

***Memories of Muhammad Why the Prophet Matters***, by Omid Safi, (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 352 pp., ISBN: 978-0061231346, \$24,99 (Hardcover)

Omid Safi's book *Memories of Muhammad* is not a biography of the Prophet Muḥammad in the conventional sense. This point is suggested by the subtitle: *Why the Prophet Matters*, which reveals the central theme of the book. This question is currently being asked by many Muslim and non-Muslim columnists and intellectuals. An American Muslim of Iranian origin, Safi starts the book by introducing the "Muḥammad Problem", in which he locates Islam and the Qur'ān in the American tradition. The introduction functions like a manifesto of the American Muslim in particular and of Muslims living in non-Muslim lands in general. It examines the way that different faiths have been received in the Christian West and how the Founding Fathers of the USA viewed Islam, revealing little-known facts such as Thomas Jefferson's interest in the Qur'ān and the Arabic language and that the Muslim American Congressman Keith Ellison swore on Jefferson's copy of the Qur'ān when he took office.

Safi's book then takes on the task of reviewing the methodologies of remembering the Prophet in the *umma*, or the followers of the Muḥammadī tradition. As a chronicler of the ways of the Prophet who is interested in demystifying both the connections of the Islamic faith to the Judaic one and the access that people of different Judaic faiths (used to) have to each other's worldviews, Safi begins by explaining the kind of environment that Muḥammad was born into. He paints a picture of the Arabian Peninsula, situated as it was on trade routes, as a crossroads of different cultures and faiths. He describes an Arabia in which one's honor is inextricably linked with one's clan, to set the ground for the impact of the transformation of "the Muḥammadī revolution". It was, as Safi argues, Muḥammad's mission to change the understanding of honor from bravery on the battlefield to being an honorable human being through being mindful of God in one's actions, through that touchstone of Muslim faith, *taqwā*. Safi explains that Muḥammad became the person to initiate this "heart-transformation" through his own connection to God, which started with the revelation and culminated in the "*Mi'rāj*" (heavenly ascension). Safi guides the reader gently to this most pivotal of events in the development of Islam, drawing parallels to Jesus' crucifixion and

Buddha's enlightenment to carry the non-Muslim reader along on the journey. The *Mi'rāj* not only becomes a pivotal event in that it consolidates the importance of the personal connection to Allah in the Islamic faith but also becomes the event around which the "literal" and "metaphorical" readings of the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* (the Prophet's sayings) try to claim legitimacy. Safi addresses both of these readings and provides quotations from the literature that has been generated about the "nightly journey" during which Muḥammad is believed to have travelled from Mecca to Jerusalem and then from there to the Heavens to come face to face with God. The passages that Safi quotes from classical works that embellish upon this journey are read with a view of finding the pathos of these (re)tellings of the story, especially in placing Muḥammad's message within the Judaic tradition (he meets several Prophets of the Old Testament in his journey in the Heavens). However, most important aspect of this ascension is the verification of Man's place in the constellation of beings that God has created and Man's inherent ability to connect to the Creator like no other creature can.

Safi's account of the events of the life of Muḥammad are drawn mostly from classical histories such as Ibn Ishāq's; however, in each episode that Safi recounts, he points to the "cosmic" character of the Prophet's personality, which enabled him to experience the closeness to Allah. In *Mi'rāj*, the Prophet was close to Allah like no other being had been, realizing the full potential of Man. His ability to commune with Allah at such close quarters makes him the ultimate example to follow for Muslims, and his companionship with Allah manifests itself in his wisdom and social abilities: he is invited to Madīna because of his trustworthy character to establish peace between the warring tribes. It is this conciliatory note that resonates throughout Safi's take on the Prophet's life, rather than the catalogue of wars that take center-stage in some other accounts. When the wars are mentioned, aspects of how Muḥammad changed conventions of warfare –not killing civilians and by respecting the bodies of the fallen– are highlighted.

Attention is given to the Prophet's family life to emphasize how he enabled members of his family to fulfill their own potential as human beings. His guidance and how his example is to be perpetuated in the Islamic world become the point around which Safi discusses the Sunnī and Shī'a split that ensued after the Prophet's death. The chapter on this debate will be an interesting read, especially for Sunnī

readers or people who have been exposed to Sunnī accounts of events that aim to suppress the memory of this split. Safi identifies the blurriness of the accounts of what “really” happened after the Prophet died in Sunnī texts and explains that what happened afterward is very important for the Shī‘a tradition. It is this approach to Muḥammad’s memory, according to Safi, that differentiates the Sunnī and Shī‘a paths. He starts with the commonplace understanding that the Sunnī way of connecting to the Prophet as a model is through his sayings, “sayings-legacy”, whereas the Shī‘a see models of the Prophet in members of his family in what he calls the “family-legacy”. Safi provides a history of the struggles and conflicts that occurred during the time of the four caliphs, a period, he reminds the reader, that is portrayed as the best of possible worlds, only second to the time of the life of Muḥammad himself in Sunnī accounts. Safi’s American sensibility can be seen in the way he lays importance on the preservation of the different histories, especially the Shī‘a history. Having delineated the differences between the two approaches, Safi also draws attention to the fact that the borders between Sunnī and Shī‘a schools of thought are more porous than one imagines, with the Shī‘a’s dedication to emulating the habits of the Prophet as a tradition passed down in his family, and the Sunnī’s love for the family of the Prophet.

This porousness is nowhere more evident, as Safi suggests, than in the practices of the Sufi orders and the poems of Sufi masters, which he quotes at length. In Sufi understanding, he explains, the cosmic personality of Muḥammad is much more prominent than the historical one. However, rather than presenting the devotional texts of Sufi orders as esoteric narratives, he explains that these narratives give just as much weight to the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth and in fact act as commentary on them. The importance of the Sufi orders, and their appeal, Safi argues, is again, their emphasis on “conditions” of the heart, and in the Sufi approach, Muḥammad comes across not so much as someone who has brought divine Law (for social relations) but as a figure of affection and mercy, an image that goes some way to explain the attraction of the Islamic faith and the Muḥammadi tradition for billions around the world—especially those incredulous Westerners who only see a body of arcane social laws when they look at Islam.

Safi maintains that it is the “cosmic” character of Muḥammad, the culmination of all human faculties that enable Man to know God personally, that “Islamist” movements overlook in their understanding of

Islam, as they try to implement the principles of just government that the Prophet implemented in his lifetime.

Leaving the discussions of historicism aside (Safi maintains that if a historicist reading of Islamic practice is to be done, it is to be carried out not piecemeal but wholesale), he focuses on something more fundamental, the love of the Prophet, and through that, the love of the divine. In fact, Safi argues that the mutual love between the Creator and His beloved servant Muḥammad, the love between Muḥammad and his *umma*, which led his coming back to humanity after his encounter with God, is the only prism through which Islam and Muslims can be, and should be, understood. It is a Sufi writer that he turns to make his point clear. He tells the story of the love-stricken Majnūn who describes his beloved Leila as the most beautiful woman, a description that falls short when the Sultan comes face to face with her. In response to the Sultan's dissatisfaction, Majnūn explains: You have to see her through my eyes. And as such, Safi equates faith with love and says that to understand the love that Muslims have for Muḥammad, one has to look through a Muslim's eyes, and so the Muḥammadi community becomes Majnūn, who is consumed with that love. This love, Safi makes clear, despite differences, is the enduring legacy and memory of Muḥammad.

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