

**Book Review**

## **Prophet of Islam and his Leadership Qualities**

*The Leadership of Muhammad*, by John Adair, London: Kogan Page Limited, pp127, 2010, HB, £12.99.

If the Holy Qur'an is the first and most important source of guidance for the Muslims, then the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) is an equally important source of instruction for the world's 1.5 billion Muslims. And if recording and preserving the Qur'anic revelation became a priority for the early Muslims, then developing a separate genre of literature focusing specifically on the life, times and teachings of the Prophet for the benefit of posterity became an important preoccupation for them. This genre of literature developed as a result of the early Muslim scholars desire to preserve and disseminate authentic information about the Prophet who was not only considered to be an outstanding role model for humanity but as the Seal of Prophecy (*khatim al-anbiya*).

In other words, to Muslims, the life and teachings of the Prophet is much more than a biography of a leader and reformer; on the contrary, it represents the meeting of Divinity and humanity in their material and spiritual dimensions. That is why Muslims consider the Prophet to be *al-insan al-kamil* or the 'perfect human being' who, though a mortal, became immortal by personifying sublime qualities and attributes in all aspects of his life including the social, economic, political, moral and spiritual dimensions of human endeavour.

In his acclaimed book, *Islam Between East and West* (reprinted 1999) late Alija Ali Izetbegovic, the Bosnian President and philosopher, wrote "...to properly understand our position in the world means to submit to God, to find peace, not to start making a more positive effort to encompass and to overcome everything, but rather a negative effort to accept the place and the time of our birth, the place and the time that are our destiny and God's will. Submission to God is the only human and dignified way out of the unsolvable senselessness of life, a way out without revolt, despair, nihilism, or suicide. It is a heroic feeling not of a hero, but of an ordinary man who has done his duty and accepted his destiny. Islam does not get its name from its laws, orders, or prohibitions, nor from the efforts of the body and soul it claims, but from something that encompasses and surmounts all that: from a moment of cognition, from the strength of the soul to face the times, from the readiness to endure everything that an existence can offer, from the truth of submission to God. Submission to God, thy name is Islam!" (pp291-292)

For Muslims, it is in the life and teachings of the Prophet of Islam that they have the most powerful expression of what 'Submission to God' means both practically and spiritually. As the Qur'an stated, "If you love God, follow me [Muhammad], then God will love you." (House of Imran, verse 31) The Prophet, in turn, remarked that "None of you has real faith unless I am dearer unto him than his father and his children and all mankind." (Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim) For this reason, it is not possible to fully understand and appreciate the different branches of traditional Islamic sciences (*ulum al-deen*) including Qur'anic exegesis, Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic spirituality or the vast corpus of Prophetic traditions without direct reference to the *seerah* (the life, times and teachings of the Prophet of Islam).

The early Muslim scholars were aware of this and, as a result, they meticulously preserved as much information about the life and teachings of the Prophet for the benefit of the future generations. Thanks to their heroic efforts and achievement, today one is able to study and analyse the life of the Prophet from the beginning to the end without any problems or difficulties. In the words of late Professor Muhammad Hamidullah, a renowned biographer of the Prophet, "To write the biography of Muhammad ...one is handicapped by the excessive number of documents, and not by their paucity." (*Muhammad Rasulullah*, 1974, p1) This has enabled many modern

scholars and historians to pursue further research and enquiry on the topic in so doing shed new light on different aspects of the Prophet's life and teachings.

John Adair is a leading scholar and academic who specialises on Leadership Studies and Development, and is currently the Chair of Strategic Leadership at the United Nations System Staff College in Turin. The author has published extensively in his field of specialisation but he does not explain why he chose to write on the leadership qualities and attributes of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). However, there are two clues, namely very early in his career he had served as an adjutant in the Arab Legion, an army of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and he clearly remembers his time with the desert Bedouins with fondness and affection; the other reason is that he considers the Prophet of Islam to be an immensely successful practitioner of core leadership skills and qualities which are essential for being a good leader.

In his own words, "This book is a biographical inquiry into one aspect of the Prophet Muhammad's life: his leadership. It is not a full biography of Muhammad...I do no more than touch lightly upon aspects of Muhammad's life that any biographer would regard as central, such as his roles as Messenger and Prophet...For Muslims, the first and original leader is God, and all are bound by their faith to obey God's law. Thus any leader of any organization – business, political or religious – is also first and foremost a follower of God. This fact imposes limits on Islamic leaders, and defines their duties to the people they lead. In Islamic thought, model leaders were simultaneously both exalted and humble, capable of vision and inspiration, yet at the same time dedicated to the service of their people. As you read these pages you will, I hope, be able to judge for yourself just how close Muhammad comes to this ideal. My argument in this book is that this ideal – glimpsed more than once in the life of the Prophet Muhammad – accords well with what we now know to be the universal truth about the nature and practice of leadership."(pp1-2)

Consisting of eight short chapters, in this book, the author provided a brief overview of the nature of the Prophet's leadership from his early years to the end of his Prophetic mission in 632CE. He does this by touching on the leadership qualities of other prominent Muslim leaders like Sultan Salah al-Din Ayyubi (Saladin) and by drawing on Ibn Khaldun's theories of society and leadership. Although there are no

shortage of books on the life and teachings of the Prophet written by non-Muslims, however, the author's approach to the subject is a sympathetic one. He does understand and appreciate that to the Muslims the Prophet is much more than a mere leader and reformer. He was (and remains) their most powerful role model in every aspects of their life. So much so that 1.5 billion people of different background, culture and nationality today proudly claim to be a follower of the Prophet of Islam; a Prophet who preached that there is only one God, Who alone deserves to be worshipped. In the words of the Qur'an, "In the Messenger of God is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often." (The Confederates, verse 21)

However, many non-Muslims do not understand nor do they appreciate how much Muslims respect and revere the Prophet and his teachings. As a result, the Prophet of Islam is one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted religious figures of modern times (especially in the Western world). Both Muslims and non-Muslims are responsible for perpetuating such inaccurate and distorted image of the Prophet who is known in the traditional Islamic sources as *nabi al-rahma* (or 'the Prophet of Mercy') since all his deeds and actions were motivated by no other desire other than to show, and to be shown, mercy – which is one of the most important and beloved Attributes of Almighty God (*sifat Allah*).

Not surprisingly, according to the author, "The Muslim tradition of leadership, if I have understood it, transcends even the three great human traditions of understanding leadership [Western thought, Eastern philosophies and Tribal tradition]... At its pinnacle is the lofty ideal that human leaders – men and women, boys and girls – should model themselves on God. Through meditation on the Qur'an, Muslims should seek to reflect in their way of life – especially in their leadership – these qualities in the world, as the moon reflects the sun. If your feet stand in the Muslim tradition, then that may be the path for you – the way in which you can grow to be a 'good leader and a leader for good'. But within Islamic thought there is a bridge between theology and philosophy – a bridge that made possible the flowering of Islamic science, mathematics and historical scholarship in the Middle Ages. That bridge, of course, is the concept of Truth. From truth and truth, whether it is found by contemplating the names of God or through the study of human and social life, which is the road that I

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

have travelled. Therefore Islam today is both an inheritor of the world's body of knowledge about leadership and – as I trust that I have shown in this book – a great contributor to it.” (pp109-110)

The author of this book deserves credit for focusing on such an important aspect of the Prophet's life and in so doing he has clarified many misconceptions about Islam and its Prophet; we need more books like this. Recommended reading for students and scholars alike.

**M M Khan is an internationally acclaimed author, literary critic and research scholar. He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and a Member of English Pen. His books include THE MUSLIM 100 (reprinted 2010) and THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL (forthcoming). The Kindle version of THE MUSLIM 100 has been recently released (available from Amazon). He is a Founding Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK and editor of its website. See [www.bmri.org.uk](http://www.bmri.org.uk)**