowned South Asian poet Allama Muhammad Iqbal

¹¹ For more on this subject, see Willem Bijlefeld, “A Prophet and More than a Prophet? Some Observations on the Qur’anic Use of Terms ‘Prophet’ and ‘Apostle’,” *Muslim World* 49 (1959) 1–28; and Earle Waugh, “Following the Beloved: Muhammad as Model in the Sûfî Tradition,” in *The Biographical Process*, ed. Frank Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

¹² The late Islamicist Wilfred Cantwell Smith stated that Islam’s profession of “faith speaks about God’s work in the world rather than the person of the Prophet.” This is not totally accurate because he missed the idea according to many Sûfî theologians who believed that Prophet Muhammad was a “total” being and that he was tied to the pre-eternal existence of divine essence. See Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Mentor, 1965) 60–66. See also Nathan Söderblom, *The Living God* (London: Oxford University, 1930) 223–26.

¹³ Ahmad ibn Muhammad Aflaki, *Manâqib al-‘Arifin*, trans. Clement Huart as *Les saints des dervishes tourneurs* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1918–22) 55.

(d. 1938) said: “You can deny God, but you can not deny the existence of the Prophet.” The Prophet’s life fits into a history of previous prophets and with the history of God. His experiences provide Muslims a self-identity that is not fixed in time but eternal in time and space. While on the surface it may appear that only Muslim faithful are able to connect completely to the Prophet in unique terms, within the tradition Muslim scholars have written extensively on how the Prophet’s love for all invites any believer from any tradition to him. Nevertheless, place of the Prophet in the daily lives of Muslims is at the center of their increasing their knowledge of Allâh and surrendering themselves to the creator. In this section I will highlight how the customs of the Prophet is remembered for a higher level of veneration.

As early as mid-seventh century, the notion of the Prophet’s *sunnâ* consisted of his worldly actions (*fi‘l*), his sayings as a Prophet (*ḥadiths*), and his unspoken approval of particular facts (*taqrîr*). Posthumously, his companions (*ṣahâba*) were the most important living source for recollecting and consolidating the Prophet’s entire sayings and customs. The *ḥadiths* and *sunnâ* went under a scrutiny of authenticating each and every piece of information. The field of *ḥadith* studies was undertaken by a considerable number of early Muslim scholars who cross-checked the validity and reliability of each individual in the chain of transmission, as well as, the content of the Prophet’s statement (*matn*). These *ḥadiths* discussed details of faith, doctrine, ritual practice, religious understanding, eating, walking, treating other religious adherents, paying charity, giving advice, taking care of the poor, orphans, elders, and other minute details of maintaining a faith that reflected the surrendering of oneself to the One God. As early as the eighth century, the chain of transmitters, the *isnâd*, was codified by dedicated scholars. This process did have its share of criticism from scholars in the field. For example, in order for the *ḥadiths* and *sunnâ* to be “sound” or truly authentically connected to the Prophet (*ṣahîh*), each individual transmitter in the chain needed to be upholding the ethical standards of the Prophet. For those who may have remembered the saying or custom of the Prophet but was not practicing the faith, then that person’s testimony was considered “less sound” (*makruh*) and his/her recollection of customs were categorized as less authentic or inadequate. The first collection of *ḥadiths* were compiled by Abû ‘Abd Allâh Muhammad Bukhari, where it took him over twenty years to collect sixty-four thousand *ḥadiths* that were originally stated by the Prophet himself.¹⁴ His text, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, became very important for Muslims to read and incorporate into their lives after the Qur’ân because it contained the outward customs of the Prophet and

¹⁴ Abû ‘Abdallah Muhammad Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 6 vols. (Lahore: Ashraf, 1978).

his ethical ideals which were seen as the human experience that was an “appendix” to the Qur’ân.¹⁵

In the tradition of listening to the Qur’ân being recited is listening to God himself, the *ḥadiths* and *sunnâ* accounts are significant for Muslims as it brings them closer spiritual contact with the Prophet. While memorizing the Qur’ân is an act of worship to the one God, the memorization of *ḥadiths* allows Muslims to hear the Prophet’s voice and visualize the reenactment of his actions. For Muslims, implementing the *sunnâ* is integrally tied to the faith. It brings the Prophet’s presence into the real and breathing action. One is reminded not only of how these very customs were practiced by the Prophet himself, but how these very customs were preferred by God who guided the Prophet to practice them in the particular ways. For this reason, the teaching of the *ḥadiths* and *sunnâ* was understood to be an immense responsibility. Teachers would only instruct students of *ḥadiths* in a state of perfect ritual purity, and any reference to the Prophet needed to follow the benediction “May peace and blessings be upon him” (*sa’ala allahû alayhî wa salam*).¹⁶ This was part of a larger process of interpreting Qur’ânic revelations where the Prophet was seen as the primary exegete of the revelations he brought to them.

THE ISLAMIC TRADITION OF PANEGYRIC POETRY

For Sûfî Muslims or those Muslims seeking a spiritual and mystical journey toward God, the Prophet’s life is the primary model to emulate because he is understood as the most spiritually advanced prophet with the

¹⁵ See Émile Dermenghen, *La vie de Mahomet* (Paris: Plon, 1929); ‘Abdar Rahmân ‘Azzam, *The Eternal Message of Muhammad*, trans. Caesar Farah (New York: Devin-Adair, 1964); Frank Foster, “An Autobiography of Muhammad” *Muslim World* 26 (1936) 130–52; Muhammad Husain Haikal, *Hayât Muhammad* (Cairo: Matba’a Dar al-Kutub al Misriyya, 1935); Muhammad Maher Hamadeh, “Muhammad the Prophet: A Selected Bibliography,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982; Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Earliest Extant Work on the Ḥadith: Sahifat Hammam ibn Munabib* (Hyderabad: Deccan, 1961); Josef Horowitz “The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors,” *Islamic Culture* 1 (1928) 22–50; Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Khulasat as-sira al-muhammadiyya wa haqiqat ad-dawa al-islamiyya*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Mataba’at al-Manar, 1927); Ziauddin Sardar, *Muhammad: Aspects of His Biography* (London: Islamic Foundation, 1978); Christian Troll, “The Fundamental Nature of Prophethood and Miracle: A Chapter from Shibli Nu’mani’s *Al-Kalam*,” in *Islam in India: Studies and Commentaries* 1 (1982) 86–115.

¹⁶ Reciting the benediction “May peace and blessings be upon him” after any reference to the Prophet Muhammad is sometimes abbreviated as “pbuh” from the English. Whenever there are references to other prophets like Abraham, David, Isaac, and Noah the common benediction that follows is “on them may there be peace” or *as-salaatû as-salaam*.

deepest inner and outer connection with God. As with their Sunnî and Shî'â Muslim counterparts, Sûfî Muslims were learned spiritual teachers who were at times working in the colleges (*madrasas*) or had established their own orders for spiritual enlightenment, commonly referred to as Sûfî orders. Since the tenth century, Sûfîs were scholars of law, philosophy, theology, literature, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy. Prominent Sûfîs such as Abu Bakr al-Shibli (d. 946) and al-Qushayri (d. 1074) were important scholars and influential members in all of the major Sunnî and Shî'â legal schools (*madhabs*), and were major advisers to statesmen on jurisprudence like Shaikh Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1236) for the Abbassid Caliph al-Nasir. It is widely known, too, that Sûfî scholars had developed their own ways of defining and transmitting spiritual knowledge and authority, and had simultaneously devised their own strategies for knowledge legitimation. Sûfî scholars were not only accepted in mainstream Sunnî Islam but were crucial in the intellectual growth and flourishing of Islamic scholarship. These important voices of religious authority in the past and present reflect the plurality of authorities in Islam and of their contribution to all fields of knowledge.¹⁷

For Sûfî Muslims the inner spiritual and mystical status of the Prophet has been subject to much speculation, especially the account of his night journey to heaven (*layla al-mi'râj*).¹⁸ The love and devotion that is expressed for the Prophet in either literature or liturgy have commonly been

¹⁷ For more on the variety of the Sufi tradition in Islam, see Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabî* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud, 1999); Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Farîd, His Verse, and His Shrine* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1994); Qamar-ul Huda, *Striving for Divine Union: Spiritual Exercises for Suhrawardî Sûfîs* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978–1983); Carl W. Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2000); Bern Radtke and John O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1999) and Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1998).

¹⁸ The Prophet's night journey to heaven (*layla al-mi'râj* in Arabic or *shab-e mi'râj* in Persian, Urdu) occurred while he was still in Mecca in the year 620, on the 28th day of the month of Sha'baan. The Prophet himself described his spectacular experience of traveling from Mecca to Jerusalem and then up to the seven heavens to have a personal dialogue with God. The story explains how he traveled on an unicorn (*burâq*) which was being guided by angels like Gabriel; first he went to pray on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem then afterwards he ascended to heaven where he was greeted by all of the previous prophets, the foremost welcoming prophet was Jesus who requested him to lead the prayers for the congregation of prophets. After this event, the Prophet Muhammad was directed to view what life is like in the hereafter in both heaven and hell. This event solidified the number of times of prayer for Muslims and highlighted the Prophet's personal dialogue with God. For

present in Sûfî theology. In order to understand the way Suhrawardî Sûfis expressed their transcendental experiences and deep devotion to the Prophet, it is important to examine the Sûfî poetry and rituals that bring them closer to the Prophet. The immense love for Muhammad is at the heart of the tradition and it is clear why he is called God's beloved (*habîb-Allâh*). One of the ways in which Sûfis have shown their love and devotion to the Prophet is the recitation of the *salawât*, or the formula for invoking God's blessing on him. In the Qur'ân, it states in *sûrâ* 33:56 "Surely Allâh and His angels bless the Prophet; Oh you who believe, bless him and give yourselves up to his guidance in utter self-surrender!"

Aside from reciting the *salawât*, there is an efflorescent history of poetry dedicated to the Prophet which were designed to bring about a spiritual and temporal communion with the Prophet. Whether these poems are sophisticated compositions of the literati or folk songs sung by villagers, the poems are filled with warm human and spiritual emotions. Frequently in these verses, Prophet Muhammad is addressed as if he were alive standing in front the speaker and affectionately listening to his followers as they seek his help in solving every type of problem, no matter how seemingly mundane.¹⁹ The poetry is an expression of artistic devotional worship which show their love for the Prophet who is able to hear and act as intercessor in the affairs of the believers. In expressing their hope for Muhammad's intercession, Sûfî Muslims often have used devotional poetry (*nat'iyyâ*) to be prepared for his hospitality.

Devotional poetry dedicated to praising the Prophet's life and all of his radiant pious qualities existed during the lifetime of the Prophet. According to Hassan ibn Thâbit, the Prophet's poet, the name of Muhammad is derived from one of the Divine attributes, *mahmûd*: "Allâh derived for him, in order to honor him, part of his name, so the Lord of the Throne is called *mahmûd*, and the Prophet is muhammad."²⁰ The earliest biography of the Prophet was written by Muhammad Ibn Ishâq (d. 767) who explains that the Prophet was given the name *al-amîn*, the trustworthy one, by childhood friends when they were impressed with his admirable qualities of being fair, sincere, and honest with everyone.²¹ In a similar manner, for

Sufis, this event is more than a historical moment in the Prophet's life; the ascension represented a mystical notion that any spiritual seeker can be invited to encounter God in this life.

¹⁹ For a good study of Arabic, Persian, Sindhi, and Urdu poetry dedicated to the Prophet, see Ali Asani and Kamal Abdel-Malek, *Celebrating Muhammad: Images of the Prophet in Popular Muslim Piety* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1995).

²⁰ Hassan ibn Thâbit, *Diwan*, no. 152, ed. Walid Arafat (London: Luzac and Co., 1971).

²¹ See Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger* 106. For further

Sûfî poets the very name of Muhammad prefigures all the praises, and the blessings from praising the Prophet's name will be shared by his followers (*ummatan Muhammadî*) in this world and in the next. This name has existed from the beginning of time and will forever resound in Paradise. The famous panegyric Sûfî poet, Abû'l Majd Majdûd Sanâ'î (d. 1131) stated in one section of the *Dîwân*:

On the Throne of the revolving spheres, you see his place assigned; On the base of the Divine Throne you see his name!²²

In addition, Sûfîs applied another mystical method toward understanding the Prophet's name called *ishtiqaq kabîr*. *Ishtiqaq kabîr* was a literary technique to examine the derivation of a certain letter of a word for deeper inner meaning. For example, where the actual name Muhammad consists of: the first letter *mîm* as *majîd* (glory), the second letter *ha* as *rahma* (mercy), the third letter *mîm* as *mulk* (kingdom) and the final letter *dal* as *dawâm* (everlastingness).²³

The study of the symbolic characteristics of Muhammad's names were undertaken by both the religious scholars ('*ulamâ'*), who included Sûfî Muslims and poets was a popular intellectual pietistic form of expression in early Muslim history. As early as the ninth century, the Sûfî ascetic Mansûr al-Hallâj (d. 922) was one of the first ascetic Muslims to elaborate on the mystical meanings of the letters in the Prophet's name. For al-Hallâj the Prophet's Qur'ânic names represented more than having similar etymological roots with the divine names, but it was the physical shape itself that represented the beginning of humanity. He states: "Was not Adam, the prototype of humanity created from the name of Muhammad? His head is the round letter *mîm*, his hand represented the *ha*, his waist again a small *mîm*, and the rest a *dâl*, so the entire human race emerges, as it were, from the name of the Prophet."²⁴ This concept stressed that Muhammad's name was shaped in form of a human figure to reflect intentionally a total and complete quality; first, as the Qur'ân states that he was the "seal of the Prophets," the last Prophet to be present to humanity and an end to future messengers sent by God; and second, he was able to complete this cycle of

studies on works on the Prophet's attributes in Islamic literature, see Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Prose* (London: SPCK, 1960); Zaki Mubarak, *Al-Madâ'ih an-Nabawiyya fi'l âdâb al-'arabî* (Cairo: Mustafa al-babi al-halabi wa auladuhu, 1943).

²² Abû'l Majd Majdûd Sanâ'î, *Dîwan*, ed. Mudarris Razawi (Tehran: Ibn-Sina, 1962) 363.

²³ Abû Bakr Ahmad al-Baihaqî, *Dalâ'il an-Nubuwwa*, ed. 'Abdur Rahmân Muhammad 'Uthman (Medina: Al-Maktaba as-salafiya, 1969) 121–22.

²⁴ Mansûr al-Hallâj, *Kitâb at-tawâsîn, texte arabe avec la version persane d'al-Baqli*, ed. Louis Massignon (Paris: Geuthner, 1913) 14.

Prophets (*nubuwiyyâ*) by actually being part of that moment when humanity was first created. This interpretation stressed the importance that the shape of Muhammad's name had mystical meanings for the sacred moment of creation. Accordingly, Prophet Muhammad's actual presence in creation was the reason for God to assign him this particular name in order to symbolize his unique quality to link these moments in time.

The presence of Muhammad's name as representing eternal qualities was further developed by one of the greatest Sûfî thinkers, Shaikh Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî (d. 1240), a scholar from Spain who traveled extensively in North Africa and the Middle East and who interpreted the human forms in the name of the Prophet.²⁵ Ibn 'Arabî viewed the letters in the name "muhammad" as parts of the human body where the first letter *mîm* represented the head and consisted of the qualities of sight, hearing, and intellect. He states that:

The first *mîm* is the head, and that is the world of the Supreme Sovereignty (*'âlam al-malakût al-a'lâ*) and of the Greatest Intellect (*al-'aql al-akbar*). The breast and the arms are under the *ha* and this is the Glorious Throne; its numerical value is eight, which is the number of the angels who carry the Throne; The second *mîm* represents the stomach, and that is the world of Kingdom (*'âlam al-mulk*). The hips, the legs, the feet are from the *dâl*, and that is the stable composition by means of the eternal writ.²⁶

For Ibn 'Arabî the name "muhammad" takes on human forms to illustrate his human qualities when he was present in the world. But, these human forms are inherently connected to the other eternal world with the divine, where Muhammad resides with the creator. In other areas, Ibn 'Arabî discusses the calligraphic forms of Muhammad's name and interprets the name of Muhammad as representing a human being in prostration to the One God.²⁷

Another major Sûfî poet, Farîd al-dîn 'Aṭṭâr (d. 1220), was largely

²⁵ For further studies on Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî see Gerald Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (London: Paulist, 1980); Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabî and the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY, 1999); Michael Chodkiewicz, "Le procès posthume d'Ibn 'Arabî", in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F. de Jong and B. Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 93–123; Manfred Halpern, "Rediscovering Ibn 'Arabî's path to Wisdom, Compassionate Love and Justice in Contrast with Our Other Three Choices of Life," *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî* 29 (2001) 45–57; *Mysteries of Purity: Ibn 'Arabî's Asrâr al-Tahârah*, trans. Eric Winkel (Notre Dame, Ind.: Cross Cultural Publications, 1995); *Ibn 'Arabî: The Voyage of No Return*, trans. David Streight (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000).

²⁶ Roger Deladriere, *La profession de foi d'Ibn-'Arabî* (Paris: Michel Allard, 1978) 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 145.

responsible for further speculations about the names of Muhammad. In his works in the early-13th century there appear for the first time allusions to certain aspects of Prophetology that became very popular in the following centuries. For example, in his *Musibatnâma*, ‘Aṭṭâr claims that both worlds are created from the two *mîm*’s of the name of Muhammad. He asserts that in even in the word ‘*âlam*, “world,” there is only one *mîm* and the two *mîm*’s of Muhammad must refer to both worlds, the existential one and the eternal world.²⁸ That is to say ‘Aṭṭâr’s interpretation of Muhammad’s name meant that he had to exist in dual worlds and be a part of both worlds. For ‘Aṭṭâr, Muhammad’s presence in the two worlds represented his uniqueness as a Prophet, and it reflected a distinct sacred position in God’s universe.

One of the most important Sûfî poets of the medieval time is Maulana Jalâl ud-din Rûmî (d. 1273), the Sûfî who is attributed to have established the “Whirling Dervishes” or the Mevlevi Sûfî order. His mystical Islamic theology is rooted in the Qur’ân, in the customs and sayings of the Prophet, and was often criticized for not following closely to the law. For Rûmî, his poetical expressions are about his union with the pre-eternal, archetypal principle of Muhammad. Single verses inserted in Rûmî’s poetry contain vivid and abstract descriptions of some of the Prophet’s extraordinary qualities, often referring to his light (*nûr Muhammad*) and his glory.²⁹

For example, in one of Rûmî’s passages he alludes to a Sûfî finding content from one of Muhammad’s names and how they shine in the likeness of his light.

The dervishes find their happiness from “Mercy for the worlds,

Their frocks are radiant like the moon, their shawls fragrant like roses!³⁰

One area Rûmî is enraptured with the Prophet is Muhammad’s migration in the year 621 from Mecca to Medina, this becomes another model for the Sûfî’s journey because as Rûmî states “it is by leaving one’s home and traveling constantly that one’s soul becomes purified.”³¹ He also often mentions “Muhammad’s wine,” that permissible wine which inspires man-

²⁸ ‘Aṭṭâr, *Musibatnâma* 20.

²⁹ In recent years the field of Rûmî studies has grown tremendously, for more studies on the complexities of Rûmî’s mystical thought, see Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001); Annemarie Schimmel, *I am Wind, You are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992); Khalifa Abdul Hakim, *The Metaphysics of Rumi: A Critical and Historical Sketch*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: The Institute of Islamic Culture, 1959) Reynold Nicholson, *Rumi, Poet and Mystic* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1950); and, Kabir Helminski, ed., *The Rumi Collection: An Anthology of Translations of Mevlâna Jalâluddîn Rumi* (Brattleboro, Vt: Threshold, 1998).

³⁰ Rûmî, *Diwân*, no.2

³¹ *Ibid.* no.1142.

kind and can be found at the gate of Tabriz.³² Rûmî describes that the Prophet Muhammad is not only the cupbearer but rather the very goblet that contains the wine of Divine Love, a fine allusion to his quality as the *ummî* receptacle of the Divine word.³³

Rûmî writes, “Know that Muhammad is the guide, until a man first comes to Muhammad he cannot reach us.” According to Rûmî, this information was revealed to him by divine inspiration, and one needs to understand that “all gifts are showered upon the Prophet first and then distributed from him to other people.”³⁴

Then it is realized that Muhammad was the foundation . . . Everything that exists, honor and humility, authority and high degree, all are of his dispensation and his shadow, for all have become manifest from him.³⁵

One of the areas critical for Sûfî Muslims to develop an internal disciple was with the ritual of daily spiritual remembrances (*dhikr*). In almost every sûfî manual, *dhikr* is crucial for Sûfî disciples to spiritually mature and learn first hand training from the Sûfî shaikh. Shaikh Baha’al-dîn Zakariyyâ (d. 1262) of the Suhrawardî Sûfî order based in Multan and Lahore, Pakistan adhered to the strict teachings of obeying Islamic law as well as intense daily spiritual exercises. He insisted his Sûfî disciples or *murîds* to follow the proper etiquette (*âdâb-i dhikr*) to the exact detail of the instruction because their obedience to it was related to upholding God’s law and it was directly tied in with the Prophet’s *hadiths* and *sunnâ*. The Sûfî seeker of God must be prepared in every way, in all thoughts and in behavior.³⁶ Shaikh Zakariyyâ taught the following instruction to his disciples regarding proper *âdâb-i dhikr*: first, the Sûfî must come to the meditation area in a pure mental and physical state, which means that the Sûfî must perform ablution (*wudu*) and the clothes worn must adhere to the *sunnâ* of the Prophet; second, the Sûfî sits in his designated prayer position; third, at the time of *dhikr*, place your hands on your lap, empty out your heart of any ill will and close your eyes; fourth, begin by repeating after the Sûfî sheikh: “There is no God but God.”³⁷

Shaikh Zakariyyâ’s *dhikr* instructions explicitly tell the sûfî disciples to “maintain a soft voice and try to keep it as soft as possible because in order to allow God to enter the heart it must be peaceful and extremely pious.”³⁸ After this phase of *dhikr*, Shaikh Zakariyyâ instructs the disciples to break

³² Ibid. no.1732.

³³ Rûmî, *Mathnawî*, vol. 5, line 2734.

³⁴ Arberry, *Discourses of Rûmî* 232.

³⁵ Ibid. 117.

³⁶ Nur Aḥmad Khân Faridî, *Baha’ al-dîn Zakariyyâ* (Multan: Guganawala, n.d.) 226.

³⁷ Ibid. 227.

³⁸ Ibid. 227–28.

the recitation into smaller parts and concentrate on the section that says *ilâh-lâh*. He explains that this focus prepares the disciple to think truly that there is no one but God for the disciple, and all of one's love needs to be directed to *ilâh-lâh*.³⁹ Shaikh Zakariyyâ explains that for every part of the heart the disciple purifies, it creates more space for the love of God to rest in. According to him, each time a person conducts *dhikr* it brings the person closer to God and makes the heart progressively stronger.⁴⁰

Shaikh Zakariyyâ explained the importance of following the *âdâb-i dhikr* in order to have the correct practice of purifying the heart. The preciseness of the practice will result in a limitless amount of love with God and his self-disclosure. At this point, the mind, heart, body, and soul are united with that of the divine and the *sûfi* seeker can not rewind the process of being in total love. According to Shaikh Zakariyyâ, the *Sûfi* seeker knows when *dhikr* truly affects him because the new state of "total love" is like fire. He explained that God's essence is so over-powering for the seeker that the only way to approach the union is through one of God's basic elements, fire. When the fire of the *Sûfi*'s *dhikr* meets with the fire of the divine, nothing in the universe can extinguish it.⁴¹ Shaikh Zakariyyâ supports these beliefs by quoting sayings of the Prophet that state "those who seek me (God) I will return favors to him."⁴²

Shaikh Zakariyyâ continues with the following statement of the Prophet to support the significance of *dhikr*, "those servants that remember me I will keep them close to me and protect them."⁴³ At the moment of divine union (*jam' al-jam'*), the *Sûfi* seeker who is now a lover (*'âshiq*) needs to present the proper benedictions to God in order to be accepted by Him. Shaikh Zakariyyâ compares this state to that of entering paradise. He explained that it is important to humbly recite the following praises in its proper order to the Beloved: First, the *'âshiq* should recite "Oh Lord protect me with your shelter." Second, "Oh Lord you are the poles of all the worlds." Third, "Please bless me with your kindness." Fourth, "You are Lord of all friends of God." And fifth, "Please bless me with your kindness." With these proper salutations it enables the lover to sustain the fire of the union.⁴⁴

The deeper intention in venerating Prophet Muhammad is to remember and relive the customs of the Prophet. Remembrance in the *Sûfi* discipline and in the larger Islamic tradition is not just a mental exercise to keep the Prophet in mind; rather, it is, according to the treatises quoted above,

³⁹ For more on *Sûfi* meditational analysis, see Qamar-ul Huda, *Striving for Divine Union*, chap. 5 "Multani Suhrawardî Tasawwuf Spiritual Exercises."

⁴⁰ Faridî, *Bahâ' al-dîn Zakariyyâ* 228.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 233.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 233–34.

⁴² *Ibid.* 229.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 240–41.

mainly concerned to access and embrace the sacred spirituality of the Prophet because this leads to divine reunion. *Ādâb-i dhikr* is integrally linked to celebrating the spiritual legacy of the Prophet and it aids in the Sûfî disciples' own spiritual enlightenment. This area of self-identity with the Prophet is a critical area for being a Muslim believer because it brings an unveiling process of knowing the Prophet in a multi-dimensional way. The *âdâb-i dhikr*, connecting with the sayings of the Prophet, reciting the *sala-wât*, and an immersion of devotional poetry (*na'tiyyâ*) all bring about a higher level of reverence for the Prophet that aims at spiritual encounter with him. Both, the esoteric and exoteric practices goes beyond imitation to embodying the Prophet's spiritual achievements. In each area it functions to remember, reenact, reconnect with, and relive the spiritual life of the Prophet.⁴⁵ This identity with the Prophet Muhammad transcends the Muslim believer in both time and space. For Muslims, this one area of identity with the Prophet brings a sacred meaning of universal truth that is rooted in the assertion of *tawhid* or the unity of the divine.

THE VIEW OF OTHERS: JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

In the Qur'ân, the relationship to the other religious traditions can not be separated by the historical circumstances and the religious climate of seventh-century Arabia. Some of the traditions present during the time of the Prophet were Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and the majority of the population adhered to a local Arabic idol worshipping religion. Jews are referred to in the Qur'ân as children of Israel ("*banu-Isra'el*") and Christians are referred to as *Nasârâ*, a term that might be related to Nazareth or a Christian sect called the Nazaraeans.⁴⁶ The Qur'ân refers to Jews and Christians as "people of the Book" (*ahl al-Kitâb*) to distinguish them as a group who possess a revealed book from the same divine.⁴⁷ On one hand, this reference in the Qur'ân creates a union of faiths among Jews, Chris-

⁴⁵ For more on the way Sufi Muslims understand their veneration of the Prophet, see Qamar-ul Huda, "Remembrance of the Prophet in Suhrawardî's 'Awârif al-Ma'ârif," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12 (2001) 129–50; André Louf, "The Word Beyond Liturgy," *Cistercian Studies* 6 (1971) 353–68; Annemarie Schimmel, "The Veneration of the Prophet Muhammad, as Reflected in Sindhi Poetry," in *The Saviour God: Comparative Studies in the Concept of Salvation*, ed. S. G. F. Brandon (Manchester: Manchester University, 1963) 129–43; and Hilmi al-Qa'ud, *Muhammad salla-llâh 'alayhî wa sallam fi sh-Shi'r wa al-Hadîth* (Al-Mansura: Dar al-Wafâ', 1987).

⁴⁶ See Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ân* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996) 152–55.

⁴⁷ The term *Ahl al-Kitâb* is not exclusively for the Jews and Christians, various Muslim commentators have stated that this term could be applied to any religion with scripture, meaning that it could be applied to Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and other traditions.

tians, and Muslims with their worship of a one God at the center of the union; on the other hand, this alignment sets internal differences between these and other traditions. The physical proximity of traditions, as well as their closeness in theosophies created intimate dialogues and at often times heated disagreements between the Prophet's message and the clergy of *ahl al-Kitâb*.

Qur'anic verses do not distinguish among Nestorian, Byzantine, and Monophysite Christians of the time or any of various Jewish groups because these verses aim to have people reflect on their own exclusive claims of religious truths while simultaneously being open to the Prophet's message. In several passages of the Qur'ân, most likely after some of Muhammad's fruitless discussions with Christian and Jewish religious leaders, verses such as 3:67–68 came to the Prophet, it states: "Neither was Abraham a Jew nor a Christian, but upright and obedient, and not an idolater. Of all men the nearest to Abraham are those who follow him, and then this Prophet and the faithful; and God is the protector of all believers." Soteriological and salvific theological debates over Qur'anic revelations, and specifically over Muhammad's inspiration as a prophet, were at the heart of disagreement. One verse attacks the exclusive terms that were used by Jews and Christians in entering heaven: "And they say: 'None will go to paradise but the Jews and the Christians'; but this is only wishful thinking. Say: 'Bring the proof if you are truthful.' Only he who surrenders to God with all his heart and also does good, will find his reward with his Lord, and will have no fear or regret" (*sûrâ* 2:111–112).

These verses directed to Jews and Christians were responses to the intense exclusiveness of each tradition. Sayings of the Prophet and Qur'anic verses related to *ahl al-Kitâb* demonstrate a desire to correct this exclusive thinking and to: (1) appeal to them to correct their ways and acknowledge the Qur'ân as a revelation in line of previous revelations; (2) refute their challenges of theological exclusivity and uniqueness of covenants; (3) to assert a continuity in worshipping the same God; (4) an uncompromising return to a faith that is not under the leadership of corrupt religious authorities but an emphasizes on the individual and the one-on-one relationship with the divine; and (5) the unity of the traditions. One definitive Qur'anic verse, 3:70–73, highlights the commonalties between the faiths in order to show the unity of the traditions.

O People of the book, why do you disbelieve the signs of God having witnessed them yourselves? O people of the Book, why do you mix the false with the true, and hide the truth knowingly? A section of the people of the Book say: "Believe in the morning what has been revealed to the faithful, and deny in the evening; they might perhaps turn back; And do not believe those who do not belong to your faith." Say: "True guidance is the guidance of God—that any may given the like of what has been given you." Will they argue with you before your Lord? Say: "God is the bounty. He gives to whomsoever He pleases, for He is infinite and all-wise."

One area that challenged Jewish and Christian authorities in the Qur'ân is the charge of *tahrîf* or changing the authenticity of revelations.⁴⁸ It is here that the Qur'ân attacks the priestly and rabbinic interpreters of the Gospels and Torah as deliberately distorting revelation by misrepresenting the words out of context knowingly (*min ba'di mawâdi'ihî*). This distortion is not limited to interpretation but substituting (*tabdîl*) revealed words with more acceptable colloquial words, or the exchanging of revealed words with words that did not appear originally in scripture, or the *kitmân*, the suppression of the truth with falsehood.⁴⁹ These Qur'ânic revelations came toward the mid-end of the Prophet's life where in the city of Medina both Christian and Jewish communities had invited the Muhammad to arbitrate peace in that city. These references to textual inconsistencies and the involvement of human speech to scripture did not mean that these traditions lacked the presence of divine truths, rather it was to prove the historical changes that occurred in their sacred texts. The Qur'ânic verses of 2:42, 2:75, and 7:162 were responses of the debates the Prophet had encountered on scriptural authenticity alteration of texts, and whether human interpretations of scripture superseded the text itself.

Despite these criticism mentioned above, the Qur'ân and Prophet's customs displayed a commitment for religious tolerance respect and mutual respect for Jews, Christians, and the local religions. In order to move beyond the minutiae of disagreement and toward acceptance of each other's beliefs as in *sûrâ* 3:65 it states: "O People of the Book, why dispute about Abraham? The Torah and the Gospel were sent down after him: do you not understand?" Again in *sûrâ* 3:64 it states: "Tell them: O People of the Book, let us come to an agreement on that which is common between us, that we worship no one but God, and make none his companion, and that none of us take any others for apart from God." The revelations to the Prophet were not meant to bring more discord amongst the believers of the one God, instead, it was to awaken radically the Arab idol worshippers from their factional worldview of personal deities to a more comprehensive universal single loving God. The Prophet belonged to the elite oligarchy that politically, financially, socially, and culturally manipulated their idol worshiping practices to meet the desires of the priestly and ruling elite. The Qur'ânic revelations were more interested in changing their hearts and minds so that they would return to the original path of worshipping the single one god.

In the brief 22 years of Qur'ânic revelations to the Prophet, his customs

⁴⁸ *tahrîf* occurs four times in the Qur'ân, in *sûrâs* 2:75; 4:46/5-13; and 5:41.

⁴⁹ For *tabdîl* verses, see 2:59 and 7:162; for *kitmân* see 2:42/140/146/159/ 174; and 3:71/187.

reflected an intense respect for other traditions, even to close family members who never acknowledged his inspiration. In *sûrâ* 2:256 it states: "There is no compulsion in matter of faith. Distinct is the way of guidance now from error. He who turns away from the forces of evil and believes in God, will surely hold fast to a handle that is strong and unbreakable, for God hears all and knows everything." Members of his family and of the same tribe were tremendously hostile to the Prophet and even made several assassination attempts on Muhammad. In moments of despair and in the antagonistic circumstances that were created for the Prophet and his followers, the Qur'anic verse was revealed in *sûrâ* 2:256, it states: "Do not revile those who invoke others apart from God, lest they begin to revile God out of malice and ignorance."

THE QUR'ÂNIC JESUS

The Qur'ân as a revelation from the one God was to complement previous revelations brought by earlier prophets. The Qur'ân does not supersede or negate other revelations, but rather it is understood as a culmination of the history of God's revelations to humankind. The Qur'ân mentions the stories of Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Joseph, Noah, Jesus, and others in order to demonstrate a continuity in revelations. The Qur'ân gives a number of dignified titles to Jesus more than to any other figure of the past. Jesus is referred to as a "sign," a "mercy," and an "example." He is directly called by his proper name Jesus, the son of Mary (Ibn Maryam), by the titles Messiah, and by the honorable names like Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word, and Spirit of God. In the Qur'ân there are two accounts of the annunciation and birth of Jesus, and there are numerous references to his teachings and healing powers, and his death and exaltation.

Three chapters of the Qur'ân are named after references to Jesus; he is mentioned in 15 chapters and in 93 verses. The proper name in Arabic for Jesus is 'Isâ, and it occurs 25 times in the Qur'ân. Other honorific titles used in conjunction with 'Isâ (such as Messiah and Son of Mary) mean that Jesus is spoken of over 35 times. Jesus is always spoken of in the Qur'ân with reverence, there is no criticism against him, for he is viewed as the Christ of God.

Muslims have and still continue to honor Jesus as being one of the foremost righteous prophets created by God. In the Islamic tradition the stories of Jesus' poverty, charity, benevolence, teachings on spirituality, and uncompromising love to all are imbedded in the essential teachings of Islamic religious education. Still today, whenever there is a reference to Jesus, pious and conscious-minded Muslims will mention "on whom be

peace” (*as-salatû as-salaam*).⁵⁰ Even those less educated in Islamic theology can recall the Qur’ânic verses (4:169) that calls Jesus “a spirit from God” (*rûh*). And in many folklore songs there are references to a letter from the Prophet Muhammad to the Negus of Abyssinia in which the Prophet said, “I bear witness that Jesus son of Mary is the spirit of God and his word he cast to Mary the virgin.”⁵¹

The Birth of Jesus

To examine some of the similarities and differences in how the Qur’ân relates to Jesus, his missionary work, life, and death, it is important to explore some of the verses in order to understand the Islamic position on Jesus. For too long, most literature on Muslim-Christian relations, the attention is on the differences that divide the two traditions as inevitable opposites. However, the narrative of his birth and even up to his death of Jesus, at least demonstrate the common threads that can bring a better understanding of each other’s tradition. For example in *sûrâ* 19 entitled “Mary” verses, 22–25 retell the birth narrative, it states: “So she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a place far away. The birth pains drove her to the trunk of the palm-tree, she [Mary] said: ‘Would that I had died before this, and become forgotten.’ Then he called to her from beneath her: ‘Grieve not, your Lord has placed beneath you a streamlet; shake toward the trunk of the palm-tree and it will let fall upon you juicy ripe fruit.’” From Qur’ânic verses, 29–31 it continues with the birth of Jesus and his first words: “O daughter of Aaron, your father was not a bad man nor was your mother unchaste. Then she referred them to him. They said: “How shall we speak to one who is in the cradle, a child?” He said: “Indeed, I am the servant of God, he has bestowed on me the Book, and made me a prophet; And He has blessed me wherever I am, and has charged me with the Prayer and the Almsgiving as long as I live.”

There are links to the apocryphal Gospels, for example, the withdrawal “to a place far away” has been understood to refer to Mary’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In some parts of Muslim literature, the tradition has placed Mary’s tree on a hill near Damascus. Mary’s birth pains and agony is closely tied with the story of Hagar and Ishmael, that is to say delivering birth to God’s chosen prophet brings a greater degree of mortal pain than usual.⁵² The meaning of “he called to her from beneath her” has had a variety of meanings to different exegetes. Some have proposed that

⁵⁰ “*As-salatu as-salaam*” is a benediction that is repeated after any reference to any prophets.

⁵¹ To read the letter, see the Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad* 167.

⁵² Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Geuthner, 1954) 142.

it was the angel Gabriel speaking to Mary, while others suggested that it was baby Jesus who was speaking to Mary. But it is close to the New Testament version of the birth narrative.

As in both accounts of the New Testament and the Qur'ân when Mary returned home with the infant she was immediately accused of immorality and defiling the family's honor. This could be compared to with Joseph's reservation in Matthew 1:19 which states "not willing to make her a public example, he was minded to put her away privately until the angel reassured him." The interesting comparison reflects the vulnerability of both Mary and baby Jesus in a home where the uncertainty of their acceptance weighed heavy on Joseph's reaction and on the intervention of an angel. In the Islamic literature, there is a consensus amongst most Muslim scholars of baby Jesus' ability to speak "in the cradle" which is mentioned in other *sûrâs* 3: 41/46; 5:109–110; and 19:29–30. The miracle birth event is perceived as the divine's way of announcing to creation of another unique prophet being sent to humankind. In *sûrâ* 21:91 it states: "So we breathed into her some of our spirit" to remind the faithful that Jesus' birth and life contained the actual breath of God. His is a "spirit of Holiness" (2:81) which can not be denied or recreated anywhere else in human history.⁵³

The breathing of spirit into Jesus reminds Muslims of other verses of the Qur'ân at the moment of creation, e.g., *sûrâ* 15:29 states " I have formed him, and breathed my spirit into him." This is similar to Genesis 2:7, "The Lord God . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." The difference for Muslims and commentators alike is that the spirit did not dissipate at birth but the Holy Spirit remained with Jesus to support him in his youth and as an adult. The Qur'ân describes how Jesus was successful in his missionary work. In *sûrâ* 58:22 it is stated: "He had inscribed faith on their hearts, and had supported them with a Spirit from himself." Again in Jesus' dialogue with God about this spirit, he is instructed in *sûrâ* 17:85–87 to say "They ask you about the Spirit; say: 'The Spirit belongs to my Lord's affair.'" This stated, the Holy Spirit is the divine presence and power that descended upon Jesus in his humanity. The title of Spirit (*rûh*) attributed to Jesus by the Qur'ân is a magnificent testimony of his prominent place with God, with prophets, and with humanity.

One of the major themes of the Qur'ân is the eternal unity of a one divine who is the master of all of the worlds known and unknown. In the daily Muslim prayers *sûrâ* 112 is repeated quite often and affirms the Oneness of God. It states: "In the Name of Allâh, the most benevolent and ever merciful. Say: 'He is God the one, the most unique, God the immanently indispensable. He has begotten no one, and is begotten of none.

⁵³ To see other verses related to the spirit (*rûh*) of God breathing into Mary, see *sûrâs* 2:254; 4:169–171; 5:109–110; 19:17; and 66:12.

There is no one comparable to Him.’ ” Since the Qur’ân was revealed in a largely idol worshipping society, it repeatedly denounces any association of partners to the divine and even deplores the current pagan ideas of deities having children and family members. It is in this light that the Qur’ân makes affirmative and identifiable claims of Jesus’ place as a prophet, healer, and even as a sign (*ayât*) of God but not at all a living manifestation of the divine.⁵⁴ This is clearly an inevitable truth for Christianity that Jesus is one part of the Trinity and the Trinity is an expression the single Unitary; however, from the beginning moments of the Qur’ân, Islamic theology has criticized the trinity not only for the moving too closely of associating partnership to a single God but also for the fact that the identity of Jesus was transformed from a human prophet to divine essence. With this criticism aside, the Qur’ân speaks of Jesus’ work as a prophet and his discussions with the first apostles. In *sûrâ* 3:48–52 it states:

He will teach him [Jesus] the law and the judgement, and the Torah and the Gospel, And he will be Apostle to the children of Israel, [saying]: “I have come to you with a prodigy from your Lord that I will fashion the state of destiny out of mire for you, and breathe a new spirit into it, and you will rise by the will of God. I will heal the blind and the lepers and infuse life into the dead, by the leave of God. I will tell you what you devour and what you hoard in your homes. In this will be a portent for you if you do believe. I have come to confirm the truth of the Torah which was sent down before me, and make certain things lawful which have been forbidden until now; and I come to you with a sign from your Lord; so be fearful of God and follow me. Surely God is my Lord, and your Lord, so worship Him; and this is the right path.” When Jesus perceived their unbelief he asked: “Who will help me in the way of God?” “We,” the disciples answered, “shall be the helpers of God. We believe in God; and you be our witness that we submit and obey.”

THE REMOVAL OF JESUS

Among the theological areas of contention between Muslims and Christians have been over the divine nature of Jesus and his death. First, the Qur’ân does not state categorically that Jesus died naturally, rather it focuses on dismissing the notion that Jesus was crucified on the cross. In *sûrâ* 4:157–158, it states “though they did not kill him and did not crucify him (*mâ salabû-hu*), though it so appeared to them. Those who disagree in the matter are only lost in doubt. They have not knowledge about it other than conjecture, for surely they did not kill him. But God raised him (Jesus) up in position and closer to Himself; and God is all-mighty and all-wise.” According to Islamic revelations, both Jews and Christians were in agreement that Jesus was killed under capital punishment because he

⁵⁴ Another name attributed to Jesus by the Qur’ân is *ayât* or “sign” as in *sûrâ* 19:21 “We may make him a sign to the people.” See also *sûrâs* 21:91; 23:50–52; and 33:44.

“threatened” the religious authority of the Jewish rabbis. At least these were the commonly held views by Jews and Christians living in seventh century Arabia. Whereas according to Islam, Jesus was an extraordinary prophet who was sent a message from God to return worshipping him without the superstitions and religious innovations created by human beings. The Qur’ân contests the position that Jesus was crucified on the cross by asserting that he was saved from the hands of his tormentors and God raised him to himself (*bil rafa’a Allâh ‘alâyhî*). What does the Qur’ân mean by “God raised him to himself?” and more importantly, what are theological problems of Jesus’ death on the cross?

The classical Muslim interpreter of the Qur’ân, ‘Abd Allâh ibn ‘Umar ibn al-Baydawi (d. 1286), stated that at the moment when Jesus was going to be captured to be killed, God thereupon informed him that he would take him up for heaven. Jesus then asked his disciples which of them would be willing to have his likeness cast upon him and be killed and enter paradise.⁵⁵ One of them accepted and God put the likeness of Jesus upon him and instead an impersonator was crucified. Al-Baydawi believed it was Judas who betrayed Jesus that was crucified.⁵⁶ The Qur’ânic verse 3:54 states: “But the unbelievers contrived a plot, and God did the like; and God’s plan is the best. When God said: ‘O Jesus, I will take you to Myself and exalt you, and rid you of the unbelievers, and hold those who disbelieve till the Day of Resurrection. You have then to come back to Me when I will judge between you in what you were in variance.’ ” Al-Baydawi’s thought is consistent with the teachings of the Qur’ân and the Prophet in that he does not contest the Jesus’ death on the cross rather he was interested in elaborating on the time and place of Jesus’ return to God.

Another commentator, ‘Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (838-923), stated that Jesus was taken up to heaven after Herod gave the order to kill Jesus. At that very moment, Jesus was removed from earth and a Jewish leader who brought Jesus to Herod named Joshua took on the resemblance of Jesus and was crucified instead of Jesus. Joshua stayed on the cross for seven days, and each night Mary and the disciples mourned incessantly at the foot of the cross thinking it was originally Jesus who was crucified.⁵⁷ On the eighth day, with God’s mercy and compassion for the community of mourners, Jesus descended from heaven to console Mary and the apostles with a feast and later returned to heaven. Just like al-Baydawi, al-Tabari’s interpretation of the moment of the crucifixion event

⁵⁵ ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar ibn al-Baydawi, *Anwar al-tanzil wa-asrar al-ta’wil al-ma’ruf bi-Tafsîr al-Baydawi* (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1998).

⁵⁶ Ibid. 339.

⁵⁷ ‘Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jâmi’ al-bayân ‘an ta’wîl ay al-Qur’ân*, ed. Muhmud Muhammad Shakir and Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, 16 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1969).

is focused on the ways in which Jesus was removed from earth in the living flesh and how his removal simultaneously deceived the apostles, the community of observers, the Jewish leadership, and Herod's officials.

These commentators reflect general Islamic views that Jesus was alive when God brought him to heaven, and that he still exists with God until his ultimate return is back to earth. But why could Islam not accept Jesus' death on the cross? Islam's understanding of the history of prophets and the reasons for having messengers is God's answer to redirecting his creation to worship him. When human beings error to follow another Supreme Being(s), God had chosen a prophet amongst them to communicate their wrong beliefs and to guide them back to the one single God. In his eternal love and commitment to his creation, prophets serve as *modus operandi* for God's speech on earth or as stated in the Qur'ân vicegerent of God (*khalifa*).⁵⁸ This being said prophets have a unique position as human beings and as the vehicle for the divine's message. The divine will allows prophets to experience the pains and ordeals of being chosen to spread the word of God but God will not allow any prophet to be destroyed by the community of creation. Death on any one person or any thing is purely decided by the divine and Jesus' death sentence by Herod or his entrapment by the religious authorities was not conducive to divine mandate. For Herod and rabbinic authorities, i.e., creation, to conspire and kill a prophet is to transgress against the divine order of creator and creation. Only the divine has the power to select and send prophets and decide on their fates, to contest this system is to challenge God's authority. Given these parameters, commentators have limited their work on expanding on the "substitute Jesus" at the time when God pulled him up to heaven. Traditionally, exegetes focused on specific figures surrounding Jesus to identifying the moment he was removed from earth. Since the Qur'ân is firm on Jesus not being crucified, the literature works on what the Qur'ân does not specify and that is what could have happened in his absence.

CONCLUSION

My article has attempted to demonstrate the many lenses in which Muslims see themselves as believers and as a faithful community under God's order. It has shown why the Qur'ân as a revealed scripture is the most

⁵⁸ *khalifa* (pl. *khalâ'if*) literally means vicegerent or viceroy as in 2:28–30 "I am setting in the earth a viceroy" and in *sûrâ* 38:26: "David, behold, We have appointed you a viceroy." *khalîfa* is used a total of nine times (2:28–30;6:165; 7:67–69; 7:72–74;10:14–15; 10:73–74; 27:62; 35:39; and 38:25–26). However, the verbal noun *khalafa* "to succeed or to be a successor" occurs six times and the passive participle *istakhalfa* "to make one a successor" as in *sûrâ* 24:54 "even as He made those who were before them successors" occurs six times.

important and insightful authority for Muslim identity, self-understanding, soteriological and ontological meaning, ethical and all matters of religious practice. Scriptural authority and authenticity is critical for Islam as it brings the believers closer to the essence of the divine. The remembrance of God is the struggle of constantly bringing greater attention to God in all moments of our life. While remembrance of God is not restricted to the textual life of the Qur'ân only, I have shown that the customs and life of Prophet Muhammad also is crucial for Muslims to obey and surrender themselves to the one God. For Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is the last of all messengers, "the seal of the Prophets," because he completed the revelations in its purest form. He transmitted the Qur'ân to a community, ensured it was compiled, memorized, and written down in his lifetime. In addition to being the throne carrier for the last revelation, the Prophet's life is a real model for Muslims to embody, to emulate, and to strive to capture in daily spiritual life.

Shaikh Zakariyyâ's meditational exercise instructions on connecting with God requires the seeker to purify the heart of any other desires and to concentrate on our essence *ilâh-lâh* "there is no God but God." The purified heart creates the space for the divine to rest and to be reunited with the ultimate reality. The seeker is often called an *'âshiq* or lover by poets; this is because only lovers of God can truly prepare themselves for the encounter and *'âshiq* seekers are only invited by God. Many Muslim writers have referred to this process as an unveiling process whereby each level of deeper knowledge of God brings about another level or station of encounter. These practices of attempting to reunite with God, either through the intercession of the Prophet or the direct mediation of one's own spiritual teacher, affirms a particular identity that is unique for the Islamic tradition. This is not to say that other traditions do not have their methods in encountering God, but it is clear that within each religious tradition the ideas and religious practices used to reach enlightenment are integrally tied to the specific realities of that tradition. Cultivating a compassionate heart, loving the Prophet in multiple expressions, using poetry for deeper reflection, and incorporating supplications in addition to daily ritual prayers are at the core of the Islamic path of increasing the knowledge of Allâh.

The specific references to other traditions in the Qur'ân highlights and acknowledges other religious traditions and their uniqueness. The nature of revelations, at least Islamically, is not to refute or dismiss the wisdom of other religious traditions. Instead, it is to align itself with previous traditions in new innovative ways to forge a community of unity. While there are verses to the People of the Book to appeal to correct their ways in understanding God and to adhere to the message of the Prophet, the core relationships with Jews and Christians is instructional for Muslims. It is

instructional for Muslims to work with the challenges of theological exclusivity and claims of private covenants with the divine. The Qur'anic revelations are not exclusive for Muslims but for believers of the one God and this is another mechanism used by the scripture to create a tolerant and accepting community. The verses directed specifically at Jewish and Christian communities do pose interesting questions of "us" and "them" and the problems of identifying the fine lines of those weak definitions. One of the main areas where I think the Qur'ân attempts to question the religious authorities of *ahl al-Kitâb*, specifically how they were designated to be "authorities" and whether their knowledge of their own tradition is more important than scripture itself.

For Muslims the Qur'ân and the life of the Prophet have determined the tone of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim relationships and to a large extent commentators too have used or misused those definitions in viewing the other tradition. Whereas traditionally the religious dialogue among these three tradition have been restricted to polemical debates and theological counter debates, I have demonstrated that there is an enormous range to work with in areas of interreligious dialogue. My understanding of the Qur'ân and of the customs of the Prophet was not to create further obstacles for a common community to worshipping the same God, rather to build upon and continue the rich tradition of surrendering the selves together in this mission. I read the verses on Jesus' birth, life, and removal from earth as an earnest invitation by revelations for individuals and communities to refocus on the divine and our place with Him. As much as the return to Allâh in the Islamic tradition has intrinsic cultural affirmations from within, there is overwhelming evidence from Qur'anic scripture not to privatize the covenant of God and to be exclusive throne carriers of God. Certainly this is done all the time in the Islamic religion, but historical and textual evidence points to a religious pluralism that I think obliges Muslims to tolerate others and to learn new innovative ways to create a community of unity. Since Muslims struggle to keep the Prophet's model in the center of their lives, it would be unfortunate if proponents of religious exclusivity did not see that the Prophet's commitment of loving all and bringing forth a community of mutual respect was at the heart of his message. While the voices of exclusivity and cultural chauvinistic identities are the most vocal for the moment, this does not mean that true interreligious dialogue between the tradition can not flourish to counteract the ignorance of intolerance. The Islamic tradition that I know and am affiliated with, i.e., surrendering the self to journey toward God's self-disclosure, is integrally tied to an internal reconciliation and more importantly a reconciliation with other traditions in order to create a community of faithful committed to each other.