

Status of Muhammad ﷺ in our Aqidah

Bism Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim
Nahmuduhu wa nisalli 'ala rasulihi al-karim

Without belief in the Prophet, Blessings and Peace upon him and his progeny, our Islam is not valid. It is not that it is not complete; it simply is not valid. Faith (iman) is holistic: if you remove one part, all of it becomes invalid. There is no such thing as a half Muslim.

You may differ in your interpretation of the articles of faith, i.e., elements of 'aqidah, but you have to believe in all of them. You cannot pick and choose. For example, as a Muslim you have to believe in the existence of angels. You may have different interpretations as to what angels are and what they do, but you have to believe in their existence.

One way of appreciating the importance and stature of the Prophet ﷺ can be by comparing him to the prophet hood and life of Jesus, Blessings and Peace upon him. In fact, there are so many striking resemblances between them that some people might reject certain Islamic beliefs fearing they resemble Christian eschatology. We have to accept the realities of our dogma on the basis of Islamic theology regardless of their similarity to or difference from Christianity or any other faith.

Jesus, Blessings and Peace upon him, in his own right is also very impressive in the Quran where his life is depicted to have four distinct phases. First of all, he spoke in his infancy, while still in the cradle, testifying to his prophecy. When he spoke from the cradle, those who believed in him were believers and those who did not were nonbelievers. Secondly, he spoke as an adult and a prophet who delivered the Gospel to his followers. The third phase started when Allah raised him into Heaven, where he is alive and well, and waiting to come back down to Earth. Allah did not kill him, nor did he die, and his ascension was both physical and spiritual. It is here that the prophet hood of Jesus has terminated.

The fourth and final phase for Jesus, Blessings and Peace upon him, will start with his return to Earth, this time not as a prophet and messenger, but a follower of the Last Prophet Muhammad y. The hadith reports on this are so many that it is tantamount to disbelief (kufr) not to affirm this, as all this has come down to us through overwhelming continuous oral transmission (tawatur).

Any one of these phases may be construed as a truth which is miraculous for the believer, and ridiculous for the nonbeliever. Muslims should not deny any of these phases as a reaction to Christianity. Should we not believe in God merely because Christians believe in Him too? Allah decreed all this so that people realize something great is going on here. When we consider Adam and Jesus, Blessings and Peace upon them, we have two miraculous humans. The Quran exhorts Christians to form a comparison between them and accept that the creation of Adam is in fact more miraculous than the creation of Jesus.

The underlying message here is that all the prophets between them, Blessings and Peace upon them all, came as a herald to the last one, Blessings and Peace upon him and his progeny. All prophets, from the first prophet, who had no parents to the penultimate

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one, who had no father, were a prelude to the last and the greatest ﷺ. Every prophet announced the advent of the Last Prophet ﷺ. This is recorded in the Taurah and in the Injeel as mentioned in Surah al-'A'raaf verse 157. The Quran quotes Jesus, the penultimate prophet as announcing his advent to show that he, i.e., Muhammad ﷺ, was about to arrive immediately after him (Surah al-Saaf: 6)

When we compare the four phases of the journey of Jesus with that of the Prophet, Blessings and Peace upon them, we see some interesting parallels and stark differences. If Jesus' prophecy started when he was a baby, then as part of our 'aqidah, we believe the Prophet's started before even the creation of Adam, as is related in the hadith:

I was a prophet when Adam was between clay and water.
The Quran mentions the covenant Allah took from all prophets [on the Day of Creation]:

When Allah made (His) covenant with the Prophets, (He said): Behold that which I have given you of the Scripture and knowledge. And afterward there will come unto you a messenger, confirming that which you possess. You shall believe in him and ye shall help him. He said: Do you agree, and will you take up my burden (which I lay upon you) in this (matter)? They answered: We agree. He said: Then bear you witness. I will be a witness with you. (Surah Al-Imraan; 3:81)

Since all prophets talked about the Prophet, Blessings and Peace upon them all, it means that even those who lived before him had to believe in him. It is for this reason that in the famous hadith of Jibril, Peace upon him, the Prophet, Peace be upon him, answered that testifying to his prophethood along with the Oneness of God was integral to Islam. When we believe this we are not exaggerating the status of the Prophet ﷺ, but simply obeying Allah.

The second phase of Jesus' life would correspond to that part of the Prophet's life, Blessings and Peace upon them, when he was among the Companions, Allah be pleased with them, [after the formal earthly commencement of his prophecy]. During this phase, he was a prophet and also a lawgiver. Anything he said was Law. In fact, he was the Divine Order. For the Companions, worship of Allah went along with love and reverence for the Prophet ﷺ. Once, he called the companion 'Ubai bin Ka'b, Allah be pleased with him, while the latter was engaged in prayers (salat). 'Ubai did not respond and came to the Prophet only after he had finished his prayers. On finding out about the cause of his delay in responding, the Prophet ﷺ reprimanded 'Ubai and told him that when he called him, he even had to interrupt his prayers because answering his call was also worship ('ibadah). (Surah al-Anfaal; 8:23)

In this incident we see that since the Prophet ﷺ, is the only representative of Allah on Earth, prayer (salat) is secondary and answering his call is primary. Prayer (salat) is

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worship ('ibadah), responding to the Prophet (ijabah) is faith ('aqidah). The importance of responding to his call and being in his presence can be gauged from the verse of the Quran (Surah al-Mujadalah; 58:12) that orders the Companions to give charity before seeking council with him ﷺ. Even though this verse was abrogated almost immediately it was revealed, its significance is still valid. For it demonstrates how the duties of prayers (salat) and charity (charity) that are incumbent on all Muslims became part of his being and entity. This is so, lest Muslims fall into disobedience and refuse to bow down before Adam like Satan. This is not about logic but obeying Allah's command.

The Prophet ﷺ, was asked to take from the wealth of the Companions and accept their charity in order to purify them. The Companions knew that even though the Prophet was human, he was exceptional in that he had access to Divine Guidance. Hence, what he said was Divine Guidance. We must not forget that he was a prophet and not a statesman.

The third phase of the Prophet's life is from his death until the Day of Resurrection. How do we see him, Blessings and Peace upon him and his progeny, in this, his current phase? When we go and visit him in his grave, we send salawat wa salam (blessings and peace) upon him, and he responds. For those not present at his grave, an angel transmits their blessings and salutations to him. So, he is alive or revived depending on whose interpretation you prefer. Those scholars who say he is revived must contend with the idea that there is perhaps no moment in time when someone is not sending blessings upon the Prophet. This would necessitate that the Prophet's soul is returned every moment in time. The more plausible explanation is that life was restored to his body as soon as he had tasted the moment of death. What ever the reality of his life may be in his grave, we must acknowledge that he listens to those who greet him and his faculties are very much alert. He is aware of the condition of his people (ummah) and cares for them. This is his love.

The Quran orders us to send blessings and peace upon him (Surah al-Ahzaab; 33:56). We pray for his elevation each time we call or hear the *adhan*. Our prayers (salat) are incomplete without it. Even when we enter a mosque, we are supposed to enter with our right foot first and send blessings and peace upon the Prophet. When we lower the body of a Muslim into the grave we say:

Bism Allah wa 'ala millat Rasul Allah

He is very much part of our 'ibadah (worship). Let those who have a problem with that expunge the blessings on the Prophet from their prayers (salat).

Should we do away with these practices because they are perilously close to Christian dogma? The Prophet ﷺ is not only part of our faith (iman), his name is very much part of our ritual prayers (salat). So the Prophet is still very much part of our religious lives in this third phase of his existence. His death did not kill his role in our deen – if anything it cemented it.

The Prophet's role, Blessings and Peace upon him and his progeny, will not end in this earthly existence until Jesus, Blessings and Peace upon him, will confirm his prophet hood upon people. As a result, all of the People of the Book will concur (Surah a-Nisaa; 5:159) and will believe in him.

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Then there is the Day of Resurrection, the fourth and final phase of his existence as a prophet. Our tradition of Hadith tells us that at this time, he will demonstrate such immense compassion for fellow human beings that one wonders whether or not to call him the Savior. This is referred to in the Quran and in the dua after the adhan as the Station of Praise (al-maqam al-mahmud). When on that day everyone will be seeking reprieve from Allah's Justice and Wrath, the Prophet ﷺ, will engage in prayer (du'a) and intercession (shifa'ah). As part of our 'aqidah we know that it will be his word and intercession that will help us get into Paradise (jannah). All of this will happen – of course – through Allah's leave. But now this might be construed by someone as being very close to the Christians' claim that Jesus, Blessings and Peace upon him, died for their sins.? How do we know intercession is there and that the Prophet ﷺ, is the intercessor? We know this because Allah has commanded us to send blessings and peace upon him. And when will we get the reward for doing so?

No one is saying Muhammad ﷺ is God. But God is saying Muhammad is His messenger. The Prophet said he will be the first to be allowed to enter Paradise but he will be the last one to enter. [That is to say, only after everyone who can enter through his intercession has done so.]

Why should we deny Muhammad ﷺ this Divine favor and rob him of this respect merely to show non-Muslims that we do not believe in any form of Messianism. Those who believe the prophet was just a human – like us – and did not attract Divine Grace as a human will have lives lacking in compassion. Those who believe that only through a human means can we gain Allah's Compassion will be compassionate.* We understand compassion through humans. Allah, we appreciate Him through worship but his compassion has to manifest itself through some means. The Prophet ﷺ is one of those chosen means.* We shall, Allah willing, enter Paradise through his intercession not because he is God, but because Allah made him that way: a mercy to all the worlds. Resistance to this comes from petty human frailties such as jealousy and the inability to accept that another human can and does guide us.

Allah wants us to benefit from His favors. That is why He has made it easy for us to benefit from them by following a human being - one with a consistent intellect and impeccable morals. If the critic finds this explanation way too neat and perfect, then let him find another explanation that exhumes skepticism. Why should we have problems with perfection? Why are we running away from perfection as we try to seek it, especially us modernists who think the Prophet ﷺ has no role to play in our lives?

Finally, just a historical note that gives us a sense of the theology of the Companions of the Prophet. We all know how strict the second Caliph, Umar, Allah be pleased with him, was in religious matters. He is the first person who comes to mind (in Islamic history) after the Prophet, since the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, Allah be pleased with him, lived for only two years. On his death bed, Umar asked the mother of the believers, Ayesha, Allah be pleased with her, if he could be buried next to the Prophet ﷺ. Was he saying that he wanted to be buried next to the one who could help him after his own actions had terminated? Was there a will from the Prophet that Umar was enacting? Why did he even bother to make such a request if he knew that only Allah can help him after he dies. And all this, as he is dying as a martyr in Islam.

Ayesha agreed to his request. She did not condemn this request as shirk (associating partners with God). This shows that even after his death proximity to the Prophet's body has blessing and barakah. Furthermore, when we visit the Prophet ﷺ, we

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send salutations on Umar too, as he had requested. In earlier times, everyone visited the Prophet's grave and sent blessings and salutations upon him.

We used to be an ummah that respected its leaders and we were humble toward them. We did not denounce them by saying he, Blessings and Peace upon him and his progeny, was just a human.* In our current obsession with politics and political action we forget that you do not need Islam to promote social justice in the modern context. The Prophet ﷺ and his Companions, Allah be pleased with them, did not promote such values merely for the sake of life in this world. They were far beyond that. Besides, the language we use today to promote Islamic values is very different from that of the Prophet's. We should not use secular language to express Islam or the Prophet's compassion. We should not use secular language because this is a religion and not a discussion about how we fit into today's world. Religion – in this case Islam – assumes that man has a higher purpose in life. The whole idea of Islam is that the Hereafter is incomparably superior to this world. We should help our neighbor for God's sake and for the Hereafter, not for humanism.*

When we talk in the context of interfaith dialogue we always do so from the context of Muhammad rasul Allah. This is so because our belief in other prophets is contingent upon our belief in Muhammad ﷺ. We believe in him, and he has told us to believe in the others. This is the way of the Sunnah. Muslims have always debated non-Muslims through the Sunnah and through their understanding of the Quran based on the sunnah.

From the perspective of establishing our 'aqidah, La ilaha illa Allah has to be understood and uttered in the context of Muhammad rasul Allah. This is because we get to La ilaha illa Allah through Muhammad rasul Allah. This is from the perspective of 'aqidah, and not from the perspective of reality as it is. This is the view from the bottom up. He is so much part of our 'aqidah that if we take him out there is no 'aqidah left.