

Prophethood

Prophethood in Islam

By Sheikh Odeh Muhawesh

Allah created Adam and Eve to dwell on the Earth along with their descendants, the human race, and were given dominion over the Earth and all that it contains.

He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth. (I, 29)

But a condition was laid upon them to exercise their authority in accordance with Allah's laws. If people adhere to the laws, peace and harmony will exist on Earth and Allah will reward the law abiding ones with Paradise in the Hereafter. If people violate these laws, then chaos, bloodshed, and corruption will become prevalent, disrupting the system according to which His universe must run (I, 30). Those who do such things will be punished with the Hell fire. (I, 39)

We said: Go forth from this (state) all; so surely there will come to you a guidance from Me, then whoever follows My guidance, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. (I, 38)

But in order for people to abide by Allah's laws they must first know what they are and must avoid any misinterpretation and misapplication of these laws. If the expectation was to obey these laws without knowing what they are or without a guarantee they are being correctly interpreted, then this would be unjust -- which is against the very nature of Allah. (VI, 91)

The main premise behind the concept of Prophethood in Islam is the justice of Allah. The creation is essentially divided into categories of choice. Creatures belonging to the first category do not have choice in anything that governs their lives or destinies. This would include all objects, plants, and animals. A tree has no choice where it grows, or what kind of tree it is, and when and how it will become no more. Therefore, it is said that a tree has no choice or control over its destiny.

People, on the other hand, are given control over choosing between right and wrong. Right is defined as that which Allah declares as His law. Because Allah is just, He sends messages to people outlining what His laws are and gives examples of how to apply them. These messages must not contain any errors, and must be interpreted correctly as stated above. Otherwise, how can Allah fairly judge people if errors are contained in the messages or their interpretations?

And (know) that this is My path, the right one therefore follow it, and follow not (other) ways, for they will lead you away from His way; this He has enjoined you with that you may guard (against evil). (VI, 153)

Indeed, there is for you a good example in Ibrahim and those with him. (LX, 4)

When (Jesus) the son of Mary is held up as an example. (XLIII, 57)

Because Allah's messages cannot contain any errors, those who interpret them must have full knowledge of everything they contain, and must possess perfect knowledge of how to interpret and apply these messages. But since people in general lack that perfect knowledge, Allah must choose those who will deliver and interpret these messages. Allah does this by sending infallible angels to those who He chooses from among people to be His messengers, in order to ensure these messengers themselves have full knowledge and understanding of these messages and will apply them flawlessly. These messengers of Allah must, therefore, be infallible. Further, since everything that people do in their exercise of dominion over the Earth affects Allah's system, these messengers must not err at all. In other words, the messengers must be infallible as relates to every action. The messages must be understood and made clear by these messengers. Because Allah's messengers must receive direct communications through His angels, these messengers must be prophets. People who spoke directly to Allah, as in the case of Moses, or received revelations delivered to them by angels, like Ibrahim, Jesus, and Muhammad, are called Prophets according to Islamic beliefs. As a general rule, those prophets who received scriptures to deliver are called messengers, while prophets who came to reestablish the messages of previous messengers, are not called messengers.

Further, We sent a long line of prophets for your instruction (XXIII)

Recognizing the Messengers

History tells us, since the days Adam and Eve first walked the Earth, many people falsely claimed to be Allah's messengers. To avoid following false messengers, Allah defined certain characteristics of His messengers. Some of these are:

1. Each messenger must be given miracles by Allah which others cannot duplicate (III, 183-184).
2. Such miracles must challenge the prevalent issue facing the people to whom the specific message the messenger was sent to deliver and interpret. For example magic was the prevailing issue of Moses' time, so Allah gave Moses the power to turn his staff into a real snake that engulfed the staffs of the magicians. He also parted the sea to save the children of Israel from the Pharaoh's wrath (XX, 63-78).

When Jesus was sent to the Children of Israel, diseases were rampant and medicine men were considered to be among the elite. So Allah gave Jesus the power to cure any disease and to bring back to life those who perished because of those diseases. Muhammad was sent to a people who lived by the rules of poetry and mastery of

language. These people worshiped idols which believed controlled the universe. Therefore, Allah gave Muhammad the Quran which is a lingual miracle, and supported him by such miracles as a cloud that covered him from the heat of the sun wherever he went. Muhammad once asked the Meccans if he could bring them a sign that would convince them he was a messenger. They asked him to have a tree speak to him and said that if he did so they would believe in his message. When Prophet Muhammad ordered the tree to come to him, it did and then bowed to him. Some of the Meccans believed Muhammad, while others claimed he had performed magic on the tree.

3. All messengers of Allah must deliver a consistent message of obedience to Allah's law. If the messengers delivered messages that differed from one another, then one could conclude the source of the messages was not the same. But since the messages all came from the one Allah, they must contain the same law. It is for this reason that all Divine religions teach the importance of the Ten Commandments and other canons. Muslims believe that the differences which came to exist between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were caused by human forgeries of the original messages delivered to us by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.
4. People must equally believe in all of Allah's messages, and revere all of His prophets without distinction. The Holy Quran states:

Say (O Muslims), we believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, and Isaac and Jacob, and their children, and that which Moses and Jesus received and that the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them and unto Him we have surrendered. (II, 36)

Differences of opinion

There are different opinions among Muslim sects regarding the infallibility of the prophets. Shias in general believe that since every action we take affects Allah's universe, we are responsible for the outcome of these actions. It is inconceivable that we can do or say anything without it being part of the universe we live in. Since Allah sent these prophets as messengers to explain and act out the scriptures, every action they take is an example for us to follow. If they utter a word in error or do anything, no matter how small, that violates Allah's system, people can claim that utterance or action as a legitimate example to follow. But since Allah is just, He would not send fallible prophets as examples for us to follow lest we would be requested to follow them in their errors and deserve Allah's wrath for committing errors against His system.

Sunni Muslims however believe that prophets are only infallible when it comes to delivering Allah's messages. They believe that prophets can and do err if they are dealing with personal matters or in cases that do not relate to their messages. Some Sufis take the view of Shia Muslims as relates to the infallibility of the prophets.

However, all Muslims agree that prophets are only sent as good examples for us to follow. The view that prophets can act as both good and bad examples for us to follow is not held by any Muslim sect.

Prophets and Prophecy: A Christian View

Dr. Paul Niskanen

Prophets in the Old Testament

Prophets play a key role in the history of Israel throughout much of the Old Testament. The fundamental understanding of a prophet in ancient Israel was that of a person chosen and called by God to communicate God's message to the people (see Deut 18:18). The element of divine election or vocation is emphasized in many of the stories about the prophets (e.g. 1 Sam 3; 1 Kgs 19) as well as in the writings of the prophets (e.g. Isa 6; Jer 1; Amos 7:14-15). The role of the prophet as an intermediary or spokesperson for God is nicely illustrated by reversing the analogy in Exodus 7:1-2. Just as Aaron communicates to Pharaoh all that he has heard from his brother Moses, so the prophet speaks to the people all that he has received from God.

The Bible speaks of this process of communication between God and the prophet in two main ways. The more frequent mode is that of the prophetic word coming to the prophet in a vision (e.g. Mic 1:1; Hab 1:1). The prophet is one who has received a revelation from God; he sees something that others do not. Because of this insight, one of the ancient names for a prophet in Israel was *ro'eh* meaning "seer" (1 Sam 9:11). The other means by which this process of transmission is expressed is through divine inspiration. The prophet is one who is possessed by the spirit of God. This spirit not only speaks in and through the prophet (see 1 Kgs 22:24), but at times even seems to animate the prophet in peculiar ways (see 1 Sam 19:23-24; Ezek 2:2).

The message which the prophet delivers to the people can be understood in various ways. First, it may be noted that the form that the message takes (prophetic oracle, parable, symbolic action, etc.) varies greatly from one prophet to another. This emphasizes the point that prophetic inspiration is not a process of mere dictation, but that the prophets retain their own individuality, vocabulary, style, and personality in communicating God's message to the people. Furthermore, the content of the message can frequently be understood or interpreted in more than one manner. The Jewish tradition sees the prophets primarily as divine warners sent to call the people back to their covenant relationship with God through observance of the Torah (see 2 Kgs 17:13). The Christian tradition does not deny this fundamental role of prophecy, but adds to it the idea of preparing for and announcing the coming of Christ (see Luke 24:44; 1 Pet 1:10-11) who, as the Word of God incarnate, fulfills and perfects God's revelation given through the words of the prophets (see *Dei Verbum* --The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of Vatican Council II §§4 and 15).

Prophets in the New Testament

Jesus of Nazareth continues in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, exhorting his contemporaries to reform their lives (see Mark 1:14-15) in words that are both consoling (e.g. Luke 6:20-23) and challenging (e.g. Luke 6:24-26). Jesus identifies himself as a prophet in the context of his rejection by the people of Nazareth, stating that “a prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house” (Matt 13:57). He was also acknowledged at times by others to be a prophet (e.g. Matt 21:11; Mark 6:15; John 4:19; 6:14), although such recognition was far from universal (e.g. John 7:52; 9:24). The second speech of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles identifies Jesus with “the prophet like Moses” that God would raise up (Acts 3:22-23; see Deut 18:15). Yet Jesus is also much more than a prophet. He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God (Matt 16:13-17), the one of whom all the prophets spoke (Luke 24:27, 44; Acts 3:24). The New Testament writers and the Church see in Jesus the fulfillment and completion of the prophetic message (see e.g. Matt 1:22-23; 2:5-6; 17-18; Luke 4:18-21).

Prophecy, however, does not cease with the coming of Christ. Thus the Church has always recognized that the prophetic role is not limited to a preparatory or annunciatory function with regard to Christ. In the New Testament we hear about prophets in the early Church who continue in the basic prophetic task of speaking God’s word to God’s people (e.g. Acts 11:27-30). Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, encourages the Christian community to strive eagerly for the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy (1 Cor 14:1). He further describes the prophetic word as being oriented towards the community for its “building up, encouragement, and solace” (1 Cor 14:3). This prophetic role of exhortation is in full continuity with the prophets of the Old Testament.

For Christians, what is new or different about prophecy after Christ’s coming is that it does not constitute any new public revelation. It encourages or builds up the Christian faith which already exists, but does not add to the content of that faith. So Saint Paul writes: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed” (Gal 1:8). In the same vein, *Dei Verbum* states that: “we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (DV §4).

Prophecy in the Church

Although individuals identified as prophets appear to have exercised an identifiable public role in the life of the early Church (see e.g. Acts 11:27; 13:1; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:20), there is no hierarchical or ministerial role so-designated in the Catholic Church today. This is not to say, however, that the Church lacks or denies prophetic activity in this day and age. Rather, the Church emphasizes that all Christians, by virtue of their baptism, are called to share in Christ’s threefold office of priest, prophet, and king. The gift of the Holy Spirit, received in the Sacrament of Baptism, is the theological basis for the prophetic role of all the faithful (see Num 11:16-29; Acts 2:1-21).

Even so, the Church today still recognizes in certain individuals a particular gift or charism of prophecy, much in the same way that the early Church did. Like the prophets of old, many prophets in the modern world are distinguished and recognized by their fearlessly

proclaiming the Gospel regardless of public opinion or even threats to their own life. Many, for example, would see Archbishop Romero or Mother Teresa of Calcutta as modern day prophets who rouse a complacent and materialistic world to see the face of Christ in the poor, the oppressed and the dying. By their words and actions they call us to a conversion of hearts and lives.

Alongside of prophecy there has always been present the phenomenon of false prophecy—individuals claiming to speak on God's behalf a message which God has not in fact spoken (see e.g. Jer 23:16-22; Ezek 13:1-9). Distinguishing true from false prophets is a perennial problem. There are, however, some biblical guidelines. False prophets are recognized either through the non-fulfillment of their words (Deut 18:22; Jer 28:9), their contradiction of established revelation (Deut 13:1-3; Gal 1:8), or their own self-interest evident in their prophetic activity (Mic 3:5). The corollary of this last point is that true prophets are often recognized by their willingness to stand up to and confront the dominant culture and political powers and to face opposition and persecution (see e.g. Jer 1:17-19; Ezek 2:3-7).

When looking at the phenomenon of prophecy in the Christian tradition, one sees the process of divine revelation at work by which God speaks to human beings in human language through the prophets. One witnesses the divine pedagogy—a truly sacramental process whereby God's word comes to us in and through the words and deeds of our fellow human beings. One also perceives something of the communion that is the Church. God calls and gifts certain individuals within the Church to proclaim God's word in a particular way. This charism of prophecy is never solely for the benefit of the individual, but at the service of all of the people of God, for the building up of Christ's body, the Church (see 1 Cor 12).

In conclusion, one might apply to the words of the prophets the same language that *Dei Verbum* uses in speaking of all of Scripture: "For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men (DV §13).

Points of Agreement:

Muslims and Christians agree that God reveals God's will through prophets, and they agree on many of the same prophets: for example Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), Elijah (Ilyas), Elisha (Alyasha), Ezekeiel (Dhukifl), and John the Baptist. Jesus is a prophet in both traditions, but for Christians Jesus is also more than a prophet.

Points of Disagreement:

Muslims consider many to be prophets who probably would not be considered prophets by Christians—for example, Adam, Noah (Nuh), Lot (Lut), Jethro (Shoab), Aaron (Harun), and others. Conversely, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, et al. are considered prophets in Judaism and Christianity, but not in Islam. More important, Christians do not usually

believe prophets to be infallible, though there may be a range of opinion in this matter in Christianity. Most Christians would probably agree with the statement above, from *Dei Verbum*, that the prophets' message is not the direct voice of God, but is mediated through the prophet's human consciousness, language, and culture. Again, Muslims of course consider Muhammad to be a prophet, indeed, the prophet, but not many Christians have considered Muhammad to be a prophet. Most Christians think that prophecy continues in the Church, whereas Muslims think that Muhammad was the last prophet.

Points for Discussion:

To what is the prophet's message infallible? To what extent is it mediated through the prophet's human consciousness, language, and culture? Can Christians endorse Muhammad as a prophet? To what extent does prophecy continue after the death of Jesus or after the death of Muhammad?