

The Prophetic Paradigm: Compassionate Forbearance

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To speak about the intellectual search for knowledge, therefore, is also, and inescapably, to speak about the pursuit of virtue, and it is here that the paradigm of prophetic perfection is of the utmost importance: ‘I was raised up as a Prophet to perfect the most noble traits of character (*makārim al-akhlāq*)’,¹ the Prophet said, in an allusion to the principle that understanding the message of divine oneness—the conveyance of which was the chief reason for his being ‘raised up’ as a prophet—both requires and produces nobility of character. In other words, there can be no authentic assimilation of the mysteries of divine revelation, the meaning of prophetic guidance, or the depths of authentic knowledge, without the full participation of the whole personality,² or rather, the personality made whole through perfect nobility of soul, or magnanimity.

Such magnanimity is defined according to the prophetic model of perfection, and the Prophet’s soul is described precisely in terms of qualities, at once human and divine, of kindness and loving mercy. In the following verse, he is referred to as *raʿūf* (kind) and *raḥīm* (merciful), both of which are also names of God, *al-Raʿūf*, *al-Raḥīm*: ‘There has indeed come unto you a Prophet from amongst you; whatever harms you is grievous to him; he is ever-caring in your regard; unto the believers, kind (*raʿūf*) and merciful (*raḥīm*)’ (9:128). The importance of this gentle predisposition of the prophetic character for the very success of the Islamic religion can hardly be over-estimated. The Qurʾān itself bears testimony to its key role in attracting people to the religion. Had the Prophet been intolerant and hard-hearted, people would have been repelled both from him and from the

¹ This *ḥadīth* is found in the collections of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Bayhaqī and Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, as noted by al-Ḥāfiẓ al-ʿIrāqī in his gloss of ‘verification’ (*takhrīj*) upon al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyāʾ* vol. 3, p. 70; this is found in the latter’s chapter of the *Iḥyāʾ* devoted to the prophetic virtues, ‘Kitāb ādāb al-maʿīsha wa akhlāq al-nubuwwa’, vol. 3, pp. 69–109. See the translation by L. Zolondek, *Book XX of al-Ghazālī’s Iḥyāʾ Ulum al-Dīn* (Leiden, 1963).

² Martin Lings points out that the words ‘whole’, ‘holy’ and ‘health’ share a single etymological root. All three are thus originally ‘the same word and have merely been differentiated in form and in meaning through the fragmentation of language The virtues of simplicity and sincerity are inseparable from this perfection, for each in its own way means undividedness of soul.’ *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 36. This, in its own way, demonstrates one of the meanings of *tawḥīd*, literally, ‘realising one’ or ‘making one’, thus, integration, and not merely ‘affirming one’ or ‘declaring one’.

religion he was representing and conveying: ‘It was a mercy from God that you are gently disposed to them (*linta lahum*); had you been fierce and hard-hearted, they would have fled from you’ (3:159).

The Prophet is told in the Qur’ān to say to people: ‘If you love God, follow me; God will love you’ (3:31). In the light of the preceding points it should be clear that ‘following the Prophet’ does not simply mean obeying the law he conveys; it means, in addition and more fundamentally, that one must make an effort to emulate his ‘beautiful example’ (*uswa ḥasana*): ‘Indeed there is for you in the Messenger of God a beautiful example’ (33:21). The prophetic character is also described as ‘tremendous’ (*‘aẓīm*): ‘And indeed your character is of a tremendous nature’ (68:4). If we ask which are the actual virtues to be emulated in this ‘beautiful example’, what is the concrete, identifiable and thus imitable content of this ‘tremendous character’, the answer we are given in the Qur’ān is remarkable: for the Prophet’s character is described, almost invariably, in terms of gentleness and kindness, concern and compassion; and it is these qualities which must be emulated by all Muslims who wish to ‘follow the Prophet’, and thus become lovable to God. In other words, the cardinal prophetic virtues to be emulated are those gentle and forbearing ones comprised within the quality of *ḥilm*. The Prophet went so far in his exhortation to emulate his own quality of *ḥilm* as to say: ‘The *ḥalīm* is almost a prophet (*kāda’l-ḥalīm an yakūna nabīyyan*)’.³ He himself is described in the traditional sources as *aḥlam al-nās*:⁴ ‘the most forbearing of people’—the one with the greatest plenitude of *ḥilm*.

Scholars of Islam have routinely been struck by this aspect of the Prophet’s character. For example, in his renowned work *Muḥammad at Medina*, Montgomery Watt draws a touching portrait of the Prophet as a gentle, loving, and compassionate person, stressing his love for children, his gentleness with all, especially women, and even manifesting an extraordinary concern for the welfare of animals: ‘His kindness extended even to animals, and this is something remarkable for Muḥammad’s century and his part of the world. As his men marched towards Mecca just before the conquest they passed a bitch with

³ Cited in the compilation of Muḥammadi Rayshahrī, *Mizān al-ḥikma*, tr. N. Virjee et al, *The Scale of Wisdom: A Compendium of Shi‘a Hadith* (London, 2009, p. 311)

⁴ This is how al-Ghazālī describes him in the sentence which begins the section on the Prophet’s granting of pardon (*afwu*), in Book 20 of the *Iḥyā’*, referred to above. See *Iḥyā’* vol. 3, p. 96; for the English translation, see Zolondek, *Book XX*, p. 35.

puppies, and Muḥammad not merely gave orders that they were not to be disturbed, but posted a man to see that the orders were carried out.’ It is not surprising that he states: ‘Of all the world’s great men none has been so much maligned as Muḥammad’.⁵

The above is not to be seen simply as a quaint anecdote. The Prophet’s attitude to animals manifested the scope of his compassionate concern for all God’s creatures, and was nothing short of revolutionary for his times. The Arabs were accustomed to torturing their animals; such practices, together with organised fights between animals, were abolished, as was the customary overloading of beasts of burden. The Prophet is reported to have said in this connection: ‘If you behold three mounting an animal, stone them until one of them descends.’⁶ Similarly, he forbade hunting for sport, going so far as to warn that a sparrow that was hunted for sport and not eaten will complain about its killer on the Day of Judgement. He is reported as also saying: ‘No one will kill a sparrow or anything larger, without just cause, without God asking him about it on the Day of Judgement.’ When asked what was a just cause, he replied: ‘That you slaughter it and eat it.’⁷

This is not to say that the strength of the Prophet’s character, his resolve, determination, courage, and other rigorous virtues are to be ignored. Rather, it is to see that, by nature, the Prophet was of a gentle and generous disposition, and would manifest the complementary virtues of courage and strength only when circumstances objectively required it. As we shall see in more detail below, all of the Prophet’s battles were of a defensive nature. Among western scholars, Karen Armstrong offers an objective evaluation of Muslim conduct in this regard, putting into proper context the Prophet’s reasons for resorting to warfare: ‘In the

⁵ William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 321–324. Likewise, Karen Armstrong concludes her second biography of the Prophet, *Muhammad: Prophet For Our Time*, with a plea to Muslims and Westerners ‘not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another’. She adds: ‘A good place to start is with the figure of Muhammad ... who had profound genius and founded a religion and cultural tradition that was not based on the sword but whose name—“Islam”—signified peace and reconciliation’ (p. 214).

⁶ Cited by ‘Azzām, *Eternal Message*, p. 61.

⁷ Cited by ‘Abdallāh Sirājuddīn al-Ḥusaynī, *Our Master Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah: His Sublime Character and Exalted Attributes*, tr. Khalid Williams (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 299. There are numerous sayings like the ones quoted, so much so that an entire section of Islamic law is devoted to the rights of animals. See part 5 of this work, entitled ‘Our Master Muhammad, the Messenger of Mercy’, pp. 264–303, for a comprehensive presentation of the sayings and incidents which express the mercy, compassion and *ḥilm* of the Prophet.

West we often imagine Muḥammad as a warlord, brandishing his sword in order to impose Islam on a reluctant world by force of arms. The reality was quite different. Muḥammad and the first Muslims were fighting for their lives.⁸ In this context, the following verse is of particular pertinence: 'Warfare is enjoined upon you, though it is hateful to you' (2:216). For the Prophet and those true to his example, warfare is neither glorified, nor is it deemed an end in itself, nor is it a means of spreading Islam: one fights because, and insofar as, one is fought against.

The quality of *ḥilm* entails avoiding conflict, and seeking instead peace, reconciliation and justice. It calls for wisdom, an objective view of what is required in each situation, an ability to be detached from self-interest, as well from one's own anger, sentiment or desire. It is the quality which therefore enables one to resist the pressures of tribalism, nationalism, or any other prejudice which might distort one's perception of justice and propriety. Possibly the most graphic illustration of the Prophet's resistance to such 'populist' pressures and prejudices is provided by his magnanimity and mercy towards the Quraysh at the peaceful conquest of Mecca in 630. Instead of taking revenge upon his erstwhile persecutors, his attitude was summed up in his citing of the words of Joseph to his brothers, as given in the Qur'ān: 'There is no reproach against you this day; may God forgive you. He is the most merciful of the merciful' (12:92). According to Stanley Lane-Poole, the Prophet's conduct at this triumphant climax to his prophetic mission manifested an unsurpassable degree of magnanimity:

He freely forgave the Quraish all the years of sorrow and cruel scorn in which they had afflicted him, and gave an amnesty to the whole population of Mekka. Four criminals whom justice condemned made up Muhammad's proscription list when he entered as a conqueror to the city of his bitterest enemies. The army followed his example, and entered quietly and peaceably; no house was robbed, no woman insulted ... Through all the annals of conquest there is no triumphant entry comparable to this one.⁹

A correct understanding of *ḥilm* takes us to the very heart of Islamic virtue, and one cannot fully appreciate the roots of tolerance in Islam without understanding the meaning, the influence, and the radiance of this key prophetic virtue.

⁸ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Western Attempt to Understand Islam* (London, 1991), p. 168.

⁹ Stanley Lane-Poole, *The Speeches and Table Talk of the Prophet Muhammad* (Delhi, 1987), p. 29.

Toshihiko Izutsu claims, in his pioneering work on key Qur'ānic terms, that it is not just the Prophet's character, but also the Qur'ān 'as a whole', which 'is dominated by the very spirit of *ḥilm*.'¹⁰ In making this claim, he is echoing a basic postulate of Islamic faith, namely, belief in the fundamental affinity between the Message and the Messenger. When asked about the character of the Prophet, his wife 'Ā'isha replied: 'His character was the Qur'ān (*kāna khuluquhu al-Qur'ān*)'.¹¹ Both the Qur'ān and the soul of the Prophet were alike suffused with the quality of *ḥilm*.

It is impossible to render the word *ḥilm* accurately into English by just a single word. It comprises the following meanings: forbearance, wisdom, patience, composure, self-mastery, imperturbability, together with the qualities of kindness, mildness and gentleness. The divine Name, *al-Ḥalīm*, is often, though inadequately, translated into English as 'the Gentle' or 'the Mild'. In order to make the word 'gentle' less inappropriate a translation for *ḥalīm*, one would need to revert to the original meaning of the word, bearing in mind its relationship to nobility of soul, which is evoked still today by the term 'gentleman'. To be a gentleman is to be courteous and kind, certainly, but it also implied originally the sense of nobility or aristocracy, which itself must be understood not in any restrictively social sense but in the original, Greek meaning, 'rule of the best': aristocrats, according to Plato, are those in whom the best part of the soul governs the other elements—that is, their intellectual element governs the passionate and the irascible elements of the soul.¹² So if the word 'gentle' be used in the sense of nobility and aristocracy—thus, with the meaning of perfect self-mastery—together with the sense of love—thus with the meaning of tenderness, compassion and kindness—then it comes close to connoting the range of meanings implied by the single word *ḥilm*. The relationship between *ḥilm* and

¹⁰ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* (Kuala Lumpur, 2002), p. 236.

¹¹ Qadi 'Iyad Ibn Musa al-Yahsubi, *Muḥammad, Messenger of Allāh: Ash-Shifa of Qadi 'Iyad*, tr. Aisha Abdarrahman Bewley (Inverness, 1991), p. 228; Arabic text: *Kitāb al-shifā' bi-ta'rif ḥuqūq Sayyidinā al-Muṣṭafā* (Mecca, 1993), vol. 2, p. 23.

¹² See *The Republic of Plato*, tr. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Oxford, 1969), pp. 119–143. One better understands perhaps why Shakespeare speaks of the 'heavenly blessings' that are bestowed upon a 'gentle mind': 'You bear a gentle mind, and heavenly blessings follow such creatures', says the Lord Chamberlain in *Henry VIII* (Act 2, Scene 3). Likewise, Dante brings out the aspects of grace and nobility inherent in the Latin root of the word when he writes in his poem *Vita Nuova: Amore e'l cor gentil sono una cosa* ('Love and the gentle/noble/gracious heart are a single thing'). See Jay Ruud, *Dante: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York, 2008), p. 324.

tolerance is clear; for there can be no tolerance in the integral sense—that is, tolerance based on sincere respect—if *ḥilm* and its associated qualities be absent. Tolerance can be seen as a natural concomitant of the attitudes of forbearance and patience towards the Other, attitudes that in turn presuppose at least a degree of self-dominion, together with the graciousness and serenity which flow from true wisdom. All of these attitudes are implied and evoked by the quality of *ḥilm*.